**TUĞÇE ERÇETİN**\*

# A Populist Desire: "All You Need Is the Heart of the People Rather than the Palace's Screens"
## *Popülist Arzu: "İhtiyacınız Olan Tek Şey Sarayın Ekranlarından Ziyade Halkın Kalbi"*

## Abstract

The populist repertoire relies on the glorification of the people against the elites and establishment; it operates through an antagonistic discourse driven by blame and emotional appeals. The opportunity to observe the populist style emerges during "critical moments" in political life when the appeal to the people becomes clear in the midst of the competition to determine how the conditions of life will be reproduced. There are a limited number of studies of female populist leaders that focus on their alternative role or form of political articulation. This article aims to contribute to our understanding of female populist leadership by examining the populist discourse and performance of Meral Akşener, the General Chair of the İYİ Party (the Good Party) in Turkey. Akşener's campaign speeches during the presidential election of 2018 are analyzed with a view to understanding how populist frames came to permeate the Zeitgeist in Turkey at that time.

## Öz

Popülist repertuar seçkinler ve müesses nizam karşısında halkın yüceltilmesine dayanır; böylece suçlama anlatısına ve duygulara başvurarak düşmanca bir söylem ortaya çıkarır. Siyasal hayatta "kritik anlar" rekabet ortamında halka yönelik yapılan başvuruları ve hayat koşullarının yeniden üretilmesi nedeniyle daha açık ve keskin bir şekilde popülist tarzı gözlemleme fırsatı sunmaktadır. Literatürde kadın popülist liderlerin anlatımı sınırlı olmakla beraber, bu çalışmalar genelde alternatif rollerine veya siyasal artikülasyonu nasıl formüle ettiklerine odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışma Türkiye'deki İyi Parti'nin genel başkanı Meral Akşener'in popülist söylem ve performansını inceleyerek kadın popülist liderlerle ilişkili çalışmalara katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Akşener'in 2018 yılınca gerçekleşen Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimindeki kampanya konuşmalarını analiz ederek bu dönemde Türkiye'de yayılan "popülist zeitgeist'in" nasıl çerçevelendiğini göstermektedir.

## Keywords
Populism, Turkey, İYİ Party, Elections

## Anahtar Kelimeler
Popülizm, Türkiye, İYİ Parti, Seçimler

## Introduction

A woman is on the stage. She is called by the names "Asena" (she-wolf) and "Hayme Ana" (a significant female figure in Turkish history). Both names evoke the superiority of the Turkish nation, especially the role of the women, as seen from the perspective of nationalism. In the lyrics of the music used for the election campaign in 2018, she became "Sister Meral" (Meral abla), a name chosen to indicate her closeness to the voters, which was enthusiastically taken up by the electorate. She also defined herself as "your sister."[1] when walking on the political stage, where her invocation of family bonds resonated with the public and transcended regular politics. Before giving a speech, the candidate was introduced in an effusive manner that summed up how she was represented: "The candidate of the people. She cares for us as our mother; she welcomes us like her child. She cries and laughs with us. She is someone from our home. She is one among us. Meral Akşener is coming…"[2]

During the campaign for the presidential election, "Meral abla" began to collect a muslin cloth *(tülbent)* from each woman at every electoral rally, describing them as a symbol of a "revolution" (Erdoğan et al., 2018). She also claimed that when her candidacy resulted in victory, those muslin cloths would be in the president's office. The muslin cloths have a meaning connected to unity and peace in Anatolia:[3] "Our crazy project is related to the muslin. It is a symbol of peace and fraternity. If men fight and do not promote peace, a woman takes her own muslin and flings it down; then, the nation makes peace."[4] She has two points here: her party will be the winner, and the unifying symbol will be in the office; additionally, she and the people will cause it.

Akşener represents the center-right–wing whose commitment to nationalist values is well-known. As the candidate of the newly formed İYİ Party (the Good Party), she expressed how the party would bring goodness to Turkey, defining the potential winners in the future through the phrase "the good people win." The imagined and potential "good" winners represent a particular group, a homogeneous group that supports and votes for the party, and has shared values and norms. Akşener is not one of the outsiders, strictly speaking: she had an ascendancy and a role in the presidency of the women's branch of the True Path Party; then, she became Turkey's first female Minister of the Interior before becoming a deputy for the Nationalist Action Party in 2007. Her family has close ties with crucial figures such as Alparslan Türkeş, who has visited Akşener's family house many times. Regarding his visits, Akşener has been described as his "most important audience" (Önkibar, 2017): these conversationsgave her an opportunity to gain exposure to Turkish politics and nationalism, and she was able to acquire his nationalist worldview. All of these experiences allow us to state that Akşener has not been ignored by the mainstream; thus, she cannot called an "outsider" status, according to the criteria proposed by Canovan (1999).

Nevertheless, Turkish political history has not been a particularly favorable environment for female politicians and leaders; with the exception of some women who played signif-

icant roles in the Kurdish movement and political parties, which recreated their organizations; very few other examples exist. Therefore, the leadership and candidacy of Akşener offered a change from the established order of Turkish political life, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the outreach of the populist agenda. The party's slogan was an anti-establishment statement presenting an alternative for the nation: "Turkey will be good. We will be renewed, we will be stronger, and we will be happy." The highlighted "we-ness" represents "the people," bypassing the elites and establishment, holding out the promise of a pure future.

The snap elections of June 24 made her more visible. Even though her bid for the presidency was unsuccessful, she has continued to adopt the populist style in her position as the General Chair of the İYİ Party. The desire to break down the walls between the people and power is a prominent feature of her campaign rhetoric, in which the superiority of the people is imagined in vehement terms. In a similar vein, her critical statements against the ruling party and the establishment continue to be accompanied by an aggressive tone. She positions herself as a guardian of the people, presenting a challenge to masculine politics while being subjected to offensive approaches from other political parties, specifically ruling party's discursive style.. She uses bullying acts or words as a modus operandi to challenge the dominant powers in the political arena.

Furthermore, she proposed a referendum on Syrian refugees living in Turkey,[5] thus encouraging the emergence of differentiated homogeneous groups and strengthening the construction of "us and them" boundaries.[6] In addition to anti-elitism, which frames primary "others" within populist rhetoric, "dangerous others" are invoked in this case. Her Twitter account presents various statements regarding Syrian refugees and complains that financial resources for refugees are being provided by the government, making a comparison between (foreign) Syrians and (native) Turkish retired people, which emphasizes the priority of "the real citizens." On November 13, 2018, she shared a tweet, pledging a more nativist program that excludes Syrian refugees: "Syrian refugees account for nearly the majority of the population in Kilis, Hatay, Urfa, and Gaziantep as a result of the generosity of the ruling party. In these cities, Syrians are treated as the hosts, and Turkish citizens are treated as guests."[7] Her style and repertoire allow us to investigate how a populist performance gave voice to the peoples' frustrations and grievances during a period in which nativist and people-centric frames dominated. Even the candidate's degree of populism is debatable, observations indicate that the usage of populism inevitably exists in the "populist Zeitgeist."[8]

This paper focuses on Akşener's campaign speeches, seeking to understand whether her campaign involved a populist frame. The study followed 24 of her speeches that were video-recorded and transcribed in full, thus making it possible to draw on written versions of the speeches to observe how she framed the populist repertoire during the presidential election campaign of 2018.

## The Imagination of "We-ness" and "Others" in Populism
## What Is Populism? Different Approaches with Some Commonalities

Confronting every aspect of politics, populism articulates both positive and negative categorizations, underlines perceived questions, and produces emotional reactions. Whether promoting fear-based scenarios involving uncertainties or convincing the voters of the hope offered by the "real representativeness" of populist leaders, populist framing begins by making context-based inter-group distinctions. Due to the diversity of instances that can be described as "populist," there is no single definition of populism other than that it makes appeals to contextual needs/grievances, to which it responds with a variety of special repertoires (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). In the broad array of political phenomena that can be described as populist, there are numerous different conditions and reactions; consequently, there are multiple versions of populism rather than a single definitive example. The concerns of the people are given voice through economic or cultural mobilizations that communicate different values based on contextual and issue-based components. In spite of the difficulty of defining populism, it is usually described in terms of three factors: its "thin-centered" ideology, its strategy, and its discourse and style.

According to Mudde (2004), "populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." This view is shared by other scholars (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Bakker et al., 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017; Rooduijn & Pauwels 2010; Stanley 2008). Second, discourse and political style are common elements: it is argued that populism mobilizes the masses, voicing the grievances of "the silent majority" and appealing to emotions through a devoted, informal, or colorful communicative performance, a provocative tone, and a close bond with the voters (Aslanidis, 2015; Caiani & della Porto, 2010; de la Torre, 2010; Hawkins, 2003, 2009; Knight, 1998; Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016; Nai & Coma, 2019; Taguieff, 1995). Populist language, with its unique style, allows for the positioning of commonalities—this persuades voters to see these politicians as "one of us" (Breeze, 2020, p. 2). In conclusion, populism is a strategy: it relies on performance; new policies; and reforms such as promoting the interests, identities, and values of citizens; nationalization; clientelism; or formulations for economic distribution (Barr, 2009; Betz, 1994; di Tella, 1997; Enyedi, 2005, Weyland, 2001).

Although the literature shows a variety of definitions and approaches, their commonalities point to the core contents of populism. It covers the construction of a homogeneous group of "the people" demanding their sovereignty and seeking to overcome the challenges of distance from power (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2009), which makes the will of the people superior to anything else (Kriesi, 2014). The dichotomy between "us" and "them"

differentiates the people from the "others" who do not share similarities with people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Panizza, 2005; Stanley & Cześnik, 2018) by relying on anti-elitist and anti-pluralist rhetoric (Hawkins et al., 2018). The construction of a homogeneous group of the people, anti-elitism, the "us–them" division, demands for the general will of the people, and claims on hope are the essential elements of populism.

## Social Identity–Driven Populism

The populist repertoire encourages divisions and the formation of antagonistic camps, thus offering a positive category for the in-group (Bos et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018); however, the constructed "other" camp is derived from differentiation from "us" through negative stereotyping and perceived threats, which allow the out-group to be blamed and positioned against the in-group (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020). Encapsulating the "we-ness" position is the source of the power; the people, by excluding perceived differences and glorifying an asymmetric distinction, are transformed in the direction of collective mobilization (Aslanidis, 2018). Through this language, the hierarchical narrative of imagined social identities becomes even more politicized.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) define a group "as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it" (p. 40). Shared emotions, experiences, values, beliefs, opinions, and norms construct collective identity, along with a sense of attachment; this initiates the perception of being a member of a group (Brewer, 2001; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Hornsey, 2008; Reicher, 2004; Yuki, 2011). Through the feeling of attachment, individuals have a tendency to behave in harmony with a shared identity; this gives rise to the prototypicality of the in-group, creating the sense of "we-ness" (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Hardie, 1992; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Turner, 1987).

The "we-ness" consists of the foregrounding of differences from the members of the out-group, building boundaries around "us," accentuating inter-group differentiation, and attributing a positive image/identity to the in-group that makes failures invisible or justifies negativities (Turner, 1987, 1994). Therefore, the in-group glorifies and favors its members, positioning them as enjoying a superior status (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Perdue et al., 1990; Turner et al., 1979). However, a negative image distinguishes the out-group (Turner, 1987), who are perceived as threatening or "evil," as they are outside of "our" boundaries (Bauman, 2011).

To look at populism from a social identity perspective, the articulation of "we-ness" emphasizes the in-group through the construction of a homogeneous group of the people and identification with a leader. The block of "us" belongs to both the "victim" and "superior" categories (Canovan, 2004; Inglehart & Norris, 2016) in portraying the group as both deserv-

ing of dignity and as unfairly maligned. Reflecting common identity and claiming "real repre-sentativeness" by a populist leader, persuasion of the people employs a "one among us" image that overcomes any appearance of being elitist. According to the findings of Silva (2019), supporters of populist actors believe that their leaders do not belong to the establishment; this is the result of a clear and successful framing. The populist repertoire frames the unification of a "fictional entity" (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019), defines the imagined people in terms of morally representative members of "us," and in terms of the leader who shares their common identity or, at least, speaks on their behalf (Mény & Surel, 2002; Müller, 2016; Wodak, 2013).

Another dimension is the imagination of "others"—the crowd is mobilized against the enemy image of the out-group, and is canalizing inter-group hostility towards the out-group (Pappas, 2014). The rhetoric indicates the primary differentiation from "others" in terms of an anti-elitist frame; it concentrates the idea of an unresponsive, selfish, corrupt, greedy, poorly governing, and oligarchic part of the establishment in comparison to the block of the people (Decker, 2008; Ignazi, 2003; Rooduijn et al., 2015; Taggart, 2000; Ucen, 2007; Wodak & Krzyanowski, 2017). Furthermore, voicing complaints about "others" is not just complaining about elites, but rather about various imagined "evils" that are different and per-ceived as "dangerous" to the people's lifestyle, harmony, values, and unity, such as minorities, immigrants, the political opposition, intellectuals, etc. (Palonen, 2009; Pelinka, 2013). More precisely the question is "who fails to meet the criteria" to be a member of the people (Soare & Tufiş, 2019, p. 10).

Blaming discourse stigmatizes culprit "others" and involves deep victimization of the in-group (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). This categorical positioning justifies the exclusion of "others" by pointing to the supposed corruption, immorality, and threatening behaviors of the out-group and the reproduction of the victimhood, purity, or innocence of the in-group (Lozada, 2014; Moghaddam, 2014; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014). What have been designated as perceived threats are blamed for the victimization of "the people" or the in-group (Reinemann et al., 2016). Blaming rhetoric overwhelmingly frames issues such as the elimination of the people, political instability, the domination of elites, economic decline or crisis, insecurity, and chaos as being responsible for the existing circumstances, or highlights perceived uncertainties that do not yet exist, in order to mandate for fear (Svendsen, 2007; Vezovnik, 2017).

As the paper will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, Akşener's speeches also confront this "we-ness" in a populist sense. To mobilize voters, she expresses the discontent of the people and points to the bad actors who are responsible in her view. Her repertoire ap-peals to their grievances, but also offers solutions that will supposedly "make the people and Turkey good" by adopting an alternative model of change; her different political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) or "extraordinary personality" (Taggart, 2000) is evident in observing her speeches.

## Methodology

Abi-Hassan (2017) investigated the performance and repertoire of female leadership figures, emphasizing particular features such as their identities in terms of "family, woman and mother, activists, working-class women," depending on the context. Not dissimilarly, Meret et al. (2017) examined three female populist leaders, finding, for instance, that the leadership style of Pia Kjærsgaard can be characterized by its "stubbornness, aggressive tone, and authoritarian style." This is a very common theme on the political stage: when female political actors make efforts to project a "constructed masculinity," they are perceived as aggressive (Jamieson, 1995). According to Abi-Hassan (2017), "masculine attributes" are also linked with the charisma that enables the "extraordinary performance" that underlines the populist tone. Although charisma is not the central component of populism (Nai and Coma, 2019), it has a significant impact on populist actors with performative characteristics (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013), particularly in terms of establishing a bond with followers through close contact (Weyland, 2001).

This article goes beyond the discussion of charisma or masculinity and female leadership to focus on a female leader on the political stage of Turkey in an effort to see how the ex-candidate framed the populist repertoire in her campaign speeches. This study is also not arguing for charisma as a core feature of populism; it examines how a female leader can create a close bond with voters through the use of populist language that does not necessarily involve expressing herself in a masculine manner. The scholarly literature takes account of a limited number of female populist leaders. When it does so, it conspicuously tackles the question of how populism, especially right-wing populism, deals with gender issues; these studies involve a critical investigation of male-dominated populist language with the production of hostile and instrumental usage or patterns over women, and also an examination on positive transformation exists (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2008; Read, 2018This paper does not essentially focus on "female leadership," but on Akşener's evident populist-framed references, such as "mother" or "sister"; however, an analysis of the speeches also reveals that this discourse enables the main populist themes; thus, the study aims to contribute to a new understanding of female leadership beyond the European context in which it is typically discussed. Regarding Akşener and her campaign, the paper seeks to examine the articulation of the populist frame, going beyond the debates about perceived masculinity or charisma.

Personalized politics remains a constant in the Turkish context (Türk, 2017), with charismatic politicians playing central roles within the political parties and enjoying sufficient popularity among voters to be able to bypass their parties. In this regard, Akşener is a prominent and visible actor as the founder and candidate of the İYİ Party, and as a presidential candidate. Hence, the rise of the İYİ Party must be examined with regard to Akşener's discourse and style, given her use of personalized politics and populist performance within Turkish politics recently. Regarding the analysis of populism, observation of the performances and symbolic

frames employed by political actors can help in understanding the phenomenon (Geva, 2020). This study explains how a personalized female party leader frames and performs populism in the Turkish context that is encompassed in this "Zeitgeist."

As Muis and Immerzeel (2017) argue, the supply-side of populism provides an opportunity to observe speeches due to transferred arguments; thus, framing propounds an understanding of positions, opinions, or language that can be discovered by examining rhetorical labeling. According to Meyer (2001), powerful narratives portray a historical perspective with contextual references by ascertaining conditions. Context provides the linkage for the societal, cultural, and political spheres (van Dijk, 2006, p. 161), as they are part of the interpretation in process (van Dijk, 2002, p. 18). This discursive production conflates information, while political entrepreneurs serve as essential guides, resonating positions, interpreting circumstances, and reacting in response to certain moments. This clearly reflects moments within the representation of ideas and the reproduction of emotions (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016; Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2018; Schmidt, 2008). In simple terms, we can argue that narratives display the positions of the actors, transforming expressions into meanings by unearthing who is "one of us" and who does not share the same boundaries, which is a significant aspect of populist performance. Furthermore, electoral speeches are influential in understanding how political issues and messages are framed by leaders within the "critical moments."

This study focuses on the electoral speeches, conducting a content analysis through consideration of paragraphs or sentences that make "objectively traceable distinctions between arguments" (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011, p. 1276). The campaign speeches were selected because expressions in electoral rallies are "more spontaneous compared to official texts such as party programs, constitutions, or manifestos" (Grbesa & Salaj, 2019); likewise, Grigoriadis and Dilek (2018) evaluate electoral speeches and/or campaigns as "the combination of prepared and spontaneous material," allowing one to gain a political perspective on the actors through the observation of themes (p. 293). This means that rallies take a more distinct approach with respect to positions and references, blatantly disentangling natural messages through actor-based and issue-based repertoires. In short, the findings elaborate 24 full speeches by Akşener, collected from YouTube videos/audio-recordings.

## Findings

Since the beginning of the campaign, Akşener allowed herself to engage in "straight-talking," embodying the expression "the sister of the people." She did not hesitate to create an iconic image for herself in order to manifest close ties with the people, putting the will of the people above the dictates of common sense. Geva (2020) also argues that when a politician declares herself to be playing the role of a "mother or sister," this is a means of achieving cathexis with the audience, as is highly visible in Akşener's case. Constructing social groups over shared grievances, Akşener framed the mobilizing populist repertoire by attributing moral superior-

ity and pureness to the in-group (the people, the party, and her candidacy), while portraying "others" who do not share similarities in denigrating terms and through blaming narratives. Unlike the discourse of right-wing and male-dominated populism, the candidate of the İYİ Party has covered the gender context in a positive sense, giving it superior attributions, such as women's "unifying power." Instead of exclusionary stigmatization for women in political discourse, an emancipatory role is endorsed; nevertheless, the framing of family-based references that are entwined between the leader and audience in her speeches represent an attempt to lay claim to a "protector" image against all perceived "enemies" and to achieve close ties with voters. Moreover, she has brought complaints regarding fatwas concerning women's bodies, reflecting as "perversion." At each electoral rally, the most visible aspect of her performance was her discursive style, which is aggressive, accented, deprecative, enigmatic, and particularly susceptible to conjuring up imaginary marginalized segments within the society.

The speeches show that Akşener is capable of setting the agenda at electoral demonstrations, departing from the planned structure of her speech, and formulating spontaneous statements about the ruling party elites and the failing establishment. According to Moffitt and Tormey (2014), populist discourse frames crises or failures that the people experience in anti-elitist or anti-establishment terms. The role of a resonating crisis is not a significant determinant of populism, nor is its impact certain (Knight, 1998). Mair (2002) emphasized how the system-based non-functionality shapes the future of the ruling parties; even this is not completely associated with a crisis. However, it is inevitable to consider that crises stem from uncertainty or non-functionality, as economic difficulties and concerns trigger crises that invite reactions in the feelings of the voters and discourse of politicians. In this context, the populist repertoire declares "real representative" status in terms of who is able to intervene in a time of need and reflect the collective will (Müller, 2016) or portray populism as an alternative by mobilizing the crowd (Laclau, 2005), which denigrates the establishment and embraces the alternative. During the presidential campaign, the candidate of the İYİ Party engaged in a similar discursive performance, pointing to context-based failures that articulate "critique or crisis" framings:

> I had prepared another speech, but we woke up in the morning and saw the US dollar exchange rate, which is 4.88. There is huge concern everywhere. We woke up to a day that alerts us to the economy, brings a significant concern for the youth's future or the possibility of restructuring industries, and there is stagnant investments rather than difficulty for making new investments. Thus, I want to speak about the economy at the outset. The boss of the economy is trust…[9]

The next section illustrates the main populist frames that the candidate resonated in her campaign; thus, the findings are divided in terms of the observed populist messages: the people versus elites, the "us–them" distinction, and victimization/blaming narratives.

## The People and Anti-Elitism: "The Contract with the People"[10]

The people-oriented expressions of populist actors appeal to the feelings of the citizens, especially for a particular (and homogeneous) group who feel abandoned by politicians and changes. By appealing to their uncertainties and issues relevant to them, the leaders show that they understand their feelings and intend to solve their problems and speak on their behalf. Hence, the populist repertoire embraces respect toward citizens, claiming a perspective on the unpleasant circumstances in which citizens find themselves, and which address these in the speeches. On this point, Akşener seems successful, as she understands the significant grievances and concerns of the people, and appeals to their dignity, in contrast to the policies of the establishment which focus on corruption and recklessness. Moreover, Aksener "the sister" highlights contextual issues, reinforcing the prominence of the people that demonstrates how "critical moments" and "issue-based arguments" are efficient – these moments confront the audience with the "failure of others" and the "interest of the people" of populist discourse.

In our case, the high cost of living, in particular, is on her agenda, as she unflinchingly addresses unemployment and its impact on the citizens. Therefore, the candidate has proposed a new concept, called a "citizenship salary,"[11] differentiating the position and transcendental policies of her party, which gives voice to the "hard issues." Promising a "citizenship salary" for unemployed youth is a performative source of access to the people. In her new adventure, as she differentiates herself from the establishment and its elites, the candidate's every word conjures up images. Apart from the "citizenship salary," the "Solidarity Fund of Turkey" (*Türkiye Dayanışma Fonu*) represents another move toward redemptive progress for people who are in a situation of bankruptcy or difficulty repaying loans; this people-centered performance focuses on resolving economic problems.[12]

In every electoral rally, Akşener repeatedly invokes particular groups within Turkish society, making their issues visible. She positions herself with the people, claiming "I prefer to be in the heart of the people rather than on the screens of the palace,"[13] as she criticized the limited media coverage given to the opposition in contrast to that provided to the incumbents. This demonstrates how statements of opposition can be critical to both the political and media elites in a controlled system. The candidate inherently emphasized the will of the people: "I said that I would be the candidate of the people—if my people will not give their signatures, I will not be a candidate."[14] She linked the will and support of the people with the capability to collect 100,000 signatures in six hours (collecting signatures is a requirement to officially become a candidate). During the campaign, the presidential candidate did not neglect to reflect on her bond with the people. This imaginary bond frames the "corruptness" of "others" against the "pure approach" of the in-group; consequently, we see a two-fold narrative involving people-centrism and an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of herself involving expressions calculated to show the "good side" of the candidate. imagining epitomized positive identity has driven people-centrist attributions.

In my political life for 24 years, I have never lied to my people.[15]

I have never been instructed by someone aside from my people.[16]

The effort to constitute close ties with the voters occupies a significant space that seeks to conceive a difference from the traditional and mainstream parties. For instance, the research project conducted by Erdoğan and Uyan Semerci (2017)** has a quotation from one participant in the in-depth interviews with voters, a 30-year-old student who expresses her satisfaction with the party and also considers that "the people" have no opportunity to voice their grievances as a consequence of the lack of attention by politicians and their distance from ordinary citizens:

> I participated in a few of her demonstrations. There were barriers, and we were behind at the stage. They put a barrier in front of the people. OK, every politician can ask to remove the barriers… But she says: "Take away the barrier, you cannot put anything between the people and me." (N, 30).

This quotation from a participant indicates that one of the features of her leadership style is that she tends to demand the removal of the barriers that are formulated by the mainstream to keep a distance between the politicians and the citizens. However, populist discourse and performance have a purpose or claim in abolishing "the barriers." It should be noted that "the barriers" play a metaphorical role in Akşener's discourse. In reacting to the perceived conjuncture arising from the elites of the ruling party, she anchors solidarity with the people, championing how the "we-ness" accomplishes the breaking down of barriers in spite of all challenges.[17] In 2016, she held the police barrier during a protest, saying: "The people who take this kind of measure have to show their official papers. We have to see the official order from the governor. On the other hand, I will not take my hand off the barrier."[18] To establish a direct link to common sense and mobilize an anti-elitist reaction, "the barrier" resonates metaphorically.

People-centered framing embodies non-failure in "service to the people" in elaborating negative coverage for political elites. Not surprisingly, people-centric, anti-elitist, and anti-establishment statements have been framed concurrently and also persist with regard to economic issues as the most fragile and initial dimension. To surface her "savior role," economy-based solutions are offered as viable paths to winning the election. The imagination of the homogeneous fictional entity accentuates dismantling categories through grievances of "taxpayers," "the poor," "the natives," "the country," which underlines the members of the people in a society by presenting their conditions (Ignazi, 2003; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019).

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Regarding economic and societal grievances, social groups have been produced as marginals segment of society, with certain attributions: "farmers," "youths," "women," "the disabled," "students," "the unemployed," and "retired people" in Akşener's agenda. If we remember Aslanidis's (2018) argument, "transformation from categorization to collective mobilization," the candidate's populist and collective mobilizing discourse cannot be spurned. Because we see a repertoire speaking on behalf of certain groups, for instance, she has condemned the lack of agricultural progress in the name of farmers; there is often an explicit collective mobilizaton.

When Akşener heard the voice of *ezan* (call praying fo*r),* the electoral speech did not continue until the end of it; meanwhile, the audience can witness particular dialogs between participants and the candidate through the power of the microphone, while participants/voters share their grievances, she listens to the people, leaning, and then she repeats one of the templates to the crowd. Populist performance often takes on a "listener" personality to fortify ties with the people; this is why Chávez took the stage in a television program called "Alo Presidenté" every Sunday; it took six hours to generate an interaction with the people by listening to their complaints and nuisances (Carroll, 2013). In this sense, positive visibility as the "man/woman of the people" eventuates both media and electoral stages, paving the way for being the representative of the "we-ness" within common sense. Listening to peoples' difficulties, the candidate offers reasonable utterances with regard to the idealization of ties.

As previously mentioned, her performance indicates different interactions with citizens during electoral rallies. In one of the rallies, a little child came to the stage, giving his pocket money and asking, "Can you please use the money for your campaign?"[19] After the emotional question, Akşener hugged and thanked the child. This interaction—it is not known if it was a strategy or a spontaneous act—represents Akşener's acceptable imaginary leadership. In other words, the performance illustrates her acceptance by the citizens. To develop a people-centric appearance, performative interactions and echoes have been predicated. In any case, the party and its leader seek to mobilize the crowd, convincing them of their trustworthiness and imminence.

The peculiar division between corruptness and purity embraces anti-elitist and anti-establishment rhetoric that intensely glorifies the people, disseminating a view of them as both "the real victims" of failed policies and as "the real power" to save the country. By incorporating the ruling party elites and the establishment frames together, we see an intertwined populist repertoire over anti-elitism and anti-establishmentarianism. Relying on the claims of the incumbency, the establishment has been depicted, such as "fatigue syndrome" or "exhausted driver," elicit the message of "change" in transferring to the audience. Akşener portrays the "real issues" of Turkey, attributing victimhood to the people and blaming the incumbents for "unfair" policies and favoritism in general. Her expressions mostly engage with the idea of change; she offers an alternative system in order to defeat favoritism, which she claims stems from the establishment. On June 9, 2018, during the electoral demonstration held in Trabzon, she expounded on the corrupt relationship between "sources and opportunities" within the

establishment: "It is not possible to become a specialized sergeant without a paper given by the AKP."[20] Distinguishing today and future frames anti-establishment that symbolize "more corrupt order with ruling party .This anti-establishment theme frames favoritism in the company with the imagination of "losers and winners," transferring the claim of elimination for the people by incumbents. This message saliently creates a boundary between the people and the ruling party elites and a shared sense of identity; the people are constructed as "losers" in comparison to the elites and their supporters, who have become "winners" through the favoritism of their collaborators. Collective mobilization endorses the construction of social groups in producing societal cleavages. In this way, Akşener uses labels to advance her populist repertoire.

> If you do not know someone (from the ruling party), you will be unemployed. When you do not know someone (from the ruling party), you will be hungry. (…) Their children acquire positions alongside the district governor, governor, and rector.[21]

In a similar vein, the definition of order as "broken" fosters statements about the establishment, targeting broadly articulated issues of polarizing language: Turkey as a net importer rather than self-sufficient; corruption; favoritism; institutional collapse (Turkey is defined as farm); political instability; the failure of governance; and economic instability. During the juxtaposition of critiques, the possibility of transformation was put into words during the campaign, with "the order should be changed" becoming one of the appeals.[22] Institutional regulations and economic opportunities were the primary subjects on which reactions could be offered to the incumbency. Regardless of the issues she was articulating, Akşener used an aggressive tone and depreciatory descriptions to clarify how the ruling party and establishment maintained their corruption, stating:

Many fools become rich from TRT. They are making programs, but there is no one to watch them. TİKA spends 8 billion dollars in a year, which contains your (the people's) taxes, which cost 6.5 billion dollars. It is not certain what they are paying for, and the number of employees is not certain. I'm going to research it. I will send those individuals to the jurisdiction that deals with theft.[23]

> Men who look like timber are walking around.[24]

The construction of the distance between the two camps—the people and the political elites—implies the perceived humiliation of the people by the establishment. The messages transfer the existence of a negative approach to the people in denigrating, this evaporates ties with "other" politicians and legitimates imaginary boundaries with the masses. Hence, "they see the people as easy"[25] is how Akşener described the establishment's predatory attitude to-

ward the people. To portray the elites as suspect actors in the political process, she posed a question to the crowd, asking them how much money they had in their pockets; she infamized these actors, declaring that "they" have no interest in "the people," thus positioning the political elites negatively through anti-elitist messages. Her repertoire was by no means enigmatic; instead, her arguments identified clear and explicit clauses. Her anti-elitism was expressed in the idea of the distance of the political elites from the people and by framing the issues in terms of the "us–them" distinction that is discussed in the following section of this paper. De Vreese et al. (2018) propose that it is usually outsiders who instrumentalize an anti-elitist or anti-establishment framing to acquire leverage; similarly, as an opposition figure, Akşener embodies these frames, straining against the ruling party and offering alternatives. Regardless of all statuses in both the incumbency and opposition, populist rhetoric draws a distinction between the failures of "others" and the skills of "the people," condemning the existing rule-making political actors and the establishment. Accordingly, this paper observed that the populist repertoire of the opponent party enhances reactions against the incumbency and elites of the ruling party; in the İYİ Party's case, the speeches have the purpose of challenging the ruling party elites more than other rivals in the opposition.

　　　　Akşener's anti-elitist expressions also cover the luxury lifestyles and the financial/governmental misuse by the incumbents, which is contrasted to the lives of the people who are defined as the "real ones," who are more in need of financial resources than the elites, producing people-centered opinions synchronically. The quotation below seeks to reflect the fact that the populist language of "Meral abla" seeks to reflect her supporters' frustrations with the actors or institutions of the establishment and their concerns with regard to the future. Because voters' challenges are deeply related to "the future" in various cleavages (Bonikowski, 2017, p. 189), various kinds of reactionary mobilizing discourses can have an incisive impact. In addition, the leader defines herself as "the good one," belonging to the only proper actors (the members of İYİ Party), envisioning a homeland that draws boundaries against others, and highlighting the moral superiority of "the people." In the same sense as Müller's (2016) clarification, she believes that only she stands with the people and is capable of representing them.

> People ask me the financial sources (for her promises). Let me explain the sources for you. There are cars—as you know, the grooms of ministers are using those cars, and their daughters are using the cars. These cars are rented for a very high price. But Mehmet Şimşek defined this as "money for hazelnuts and peanuts." (it means 'nothing') I will really use that money to buy hazelnuts.[26]

> Ministers, their wives/husbands, and children use luxury automobiles… (…) You will not be upset anymore, others will be. (…) Those who use luxury automobiles… Brides, grooms, children, everyone. I will say to them: "Get out the car, get out!"[27]

> You order a bridge for a billion Euros, which normally costs 350 million Euros, and take a share from that money. You give a guarantee for payment with dollar and treasure, then you compensate, receiving money from "the precious people" by taxes and raises. May you get no benefit from it.[28]

In the speeches, one can hear "get out of there" (*hadi oradan*) and "here we go, we'll see" (*hadi bakalım görelim*) frequently while she is targeting the political elites with respect to specific lies or reactions. This indicates that Akşener maintains a strict anti-elitist position, drawing boundaries between the İYİ Party and others and adopting a negative tone; this shapes emotional mobilization by embittering reactions. Apart from her aggressive emphasis, Akşener undertakes a guardianship role in order to protect women, making references to their concerns about their safety. We also see that "Meral abla" makes an especially positive appeal to gendered discourse, underlining the power of the women who are seen as capable of achieving and doing anything to achieve their goals.[29] Her statements on women and youth are significant, as they symbolize the difference from the discourse of the populist right-wing parties and take up significant space in her campaign.

> There are lots of women who cannot walk safely in the streets. We have women who cannot leave their houses. I'm calling out men who are carrying a gun—if you molest a child, I will kill you.[30]

> At this square, it is mostly women's voices who are calling me "President Meral Akşener." Thank you. When a woman decides on something, they do whatever is required. This occurred during the struggle for independence. If my sisters have a voice at this demonstration, it seems that this work [winning the election] is done.[31]

## The "Us–Them" Division: "The Children of Ministers versus the Children of the Nation"

Constructing a shared identity exploits the audience through the understanding of the "we-ness" that employs commonalities with the prototypical leader, imagining a sense of being "one among us." In launching her electoral speeches, Akşener highlighted her commonalities with particular cities; for instance, when she gave a speech in Karaman, she focused on her mother's background there, saying, "My mother belongs to one of the families who migrated from Karaman to Rumelia."[32] Resonation of commonalities tangentially frames shared identity in conjunction with common backgrounds, feelings, and norms, which is made possible by emotional canalizing. As the social identity perspective suggests that the attachment and definition of "us" depend on a comparison with "them," this differentiation scrutinizes who we are. In a similar sense, classification and positioning with the people enfold the in-group in the populist language. Thus, the division between the "children of ministers" and "children of the nation" (*bakan çocukları ve vatan çocukları*) involves a visible "us–them" differentiation, idealizing "the people" and stigmatizing the "others."

> There are two kinds of youth in Turkey. One is the children of ministers who have trillions in their pockets, and the other is the children of the homeland who have not even a kurus. We have come to stand with the children of the homeland.[33]

> Children of ministers, who do not have capability to be anything. (…)(asks one of audiences' name). X is children of the nation, but "others" are children of ministers.[34]

The antagonistic "us–them" distinction is invoked along with "being with the people" and moral boundaries within Akşener's populist frame. She mobilizes the masses, presenting a comparative categorization in order to define "the good ones" in contrast to "the evil ones." Her depiction of the party directly conceives of an "evil or enemy image of others." This kind of demonization seeks to reinforce the justification for her arguments, providing a picture and actions for the "others" who are seen as "dangerous" and should not be supported. In general, she adduces the incumbents' immoral actions while revealing the "us–them" comparison, which also affirms her party through moral superiority. In other words, "they" are evaluated in a negative sense, while the party (we) is defined through positive meanings that tend to dignify the in-group (the people and the party).

Achieving responsibility based on economic interests resonates as "moral responsibility" with respect to the interests of the country. Akşener denigrated the ruling party for the sale of (national) factories that took place, while promising to take back the factories and give them back to the nation/people.[35] This comparative categorization features the idea of how the party and its leader serve the nation and have a moral responsibility toward the citizens in protecting the nation's reputation in a national struggle. According to Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008), populist actors appeal to the concerns of the people, promising to make particular changes for the affected/victimized people with respect to problems derived from repressive authoritarianism or socio-economic crises; in this sense, we see that Akşener is also one of the leaders seeking to embrace the frustration of the people and offering new policies concerning economic challenges. The differentiated configurations of the group boundaries are enhanced by the depiction of the "others" prioritized by the candidate.

Bringing "the national and traditional days of Turkey" to the agenda, Akşener emphasizes how the "we-ness" has respect and loyalty to the nation. The references on the commitment of the "us" canalize the portrayal of "others" in a negative sense, deprecating the national values of the existing political elites. She makes categorizations in relation to national values and patriotism that lead to idealizing herself and the party, but reject "others." By instrumentalizing the discourse on national values and attachment, the claim of being the "real representative" becomes intensified. As a national symbol, her invocation of the Turkish flag noticeably escalated her labeling statements, while narrating how she is one of "the real citizens and representatives" whose uncle was martyred as a consequence of the struggle against terror organizations.[36] The commitment to national values is empowered by the leader's life story and background in order to mobilize nationalist feelings and make her a stereotypical leader who shares the common experiences. Under the nationalist frame, "they" are defined as the "evil ones" who are positioned against the will of the people and interests of the nation,

selling the national factories or failing to end terrorism or economic questions; these are more widely elaborated under the heading of "blaming narratives."

> We also brought goodness to Erdoğan and his friends. Before the İYİ Party, they were becoming sick on every November 10 (Atatürk Remembrance Day), April 23 (the anniversary for the establishment of the assembly – national sovereignty and children's day), and October 29 (the Republic day). Some of them were going to the hospitals; others were taking a rest at their homes. In this context, we established the İYİ Party with you. Then all of them became good. We brought good to them.[37]

> I'm calling from here: We did not allow for Barzani's flag; you did… You provided an opportunity to remove the Turkish flag and the picture of Atatürk; we did not provide this, you did.[38]

The portrayal of Akşener as "one among the people" creates a differentiation through the "us–them" division. Other political parties, especially the incumbents, are criticized due to their "elitist" behaviors and lifestyles, compared to Akşener's ordinariness or naturalness, which is contrasted with "being with a guard." That other politicians underestimate the importance of this can be seen in the large number of bodyguards accompanying them. Making these comparisons is discursively strategic, as it persuades the audience to identify how the leader prefers to live with norms of ordinariness and authenticity rather than differences with the people. Negative campaigning that stresses the "others' distance" recalls the in-group's commonality with the people, framing the "we-ness" in collective mobilization. The "us–them" division positions the leader on the side of the people, articulating a non-privileged lifestyle as her common routine.

> He walks with three thousand bodyguards. I'm walking with three bodyguards. Faith and fear cannot be in the same heart. If we believe, we should believe to the death.[39]

The sense of "we-ness" in relation to solidarity and unity is reflected in common purposes; a few days before the election, an electoral rally was organized in one of the more significant neighborhoods of İstanbul, Üsküdar. The candidate received a note from the staff and shared it with the crowd: the electricity has been turned off in the square. Then, the discourse emphasized the unity of "us."

> Everyone is afraid of your power. You know that we talked through a hailer when the electricity was cut off. We could not get a meeting hall, so we talked in car parks. They tried to cancel our meetings, but we fulfilled our duty. It does not matter a damn to members of the İYİ Party, Üsküdar (the people who reside there), or Meral Akşener.[40]

Electoral speeches dwell on the distinction between the past and the future; they rely on nostalgia that drives the longing for "the good old days" before the ruling party, also garnering a statement relevant to constructing a shared identity: "I'm a village girl."[41] This identification reveals a binary discursive strategy in populist language. First, this statement demonstrates her shared identity with the people, illustrating her "ordinary lifestyle" and status as "one of the people." Second, the content of nostalgic expression focuses on the difference between the İYİ Party and the incumbents who seek to perpetuate the failed economic policies of the establishment by showing how those policies had a negative impact and how "they" damaged the country and its citizens, in contrast to "the good old days." Particular conditions such as economic deprivation or challenges embitter the populist repertoire; this can be called *nostalgic deprivation* on account of the feeling of loss (Gest et al., 2018, cited in Kaya et al., 2020, p. 364). In this way, the "us–them" distinction positions "us" as having moral superiority and accuses the "others" of "selfishness" or "incapability." She continued her words, emphasizing her trustworthy relationship with the glorified people, along with her "sedulity" and "wisdom."

The production of "we-ness" by Akşener appeals to the concerns and uncertainties of the people. Populist actors reproduce symbolic threats; this perceived construction reinforces the categorization of "us–them," comparing adopted (political) identities (Pappas, 2014; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017), opinions, beliefs, and preferences, which also determine boundaries with "others." Akşener follows rhetoric regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey that leads to a framing of the differences. She stated: "Wait, wait, I'm coming to Syrians as well, there are lots of things to mention"[42] while clarifying entrenched sources for projects offered by the party, an economic transformation involving a transfer from expenditures for Syrians to those for native people when the "others" are gone. Concerns about economic issues are articulated by blaming discourse due to the existence of "others."

Even if her statements do not illustrate a direct exclusionary approach to Syrians, she promised to send Syrian refugees to their homeland, claiming that "people become happy in their homelands. We will send them to their homeland, and they will live there more happily,"[43] thus differentiating the out-group residing in the country. Her discursive nativist production expands a hope-driven future by strengthening boundaries against Syrian refugees; thus, she subsequently suggests envisaging an ideal place without "others": "We have four million Syrians. (…) When I get elected as president, I will rectify the relationship with Syria, and we will send our Syrian brothers to their homeland safely."[44] The construction of homogeneity is the expectation, which is linked to the hope for a more "pure life" without "foreigners." Within her discursive performance, she imagines a group differentiation between the native people and newcomers, and also remarks on the failed policies of "them" on refugees, explaining the alternative choice represented by the İYİ Party.

## Victimization and Blaming: "The People Paid the Price"

The populist repertoire involves hostility toward the out-group, comprising negative senti- ments in conjunction with inter-group differences. The construction of out-group members transfers to them the image of "evilness," demonizing them as a perceived threat to persuade the audience. In this case, the electoral speeches also involved victimhood and blaming narra- tives simultaneously. In this manner, Akşener defines "the silent majority" (the people) as the victims of Turkey, who were described as oppressed and exhausted. On the one hand, "Hayme Ana" blames "others," especially elites who are found to be responsible for emerging threats or developments within the country. Unlike the "us–them" distinction, blaming narratives de- clare the preferences, actions, and behaviors of "others," whose perceived danger derives from "their" differences and attributions, which are seen as not being in harmony with the in-group (the people and the party).

Denouncing the failure of governance audaciously frames political elites and especially the ruling elites as being responsible for the existence of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Within blaming and victimization narratives, the political elites become the culprits, who are consid- ered an essential reason for initiating the flow of newcomers. The group-based differentiation is between "other" political elites and in-group members; it derives from victimization and blaming narratives. By repeating the received emotions of the native people through state- ments such as "you are hurt due to Syrians" or "you feel pain due to Syrians,"[45] the speeches position the people in the victim camp against the perceived threat of the existence of "others'" and the policies of the ruling party elites. "Governance vacancy" is the definition for a con- structed issue with Syrians that subject the people to "enemy" elites. "An understanding which accommodates the country to personal interests" has framed blaming discourse with respect to the tension between Syrian refugees and citizens. In the context of how she addressed the question of Syrian refugees, she has consistently posed the question: "Are you satisfied with your conditions?"[46] which deliberately uncovers the victimhood of the native people, concern- ing their economic grievances and reproducing scenarios with threat. In calling for discontent and appealing to frustration on behalf of the people, nativism conjures the people, but also, an emphasis on people-centrism articulates populist rhetoric in the speeches.

> Syria has political intricacy; its people reside in our country; Iraq is complicated, its people reside in our country; and our youth is unemployed.[47]

The abortive coup that occurred in 2016 is one of the frequent references. Akşener crit- icized the government for its incapability to prevent the painful experience or for certain pol- icies or approaches that it took. She glorifies "the noble people" and shares their victimhood while blaming the ruling party and its representatives in relation to the emergence and rise of FETÖ.[48] Her narrative positions the people in association with heroic victimhood, as her be-

lief underlines the idea that the people struggled against the coup plotters in the streets, where chaotic conditions that were inflicted by the FETÖ against Turkey and the Turkish people, to legitimize her blaming narrative about the relationship between the ruling party and the Gülen movement. She has deridingly shared background information to support this view. Consequently, the chosen "enemy of the country" is expanded to include both the representatives of the incumbency and the FETÖ: "Due to your mistakes, we had the coup attempt. Due to your mistakes, the sainted people have paid the price with their lives. You made mistake after mistake. The people improved as you made mistakes. (…) The wizened Anatolian people are paying the price for all your mistakes."[49] Her anti-elitist approach notably relies on blaming that draws a boundary between politicians and the İYİ Party; in this way, anti-elitism and blaming discourse cultivate each other.

Apart from experiences of the abortive coup, blaming highlights the perceived unfair and dangerous actions of "others" with respect to terror organizations, clarifying how elites are responsible for creating continuous insecurity. In other words, Akşener made an association between the terror organizations and government policies, implying that government failure enhanced terror, thus revealing an antagonism and accusation. For instance, blame is articulated with respect to the actions of the PKK. Giving a quotation from President Erdoğan, Akşener indicated a comparison along with a lack of morality and nationalist commitment of the ruling party and Erdoğan in relation to the PKK's ditching policy, claiming that this is resulted with failure of the rule. Moreover, her critiques of the ruling party portray the new alliance (AKP and MHP) as "failed actors" who could not end the ditches of the PKK.[50]

> I did not kiss Barzani. I did not speak softly at Oslo. I did not allow the Peshmerga to pass with a flourish of trumpets from the country.[51]

In Denizli, she included particular assertions in association with a threatening relationship:

> The governors called me, crying. They said to the governors or chiefs of police: "Do not see members of the PKK." Then, the organization could ditch, and we have 7,600 martyrs. (…). On July 15, a coup attempt occurred. You are the reason, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. You sent the generals to prison, calling them members of Ergenekon or Balyoz. Hence, the coup attempt was experienced.[52]

> You ruined the military with FETÖ, you made a referendum in 2010, and you gave the judiciary to FETÖ, then you provided an appointment for many people from FETÖ, then July 15 happened in the end… We spoke with everyone in order to stop, but we do not have a mustache, so no one listened. On July 15, the noble people saved the state, and we lost 249 people. They were hiding. The Prime Minister was hiding in Kastamonu; we still don't know where the President (Erdoğan) was hiding.[53]

As the victimhood of the people occurs, members of the in-group, which represent the "we-ness" in her statements, the party is on the agenda as well. Perceived and framed malignment of the ruling party induce to negative reflection by the articulation of victimization. The identification with challenges of former political actors exist, such as Alparslan Türkeş and Süleyman Demirel, it seeks to tell how the party experience challenges and compete for the elections. Victimization narratives use anti-establishment sentiments to mirror the negative circumstances of the nation and its rule on the strength of the party's experiences. Despite the glorification of the party and its supporters, the people remain a source of power not to be quailed.

We should note one difference between the (Turkish) populist ruling party and the İYİ Party in terms of chosen "evils" to blame. Our previous study (Erçetin and Erdoğan 2018) showed that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) constructed enemies through internal and external actors, targeting terrorist organizations, the opposition (political parties, media, and intellectuals), and Western/European countries. However, this article revealed that the newly formed opposition party (the İYİ Party) mainly targeted the representatives of AKP and, overwhelmingly, the establishment. When Akşener blames other groups, such as the FETÖ and PKK, she also links them with the ruling party elites. Both studies illustrate that the difference between (populist) ruling and (populist) opposition parties is also based on constructed enemies within the populist discursive strategy. A ruling populist party presents a more exclusive approach with a broad cast of actors to demonize; however, an opposition party blames particular groups, the political incumbency, and its elites, who are represented as responsible for corruption and failed policies. However, it should not be forgotten that the İYİ Party is newly founded, and the presidential election of 2018 brought its first candidacy. Hence, the research agenda may scrutinize its discourse more comprehensively.

Reproducing threat and conditions, people-centrist rhetoric deployed fear toward the audience in the possibility with the winning of "others." Not solely related to this possibility, her claims regarding the existing order also fuel fear in the campaign speeches. The victimization discourse emerges through common challenges and experiences, requiring group solidarity while relying on emotive narratives such as fear (Gerodimos, 2015). This derives from the culprits constructed: the blaming discourse enlarges "others" by appealing to "enemies" and defining them as the "actors responsible" for negative experiences or tangible dangers, even if they do not exist currently. In a similar sense, Akşener has framed economic, social, political, and cultural perceived threats through her messages; this cements antagonistic group-based differentiation repeatedly.

> The people are nervous. The people are tired of the language that includes denigration or answers back all the time. Our youth are unhappy and unemployed. Our women are nervous while they are cooking. They have concerns while they are waiting for their daughters or sons to come home from work. They have concerns about their husbands in association with any kind of possible danger, on their way home. Two women have fear if they walk in the street and there is no light.[54]

Electoral campaigns seek to persuade citizens, emphasizing how candidates can address the problems of the country. As Moffitt (2016) argues, populist rhetoric attests to changing negative circumstances, (re)producing a crisis in statements; this language also makes promises that offer hope with a winning position in the political process. Hence, the imagination of hope articulates the "we-ness," voicing a "pure future" on behalf of the people. Statements like "I'm here for your life's safety. I'm here for employment. I'm here to prevent warfare against the values of the Republic. We are coming to fill the governance vacancy."[55] exist to represent a "guardian role" for the people and their interests.

## Conclusion

The scholarly literature has focused on only a few populist female leaders, and then mainly in the context of Europe. Moreover, references to women are solely related to family values or motherhood, but different cases may present various approaches apart from stereotypical roles. Although female leaders embrace particular identifications such as "mother or sister" in their own discourse, it is possible to observe more extensive nuisances, unlike "soft issues," as described by Meret (2015). This article, which aimed to understand how the female leader of a newly formed opposition party included populist frames during the campaign for the presidential election in 2018, did not essentially focus on "female leadership," but on how her populist repertoire made it possible to observe occasional references, such as "mother" or "sister" in terms of the role of women; however, the speeches also illustrated that this discourse enables the main populist themes. The paper thus contributes a new study of a female populist leader in a context beyond European countries.

It is seen that Akşener uses an aggressive tone through sardonic and invective references in order to characterize her rivals and enemies. She always collects muslin during her salutations, initiating them with nice words for the women and youth of the country. Her appeals are not solely linked with the concerns of women; she has expressed her opinion on the "hard issues," focusing on failed economic policies, terrorism, and unchecked corruption. Her anti-elitist expressions are related to the members or representatives of the ruling party and seek to portray how the incumbents are responsible for the people's grievances; thus, she positions

herself with the people, speaking on their behalf. Similarly, the chosen enemies whose actions are seen as dangerous to the interests of the people are also associated with the government and its elites, containing terror organizations as she claims. In this sense, the populist framing of an opposition party maintains particular justifications for the arguments emphasizing the negative role of the incumbents rather than other opposition groups. The speeches consider economic grievances, nativism, corruption, failed policies, the role of women, and emotional reactions.

The study demonstrated that "we-ness" is constructed within a populist discourse that emphasizes the glorification of a particular group against "demons." Therefore, populist discourse strengthens the distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt others" when a leader is positioned with the people. This kind of unification derives from appeals to peoples' grievances, perceived fears, insecurity, and anger, accompanied by uncertainties and concerns, highlighting shared values and identities. By giving voicing to the people or speaking on behalf of the people in opposition to "others" (elites, minorities, immigrants, etc.), a leader constructs "us" in her/his populist tone. With regard to this point, the article demonstrates that Akşener determines whom the victims are, referring to the people and those who are evil and harm the national will and the interests of the country. Although Akşener is not a pioneer or absolute populist, the Zeitgeist has surrounded her campaign in a particular repertoire. Examining more speeches of Akşener to scrutinize her populism should be on the research agenda.

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1   Akşener uses "your sister", emphasizing both "little" and "big" sister, establishing close relations through family references.

2   Akşener, speech in Kırıkkale, June 4, 2018.

3   At her electoral rallies, Akşener defined muslin cloths as a symbol and part of Anatolia, stating, "Muslin represents the dreams, hopes, and desire of women. It is a symbol—when it is out of the chest, everything stops. If it is out of the chest, the woman says 'Enough! that's not how it works anymore.' Although [President Erdoğan's] groom makes fun of our muslins, we women are decisive. Because there has been muslin in establishing Anatolia as the homeland. There has been muslin in ending wars. (…) Muslin can be used to mop one's brow, while one is working. And muslin is a scream and a call to say: 'That's not how it works!'" (Speech in Kırıkkale, June 4, 2018)

4   http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cilgin-projemiz-tulbent-projesi-40855341 accessed in October 29, 2018.

5   According to Pauwels (2011), the articulation of populism is closely related to various political ideologies and economic concepts; hence, its measurement originates in economic variables and manifestations of democratic concepts such as referenda, direct sovereignty, electoral majorities, etc.

6   For details, please see: https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogana-hodri-meydan-suriyeliler-icin-referanduma-gidelim-40989100

7   Akşener, tweet, https://twitter.com/meral_aksener/status/1062339295871152129 accessed in March 24, 2020.

**8** Team Populism evaluated Turkey, with its unique political party (the AKP) and President Erdoğan, as belonging to the "very populist" category (for details, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric). On the one hand, it should be noted that Turkish political actors have adopted populist framings and performances at particular times; the AKP is not a pioneer, and contextual developments or critical moments have created outcomes that enable us to observe the populist repertoire (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Toprak, 2013). Turkey has been continuously surrounded by the likelihood of crises and new dynamics, accompanied by initiatives and both domestic and external perceived threats that have explicitly mediated interaction and bonds between the leaders, who always remain in "electioneering mode," and the "real citizens" (Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2017). This fruitful lack of stability has always animated interactions with potential voters, following and appealing to values or intimacy. There is, thus, no single populist reaction or single actor who has used the populist repertoire. The leader of the Democrat Party, Menderes, emphasized the real representation of the ordinary people's values (Türk, 2014), purporting that there is a clear division between the people and "others": "we do not have to adapt to the noise of a handful of intellectuals; we have to obey to the mass of the people" (Ahmad, 2015, p. 61). Articulation of the "national vision" shed light on newly formed political parties that preferred to promote conservative rhetoric to shape bonds with the people (Gümüşçü & Sert, 2009). Participating in "Friday prayers," memorizing the names of the people, Demirel (Aydın & Taşkın, 2015, p. 137) showed the commonalities in constructing the "Muslim and Turkish" image, while Özal was a concordant actor on the populist political stage. In Turkish studies on populism, the populism of the AKP has largely been examined, focusing on how it maintains its hold using religion, nativism, an exclusionary approach, and a neoliberal tone as well as its strategies (Gürsoy, 2019; Yabancı 2020). Elçi (2019) conducted a content analysis to investigate whether the leaders of the political parties in the assembly (AKP, CHP, MHP, and HDP) could be seen as populist or not. According to his results, the AKP—as argued by Team Populism—is significantly more populist than others, while others are less populist, such as the leader of CHP, or engender a Manichean or an anti-elitist discourse. Hereby, Turkish politics has consistently cultivated a populist repertoire and performance. From this perspective, this paper evaluates populism as a discursive performance instead of advocating its treatment as an ideology; even Meral Akşener is not fully exploiting populism, articulating a populist frame in her communication, claiming emancipation of the people and constructing "us–them" group-based differentiation, as is visible in the "critical moment" of the electoral campaign.

**9** Akşener, speech in Isparta, May 23, 2018.

**10** The beginning of the electoral manifesto of the İYİ Party states: "We chose the name 'the contract with the people' for our electoral manifesto, which summarizes our understanding of what it means to rule biggest nation and the most beautiful country, Turkey."

**11** Akşener, speech in Çanakkale, June 1, 2018.

**12** Akşener, speech in Sivas, June 13, 2018.

**13** Akşener, speech in İzmir, June 10, 2018.

**14** Akşener, speech in Antalya, May 22, 2018.

**15** Akşener, speech in Bilecik, June 17, 2018.

**16** Akşener, speech in Üsküdar, June 21, 2018.

**17** Akşener, speech in Osmaniye, June 2, 2018.

**18** Murat Sabuncu, "Ülkücülerin 'devletle' imtihanı", Cumhuriyet, May 16, 2016.

**19** Akşener, speech in İzmir Tire, June 10, 2018.

**20** Akşener, speech in Trabzon, June 9, 2018.

**21** Akşener, speech in Sivas, June 13, 2018.

**22** Akşener, speech in Kırıkkale, June 4, 2018.

**23** Akşener, speech in Gümüşhane, June 8, 2018.

**24** Akşener, speech in İstanbul, June 21, 2018.

**25** Akşener, speech in Sivas, June 13, 2018.

**26** Akşener, speech in Ordu, June 9, 2018.

**27** Akşener, speech in Hatay, June 1, 2018.

**28** Akşener, speech in Aksaray, December 26, 2017.

**29** Akşener, speech in Konya, May 24, 2018.

**30** Akşener, speech in Samsun, May 26, 2018.

**31** Akşener, speech in Konya, May 24, 2018.

**32** Akşener, speech in Karaman, May 24, 2018.

33 Akşener, speech in Ordu, June 9, 2018.
34 Akşener, speech in Karaman, June 17, 2018.
35 Akşener, speech in Edirne Uzunköprü, June 1, 2018.
36 Akşener, speech in Aksaray, June 19, 2018.
37 Akşener, speech in Çanakkale, June 1, 2018.
38 Akşener, speech in Niğde, June 19, 2018.
39 Akşener, speech in Gümüşhane, June 8 2018.
40 Akşener, speech in Üsküdar, June 21, 2018.
41 Akşener, speech in Nevşehir, June 19, 2018.
42 Akşener, speech in Konya, May 24, 2018.
43 Akşener, speech in Rize, June 8, 2018.
44 Akşener, speech in Sivas, June 13, 2018.
45 Akşener, speech in Antalya, May 22, 2018.
46 Akşener, speech in Osmaniye, June 2, 2018.
47 Akşener, speech in Osmaniye, June 2, 2018.
48 The Gülen movement and its representatves were described as a terrorist organization (FETÖ) in Turkish politics.
49 Akşener, speech in Osmaniye, June 2, 2018.
50 Akşener, speech in Elazığ, June 12, 2018.
51 Akşener, speech in Elbistan, June 11, 2018.
52 Akşener, speech in Denizli, May 27, 2018.
53 Akşener, speech in Konya, May 24, 2018.
54 Akşener, speech in Üsküdar, June 21, 2018.
55 Akşener, speech in Kırıkkale, June 4, 2018.

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