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The chronopolitics of national populism

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ABSTRACT
Inspired by the populists' salient urge to recalibrate and locate contingent developments within a larger temporal order and establish historical continuity, this paper dwells on the chronopolitics of national populism and calls for a systematic treatment of time in these movements. Focusing on the neglected narrative dimension, such an inquiry will afford an alternative reading from which to engage with and critique the magnitude of populism. This study argues that despite ample variance and claims of uniqueness, national populisms employ a shared temporal template that accounts for a particular national subjectivity through a set of timing and sequencing of events complemented by affective stimuli. It focuses on the case of Turkey. More pronounced since 2013 Gezi Protests, the rising tide of national populism under President Tayyip Erdoğan's rule encapsulates how these populisms conflate the past, present, and future into a single narrative about the people's survival and prosperity.

Introduction

Amidst seemingly endless conceptual debates,[1] the recent wave of scholarship overwhelmingly treats populism as a backlash to globalisation. The economic insecurity thesis underscores social deprivation and distributional struggles stimulated by financial globalisation (Eichengreen 2018; Rodrik 2018). Alternatively, the cultural backlash thesis views populism as a nostalgic reaction to cultural grievances in the face of the rising tide of liberal progressive values and immigration (Norris and Inglehart 2018). Nevertheless, these demand-side approaches tell only part of the story. Even when such impetuses exist, the activation of populist attitudes takes place only through the messaging of populist leaders (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2018). The political dimensions of populism should not be undermined by regarding it as merely a symptom of more profound cultural

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or economic changes. Although these impetuses retain some explanatory value for specific geographic regions, their universal validity remains an open question. In fact, some top-down populisms may also emerge 'independent of the existing socioeconomic and sociopolitical context' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 105). Last, but not least, just as modernist scholarship considered the ethnic and religious surge in the direct aftermath of the Cold War era as a contingent anomaly (McCrone 1998, 2–3), demand-side approaches render the current populist surge to be a pathology requiring eradication. This problem-solving attitude, however, might lead to biased readings of the phenomenon.

A more comprehensive understanding of populism requires renewed interest in the supply-side: how populists communicate their messages to appeal to a broader base (Aslanidis 2016; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Halikiopoulou 2019; Moffitt 2016). While the bulk of supply-side explanations draw on either external (political constraints and opportunities) or internal (organisational structure, leadership) factors, the narrative dimension has largely been overlooked (Aalberg et al. 2016; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Rydgren 2005). Acknowledging that populist leaders are persuasive storytellers, this article argues for a narrative excavation to uncover the neglected dynamics of populist meaning-making. Distinct from other modes of discourse, narrative is, by definition, temporal, conveying a sequential series of stories unfolding over time (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 316). As such, the core populist narrative about good people reclaiming power from corrupt elites is rooted in evocative stories drawing on mythical pasts, crisis-driven presents, and utopian futures. This separate order of time that populisms impose is rarely acknowledged from a methodological perspective. Delving into the narrative performance of current 'national populisms',[2] in particular, this article invites a consideration of time in populism studies, which affords us an alternative reading through which to engage with the force of such movements. It addresses the populist 'chronopolitics' or 'politics of time' – 'how politics is about time, and how [...] time [is] presupposed by politics' (Maier 1987, 151). Basically, it argues that despite ample variance and claims of uniqueness, national populisms share a common narrative template to recount and connect the past, present, and future.

To examine the temporal configuration of national populisms, this article focuses on the case of Turkey. According to a recent study, Turkey has both undergone the largest increase in populist rhetoric while President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was identified as the only Right-wing leader labelled 'very populist' (Lewis et al. 2019). Erdoğan's rule represents a distinctive era in which the boundaries between Islamism, nationalism, and populism are blurred. Best described by Jenny White's term of 'Muslim nationalism', the new national identity in this populist projection is 'that of a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision for the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid onto a republican state framework, but divorced from the

Kemalist project'[3] (White 2014, 9). Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) escalated its power through an anti-elitist stance and a narrative of victimhood, claiming to represent all groups ostracised by the Kemalist 'Old Turkey'. By 2011, AKP subdued the Kemalist establishment, its 'necessary evil', after a series of trials against the military and a constitutional referendum altering the composition of the judiciary (Taş 2015). Leaving the comfort zone of the victimhood narrative was quite challenging, so AKP was left to explore its dexterity in manufacturing new enemies. With an increasingly authoritarian rule since the 2013 Gezi Protests, Erdoğan resorted to a conspiratorial mindset that sees any contention as orchestrated by a dark international elite force, called the mastermind (*üst akıl*), and any opposition as its subcontractors. Thereafter, AKP populism has become more pronouncedly anti-Western, nationalist, and communitarian. Beside Erdoğan's recurrent emphasis on being native and national (*yerli ve milli*), politics was redefined as a war between the national (*milli*) and non-national (*gayrı milli*) (Bulut 2017). Throughout this process, the Turkish case is especially noteworthy due to the centrality of temporal references in Erdoğan's populism, including nostalgia for the Ottoman era and his projections for a 'New Turkey', as well as constant struggles between conflicting representations of the recent and distant pasts (Çınar 2018; Yilmaz 2017).

This article begins with a reflection upon the significance of narratives and demonstrates how national populisms draw on shared, narratively-structured representations of events. It then outlines the schematic, affective, and organic features of the populist temporal template. After an in-depth analysis of the Turkish case, which elucidates the ways in which the template operates, it concludes with an overview of its central findings on the populist politics of time. To such an inquiry, this article undertakes a critical analysis of widely-circulated official statements, media coverage, and speeches of populist leaders.

The temporal template of populism and the affective regulation of time

Conveying a plot, narrative is based on the selective appropriation of characters and events that are ordered and related to one another temporally (Ewick and Silbey 1995, 200). Narratives primarily have a constitutive function. As Roger Smith argues, 'the people' does not emerge organically out of some demographic or territorial elements, but is constructed and sustained through the 'stories of peoplehood' told by political leaders to cultivate feelings of collective worth and identity (Smith 2003). These stories are articulated within an overarching and integrative master narrative of a linear timeline that equips the political elite with the ability to knit past, present, and future together while standing as the voice of the people. Narratives also perform a cognitive function

by countering uncertainty through a coherent, predictable story to help people make sense of social, economic, and political complexities. In a sequential ordering of events, they explain – not necessarily causally, but morally – why certain things happened in a particular way (Monroe 1996, 20). It is this power of meaning-making and simplification through which contemporary populist leaders gain adherents. Finally, the accessibility of narratives makes them a good basis for greater mobilisation (Wertsch 2012, 140). (Populist) politics is mainly about story-telling (Polletta et al. 2011). By providing a moral base for collective action or redefining perceived interests, a compelling narrative can inspire and mobilise the people.

James V. Wertsch distinguishes between two levels of narrative analysis: 'specific narratives', focusing on particular characters, events, and settings, and 'schematic narrative templates', which provide a more abstract level of representation that can be instantiated through specific narratives (Wertsch 2002, 60–62). In this light, contemporary national populisms utilise a shared schematic narrative template that accounts for national subjectivity through a peculiar set of timing and sequencing of events complemented by affective registers. While Wertsch utilised this concept in the organisation of collective memory, this article adopts a more holistic approach, extending its use to the present and future, and identifies three basic features of the populist temporal template.

First, it is schematic in the sense that it offers abstract generalised knowledge structures. The template rests on a Manichaean ontological assumption that the people are inherently good while its adversaries are inherently evil. It is no surprise that national populist leaders constantly refer to the intrinsic merits of their nation and the evil ingrained in the souls of their opponents. This simple and straightforward essentialization is not only a form of self-flattery to assert the nation's moral superiority, it is also a rough framework that narrates conflicts and provides a universal excuse to justify measures taken against any perceived enemies. Turkey's populist leader, Erdoğan, for example, may render a diplomatic crisis to the evil 'engraved in their [European/Christian] character' or relate the anti-government Gezi protests in 2013 to the destructive 'natural disposition' (*cibilliyet*) of dissidents (Erdoğan 2017; Cumhuriyet 2016a). Such an ontological description ordering the past, present, and future lays the ground for a defensive apologetic stance that leaves any further explanation redundant and denies responsibility or guilt for the misdeeds of the nation and its leader.

Second, the populist template operates through an affective regulation of time. How time is set, segmented, phased, and filled with various emotions remains a crucial aspect of the resilience of such populisms (Skonieczny 2018; Wertsch 2012, 143). At times self-aggrandising and at others self-pitying, the populist template addresses the grievances and frustrations of the masses. It circulates and mobilises 'love of the insider, fear of the outsider, and anger

against corrupt elites', all associated with specific events in national time (Levinger 2017, 5). Referring to populist mobilisation strategies, for instance, Mahir Ünal, a senior AKP member, defined his party as an 'emotional vampire' that thrives on exploiting and draining the emotions of the people at every opportunity (Today's Zaman 2015).

Finally, the populist template is characterised by collective narcissism, assuming the past as 'our' past and applying the template to that community exclusively (Wertsch 2012, 141). It employs an 'organicist form of narrative' that assumes the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts (Çınar 2015, 6–7). In other words, it is a communitarian sense of nation and time in which individuals cease to be the autonomous agents of their lives, but float through time as part of the greater nation. According to this conception of time, the nation (as a whole) has neither a past nor a future, but a heritage and a destiny, securing an exclusive place and mission throughout history.

While 'the dominant time conception has changed from a linear, irreversible and progressivist time conception to a non-linear, reversible and non-progressivist one' (Lorenz 2014, 46), the temporal template of national populism envisages a crisis-driven present squeezed in between two pasts and two possible futures (Figure 1). The art of populist leaders is evident in how they bend, stretch, or compress different segments of time in their narratives. It is the accordion of time that ensures the required flexibility of the populist narrative to cope with various grievances and expectations of its interlocutors. Ultimately, in these narratives, the people exist and will continue as long as all they share pride for their distant past and the pain of the ongoing victimhood, and continue to be mobilised in the present by the anxiety between the fear of existential threats and the dream about making their country great again.

Restorative nostalgia for the distant past: invoking the heartland in national populism

In the temporal template of national populism, the past plays a paramount role. Performing the epic function, the distant past invokes the 'heartland', in Paul Taggart's words, an imagined past in which a morally impeccable, unified population resides (Taggart 2000). In high-modernist culture, the past is something that haunts us: a liability.[4] In contemporary national populisms, however, the glory of the past is what holds the nation together and allows citizens to keep their heads up. Longing for a time they were never a part of, people seek refuge in those 'good ol' days' in an effort to restore their national pride. For the populists, a romanticised conception of the golden age only represents the due course of history for the nation. Therefore, the distant past serves not only as a source of deserved pride, but also proof that the nation is destined for greatness, leading to a restorative nostalgia. For instance, when the populist
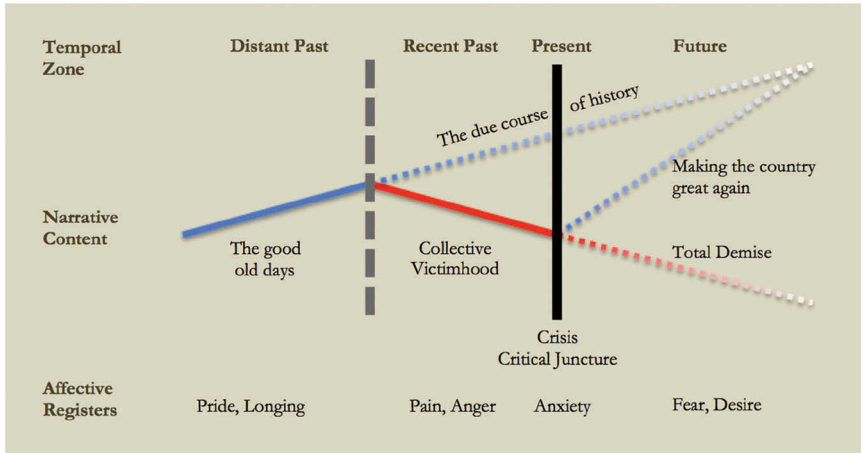
Figure 1. The non-linear narrative structure in the temporal template of national populism. (Source: The Author's Illustration).

Note: The line represents the people, as a whole, moving up and down in time.

Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, illustrates the 'new Hungarian dream', he refers to 'the 1,000 years old Christian Hungarian state' that only mirrors the rightful and glorious destiny of Hungarians (Rajacic 2007, 644).

AKP relied on the glorification and romanticisation of the Ottoman era as the golden age more than any of its predecessors. Treating national history as a battlefield, Erdoğan confronted the Republican construction of time that neglects the Ottoman past and sets the official founding moment as 29 October 1923, when the new Turkish Republic was declared under Kemal Atatürk's leadership. According to Erdoğan, 'Whoever leaves out our last 200 years, even 600 years [the Ottoman era] together with its victories and defeats, and jumps directly from old [pre-Islamic] Turkish history to the Republic, is an enemy of our nation and state' (Office of Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2016). With this framing, AKP evoked an alternative foundational history that saw the Ottoman era in new light and drew on a new founding moment: 29 May 1453, when Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople, the then capital of Byzantine Empire (Çınar 2005, 138–167). Ottomania is omnipresent in AKP's rule, as revived in all facets of life from Ottoman-style constructions to an ever-expanding array of artistic and cultural artefacts, including historical films, soap operas, novels, museums, and exhibitions (Erdem 2017).

The construction of the Ottoman as distant past and self-flattering references to the old good times of 'şanlı ecdad', the glorious ancestors, are a frequent motif in Erdoğan's discourse. The Ottomans meant glory, magnificence, and Islamic piety. The distant past appears in a self-congratulatory portrait via chest-thumping stories of nationhood that narrate the golden age

of a virtuous nation. As a proven depiction of what that just nation deserves and can indeed do, the distant past is considered the energy source to make the nation great again in the future. At a time of increasingly antagonistic relations with Western countries, defining the Turkish nation as the descendants of the Ottomans, who marched as far as the gates of Vienna, has a soothing effect and helps invigorate national pride. Likewise, such an inflated self-reliance and superiority complex due to fascination with the myth of an Ottoman golden age compensate for the current social and economic predicament. At the fundamental level, this nostalgia for the Ottoman past is more than a simple reminder of imperial grandeur, but entails wholesale retrospection and a civilisational identification contrasted with the West. The Ottoman past is the heartland of AKP's populism and projected as an era that does not fall short of an ideal virtuous state and moral society, which used to protect the poor and weak unlike the brutal European colonial empires. This self-bestowed moral superiority reverberates in AKP's humanitarian aid programmes in Africa under the concept of 'Virtuous Power' (*Erdemli Güç*) (Langan 2018, 104). Obviously, this lionisation negates any atrocities and misdeeds attributed to the Ottomans, but rather deems them to be a blessing for all the formerly occupied lands (Çınar 2018). Moreover, while Erdoğan has repeatedly defined the Ottoman past as 'a civilisation of conquest' (Sözcü 2019), this restorative nostalgia for the golden age serves to legitimise Turkey's imperial ambitions in the region (Danforth 2016).

Recent past: the circles of victimhood

The populist imagination reconfigures the distant past and recent past in disparate ways. Despite the bright picture in the distant past, the recent past epitomises how the rightful destiny of the virtuous nation has been disrupted by some corrupt elite forces. This change in the narrative helps explain and bridge the tension between a virtuous past and a degenerate present by placing the blame on extrinsic factors. The self-flattering sentiments of national pride in the distant past are replaced by the self-pitying discourse of collective victimhood in the recent past. In their work on the Israeli context, Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi point that collective victimhood is accompanied by a 'siege mentality' – the belief that the in-group is encircled by enemies and in immediate need of self-defence (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992). Similarly, the American populism headed by Donald Trump successfully mobilised a politics of white victimhood in the 2016 presidential campaign. While a majority of whites believe that discrimination against them exists in the US (Mosbergen 2017), Trump explicitly catered to a moral panic around the construction of whiteness as victimhood. The appropriation of such victimhood dictates one particular interpretation of time in which the multiplicity of actors and events are reduced into the binaries of the oppressing

elite and the oppressed people. Focusing on the evil deeds and unjust harm of the adversary, this narrative of victimhood justifies one's moral superiority and the other's wickedness simultaneously. As it diverts attention on the acts of the other, the victim remains a passive recipient of the injustices and cannot be held responsible for his own behaviour or actions. Ironically reflecting victimhood as a desired status, this exclusive belief stimulates intense affective sentiments such as anger, despair, and humiliation, which reduces the ability to empathise with others or feel guilt towards one's own victims (Wohl and Branscombe 2008).

By mystifying the recent past, victimhood also becomes the main enterprise of Erdoğan's populist rhetoric, which characterises him and the AKP as 'for outcasts and the voice of the silent masses' ('*kimsesizlerin kimsesi, sessiz yığınların sesi*') (*Akşam* 2014; Yilmaz 2017). Nevertheless, the breaking points at which the recent past begins are indeterminate because populism, unbound with strict principles, greedily employs anything real or constructed to advance its pursuits, and, hence, may lead to multiple narratives of victimhood floating in the same water. To address the broader masses, AKP flexibly operates three main circles of victimhood, each drawing to different time segments, and easily switches between them: a) victimhood of the pious Anatolian people in the secular Kemalist regime; b) victimhood of the Turkish nation under assault by Western imperialist powers; and, c) victimhood of the oppressed *ummah* encircled by Crusaders and Zionists.

The first narrative of victimhood portrays an antagonism between Black Turks (the people) and White Turks (the elite) in the Republican era (White 2007). According to the former Vice Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş, 'After the Ottomans, Turkey's history turned to be one of oppression (*zulüm*)' (Birgün 2016a). In the same reckoning, Erdoğan popularised the term 'CHP's oppression' ('*CHP zulmü*'), marking the recent past as the perpetual victimhood of conservative Anatolian people under the oppressive secular bureaucratic elite (Milliyet 2014). Once the recent past is constructed as such, stories of victimhood reverberate across politics. These stories are often derived from and dramatised in memories of the so-called February 28 Process in the late 1990s and its repressive secularist policies, such as the headscarf ban in universities and public employment and changes in the educational system aimed at limiting the spread of religious vocational schools (*İmam Hatip Lisesi*) (Cizre and Çınar 2003, 310). While his children were directly affected by these measures, Erdoğan himself was also sentenced to jail in 1998 for reciting a poem at a public rally, which was deemed to be inciting religious hatred. He served four months of a ten-month sentence and emerged from prison with an aura of victimhood and symbolic capital that propelled his rise in politics at the national level. Stories of victimhood derived from this period enable Erdoğan to show the present under the same light and establish the immediacy of the recent past in an uninterrupted linear continuum of secularist

oppression. More importantly, by fusing his personal drama with this broader politics of victimhood, it establishes an emotional link between Erdoğan and his conservative electorate while also validating his 'one of us' exclusivist narrative, as he states: 'My story is the story of this people. Either the people will win and come to power, or the pretentious and oppressive minority – estranged from the reality of Anatolia and looking over it with disdain – will remain in power' (Yağcı 2009, 116).

A second and wider circle of victimhood, which depicts the Turkish nation under the constant assault of Western imperialists, entered into the AKP's lexicon after the 2013 Gezi Protests. Referring to the Turkish Liberation War (1919–1922) following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Erdoğan declared a new liberation war against Western powers and their collaborators within Turkey (Yilmaz 2017). Since then, all developments from the coup attempt on 15 July 2016 to the Turkish Lira's fall against the dollar have been linked to Western ambitions to bring down Turkey. In this victim rhetoric, AKP mobilises Turks' persistent 'Sèvres Syndrome', the popular conviction that Western powers never abandoned their plan to divide and conquer Turkish soil. When the recent past is painted as an antagonism between the Western imperialist elite and the wronged Turks, any opposition is deemed treasonous because the liberation war rhetoric leaves only two sides and labels anyone against the government as 'Turkey's enemies' (*Türkiye düşmanları*) (Karagül 2015).

The third circle of victimhood cites the oppression of the *ummah* and props up Erdoğan as the dissenting voice of the oppressed Muslim world. 'Turkey is not only the name of a country, but also the name of the oppressed victimised but proud ummah of millions', Erdoğan claimed (Haber7 2016). His 'one minute' outburst at the 2009 World Economic Forum, when he clashed with Israel's President Shimon Peres over Israel's offensive against Gaza, was an iconic moment in that regard. Erdoğan tried to maintain this discursive stance in his 2016 'The World is bigger than five' campaign which criticised the overpowered and exclusive structure of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and was supported by top trending hashtags in social media such as #ErdoganVoiceofTheOppressed (Sabah 2016). The construction of the ummah as victimhood is already inherent to contemporary political Islams, which identify the Muslim communities in modern world as *al mustad'afin fil ard* (the oppressed on earth). This narrative has been effectively mobilised by the AKP elite, who portray the predicament of the *ummah* as a repercussion of the centuries-old war between the Crusaders and Muslims. In this framing, Turkey and, therefore, Erdoğan, is identified as the vanguard of the Muslim world and the only hope for its salvation (Milliyet 2016). The assaults on Erdoğan are then considered as an extension of the war of attrition initiated by the Crusaders, who would not concede the Muslims' conquest of Istanbul in 1453 (Esayan 2015).

The Janus-faced future in AKP's projection

In the populist template, the future is not sealed-off, and hence, stimulates both hope and despair. The people, however, appear to have only two options in front of themselves. On the one hand, the future is a promising extension of the glorious past as reflected in the common motto of contemporary populisms 'Making America/Turkey great again'. Or, on the other, it depicts an utterly dark, chaotic picture, marking the defeat of the people in its survival war. The politics of hope in the former, promising a utopian fulfilment like the 'New Turkey', helps compensate for the discrepancy between the flattering self-perception and the political reality of the present.

Addressing a crowd of women, the Minister of Forestry and Water Affairs, Veysel Eroğlu, called on mothers to change their lullabies according to the government's aims for 2071: 'You will no longer say to your children: "Go to sleep and grow". You will say: "Sleep and rise, my son. The target is 2071. You will realize the footsteps of the Great Turkey"' (Hürriyet Daily News 2016). In symbolic gestures to Turkish history, AKP targeted specific years such as 2023 (the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923), 2053 (with reference to 1453 conquest of Istanbul) or 2071 (the thousandth anniversary of 1071 Battle of Manzikert, when Turks entered Anatolia for the first time) for the institution of 'New Turkey'. Loaded with imperial fantasies and aspirations, the utopia of New Turkey was meant to restore the Ottoman golden age, establish a Turkey-led order in the pax Ottomana, and put the nation on its due course in history. This brought a revisionist foreign policy through which Erdogan criticised the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that established the borders of the Turkish Republic and 'reduced our country in 1914 by 2,5 million square kilometres, to an area of 780,000 square kilometres' (Von Schwerin 2017). While spreading fake news about the annulment of the Treaty of Lausanne after its centennial anniversary, pro-government newspapers published new maps of Turkey that annexed parts of neighbouring countries (Danforth 2016). Amidst such irredentist aspirations, turning to the past for a political future ideal, this restorative nostalgia for a bygone era offers both condolences for present inadequacies and hope for the future.

Despite the utopian promises in new populisms, however, this glamorous future does not call for constructive work in the present that would hasten the coming of the good days. The people are destined to be great and history will reveal itself once they tackle the enemies at home and abroad. Thus, reminiscent of a Hegelian philosophy of history, this self-flattering teleological determinism has nothing to do with the future-oriented modernist projects, in which the linear progressive account of time provides an 'unshakable grip of a quasi-religious enthusiasm' that industriousness will bring the desired level of development closer (Scott 1998, 254). AKP began circulating

the term of New Turkey as late as 2010, when the party indeed lost its initial reformist momentum. In the beginning, the term envisaged a strong democratic country integrated with the European system and positioned as a regional power (with hopes of exploiting the Arab Uprisings to Turkey's benefit). Over time, as the discrepancy between the liberal promises of New Turkey and the AKP's undemocratic political practices widened, what the term entailed became more ambiguous. The government aimed to eradicate this ambiguity via the introduction of some government-led colossal construction projects, like the third airport in Istanbul, which were meant to illustrate the greatness of New Turkey. It has mobilised this now blurred vision to justify its misdeeds under the special circumstances of an interim transition process.

Despite being the harbinger of a new order, the dominant tone in the future is quite dark in the populist imagination. Again, unlike the high modernist project, which is future-centred and envisages the certainty and predictability of the future along with linear forward-moving time, current national populisms foresee chaos and uncertainty as disrupting the flow of history. Manipulating public fears, it magnifies the real or perceived risks to the nation and paints a dark picture of the nation under continuous threat (Wodak 2015). What is at stake is not only the loss of some cultural and economic privileges due to immigration, but the existence or extinction of a nation or civilisation. The American populism giving voice to alt-right arguments like 'white genocide', the conspiracy theory that immigration, racial integration, and low fertility rates will turn whites into a minority in the West, illuminates such fear-mongering (Kopan 2016). This resonates with 2016 Brexit campaign's alarmist arguments about the looming danger of white Britons becoming a minority (Coleman 2016).

On the abyss of existential horror, the dominant tone in AKP's future projection is quite dark, as well. According to the ruling elite, the Western powers, jealous of Turkey's unbridled rise and potential to achieve its 2023 goals, are doing their best to stop it (Milliyet 2017). So, the very survival of the nation (*milletin bekası*) was considered imperilled. This conspiratorial rhetoric found fertile ground in the abortive coup of 15 July 2016 (Taş 2018). By defining the coup attempt as the 'last liberation war' (Karagül 2015), politics was rendered into a struggle about the nation's survival. 'After the attacks of terrorist organizations following July 15, we have seen that we will either die or exist', Erdoğan said (Hürriyet Daily News 2017). In his framing, Turkey could find itself 'confronted with conditions like those in Sévres [Treaty]', which was imposed on the Ottoman Empire in 1920 after its defeat in World War I and envisaged the partition along ethnic and religious lines (Von Schwerin 2017).

The recurrent theme of the 'liberation war' and the apocalyptic prophesy, painting the future in an all or nothing dichotomy assigned AKP with the duty to lead the people through troubled waters. For Erdoğan, 'If AKP loses, the

whole of Turkey will lose, too' (Cumhuriyet 2017a). At the end, everything boils down to an apocalyptic, conspiratorial mentality that dominates thinking about and acting on the future. The ontological insecurity pandering fears and resentments leads to the loss of reason, the collapse of the known, living in the unknown, and ultimately demands a leap of faith and unquestioned loyalty to the leader, who will lead the country in the epic war between good (the people) and evil (the corrupt elite).

The present must be rescued and redeemed

In between the euphoria of resurrecting the golden age and fear of an imminent existential threat, the future invokes alertness and a paranoid mindset in the present. In other words, the liberation war is the last hurdle in the nation's march to greatness, yet it is also apocalyptic as it may lead to the national annihilation. The primal survival instinct lies at the heart of the populist enterprise in this zone. The future charges the present with ethical demands of immediate significance, which translates ontological insecurity into a vigilant nationalism mobilised to defend the vulnerable country. According to Trump, for instance, the West must demonstrate its 'will to survive' in the face of existential threats (Thrush and Davis 2017). The present is denoted as a critical conjuncture of history assigning the nation with a historical mission. In this reckoning, the Hungarian leader Victor Orbán asserts that Europe is being invaded by Muslim immigrants and calls for a historic duty to counter the annihilation of 'indigenous Christian'/ European nations: 'Will Europe remain the continent of the Europeans? Will Hungary remain the country of the Hungarians? […] Who will live in Europe? This is a historical question which we must face up to today' (Visegrad Post 2017).

Within the rubric of the unfolding liberation war, the present in Turkish populism, too, represents an ostensibly unprecedented, exceptional crisis and epitomises the fear, uncertainty, and anxiety marked by a primal survival instinct. It looms as a critical conjuncture of history and it is the people who could turn this coming, irresolvable catastrophe into a heroic restoration of the golden age. The AKP elite began to constantly refer to '*dava*' (cause) for which personal interests and differences should be left aside. After the initial years underscoring the concept of '*hizmet*' (service) provided to the citizens, this shift implied a rather new social contract calling the people to be 'the servants of a sacred cause' ('*mübarek bir davanın hizmetkarları*') (Hürriyet 2014). This spirit was iconised on the night of July 15, when President Erdoğan spoke via FaceTime on a live news broadcast amidst the coup attempt and urged his supporters to defy the curfew declared by the junta and take to the streets (Hintz 2016). Appraising and urging for martyrdom has become the common rhetoric of the AKP elite in the aftermath of July 15, too

(Cumhuriyet 2016b). Erdoğan himself frequently argued that the country needs new martyrs in thinking that what turns a piece of land into a homeland is martyrs and warriors (Evrensel 2016). He also asked the citizens to be alert and ready for new battles against the outside powers attacking Turkey: 'Are we ready for a new Çanakkale [Gallipoli Campaign], Liberation War, and July 15 [coup attempt]? Are we ready to face those who want to attack Turkey?' (Cumhuriyet 2017b).

This vigilantism and sense of urgency in the present had to be cultivated through various means. In 2015, for instance, the AKP government initiated a new system called 'project schools'. The purpose of this project, according to the then Minister of Education İsmet Yılmaz was, '[…] To raise a new generation which would not hesitate to take to the streets with flags when another July 15 happens or when they are called for national duty' (Birgün 2016b). Besides the drastic changes in the school curricula and the content of schoolbooks along a religious nationalist agenda, various new TV productions revolving around vigilant nationalist and militarist sentiments aired in Turkey. Urging the youth to pursue martyrdom or self-sacrifice for a higher cause, these prime-time TV dramas in pro-government channels use characters and events reminiscent of real developments in Turkey, whereas the wise, courageous protagonists usually work for the Special Operation Departments of Turkish security forces (Dizici 2017). Several other historical dramas like *Payitaht* ('Capital City') go around a common plot in which the sons of the nation fight against Western imperialists, Zionists, and traitors for the survival of the nation and state. Again in these series, historical events are re-configured to draw parallels between the recent past and present to establish temporal continuity (Erdemir and Kessler 2017).

Conclusion

This article diverts attention from the content of populism to instead focus on how that content is articulated. By exploring the neglected meaning-making power of populism, it stresses the centrality of narrative in shaping populist mobilisation and argues that the narrative toolbox of populist politics is forged through the mystification of time. The purpose here is to simulate critical reflection on the taken-for-granted temporal presuppositions of populist movements.

While populist leaders position themselves to lead people with honour (deserved from the past) through the troubled waters of the present to the shores of a bright(er) future, they utilise a particularistic discourse based on the uniqueness of their nation and history. However, they follow similar patterns and indeed rely on common discursive ground in their reconstruction of time. The basic premise of this article is that national populisms utilise a common temporal template to narrate the past, present, and future in a way that fills

each period of time with particular stories of peoplehood to invoke particular affects and emotions. In a cinematic narrative, full of a stock of characters, such as heroes and traitors, the people is projected as a unique entity moving forward from the mythical world of the past to a crisis-driven present, which will lead to either a utopian or apocalyptic future. The Turkish case encapsulates how these populisms conflate the past, present, and future into a single narrative about the people's survival and prosperity. In this respect, studying the temporal template of national populism offers not only a contextualised approach to the scientific inquiry of this phenomenon, but also a general model to uncover particular instances, thereby striking an effective balance between comprehending the specific and accounting for the general.

The narrative approach also delineates the dynamic political dimension of populism. Political leaders tell stories to make claims, enlist support, and defuse opposition. Their populist imagining of the collective self would obviously deny any alternative temporal modalities that dare challenge its authority over time, and, consequently, over the people. However, politics as story-telling has its constraints, as well. These include political beliefs and cultural taboos about the past, shifts within the alliances standing behind different stories, political leaders' fit into the accords of heroic character, or the openness of narratives to rival groups (Polletta et al. 2011, 119). Ultimately, populist narratives are not set once and for all, but always contested. Despite their strong affective capital, they outlive their usefulness once anti-populists come up with better ones. In the Turkish case, for instance, the 23 June 2019 Istanbul local election rerun revealed the broad erosion of Erdoğan's mobilizational appeal after the opposition's successful dissemination of more compelling stories, which enabled them to snatch Erdoğan's underdog narrative from him (Yackley 2019). The narrative performance of the populist leaders is always contested – pushing them to fashion even more enthralling stories. In the end, the resilience of populisms depends on the interplay of such competing narratives.

Notes

1. Populism, at its most basic, refers to an 'anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People' (Aslanidis 2016, 96).
2. While admitting the importance of separating nationalism and populism as two distinct analytical categories (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017), this article concurs with Rogers Brubaker's claim that 'the present conjuncture is not simply populist; it is (with a few exceptions) *national-populist*' (Brubaker 2017, 1). National (or identitarian) populism appeals to the people as a nation vis à vis a homogeneous, primordial reference point (Taguieff 1995, 34).
3. Named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Kemalism is the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic. Its basic pillars are secularism and Turkish nationalism, although various (even rival) currents from Right to Left prescribe themselves as Kemalist.

4. For studies on how modernity has shaped temporal awareness see Koselleck (2004[1985]) and Pierson P (2004).

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