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The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean

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ABSTRACT

Although populism does not dictate a coherent ideological or programmatic agenda, some of its elements still leave distinct marks on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. This paper argues for the study of populism in its tangible policy impacts and scrutinizes the nexus of populism and foreign policy in contemporary Turkey under President Erdoğan's rule. Despite the abundant references to the 'people' in the populist rhetoric, it identifies personalization in foreign policy decision-making, nationalization in foreign policy implementation, and civilizationalization in the foreign policy discourse. Having established the patterns of populist foreign policy from a wider reading, this study then examines, generally, how populism has informed Turkish foreign policy and, specifically, Turkey's approach to the recent border disputes over the gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

KEYWORDS Populism; populist foreign policy; the Eastern Mediterranean; Turkey; personalization

Based on the steady dismantling of democratic norms and rising support for authoritarian alternatives, some scholars alarmingly associate this gloomy picture of democratic de-consolidation with the meteoric rise of populist movements (Norris & Inglehart, 2018; Pappas, 2019). Similarly, the 2017 Munich Security Report identified the populist trend as a prime danger to both the international security order and the liberal-democratic status quo (Munich Security Conference, 2017). Contrary to this understanding of populism as the ultimate driver behind the current wave of de-democratization, others consider populism much less central to contemporary politics. They either consider the populist threat to be overstated, or they challenge the analytical value of the term and suggest avoiding its use at all (Akkerman, 2017; Herkman, 2017; Mickey, 2017). In between the problem-solving approach of the first line of thinking, and the negating attitude of the second, this paper calls for a more nuanced consideration of populism.

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In a minimal definition, populism refers to an 'anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People' (Aslanidis, 2016, p. 96). The term, however, largely suffers from conceptual stretching amidst sweeping, totalizing statements in scholarly and popular discussions. An exhaustive analysis of populism should study the phenomenon separately in its impacts and the effects of its policies in each field. This paper scrutinizes the formulation and implementation of foreign policy and questions whether or how this field takes shape in an ongoing interaction with populist drivers. Compared to the larger debates about the causes and forms of populism, systematic analyses of its policy consequences are still scarce. In particular, the prevalent understanding of populism as a category of domestic political analysis has overlooked the concept's foreign policy dimensions (Boucher & Thies, 2019, p. 713). To the contrary, foreign policy is constitutive of how the people and the elites are defined in populist discourse. This is especially true in the post-Cold War era, during which globalization has reinforced the entanglement of international and domestic politics and, consequently, the domesticization and politicization of foreign policy (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015).

Now culminating into an emerging literature, studies on populism and foreign policy augment two opposing approaches (Figure 1). On the one hand, some scholars argue that instances of populism pursue a common policy profile – anti-Americanism, anti-immigration, or scepticism of global governance (Chryssogelos, 2011; Liang, 2007). On the other hand, others underline the variety of national contexts and attaching ideologies and observe no uniform pattern of influence on foreign policy (Balfour et al., 2016, p. 50). The bulk of the academic literature instead takes an intermediary position by, for instance, identifying different categories of populism and their respective foreign policy preferences (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2018) or observing the limited impact of populism in mainly the style and processes of foreign policy making (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

How does the contemporary Turkish populism test against these approaches? President Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey can be defined as a 'paradigmatic case' of populism (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 80), while the phenomenon is increasingly associated with Erdoğanism, with the citizens of different countries criticizing their governments' populist policies as 'Erdoğanization' and 'Turkeyfication' (Magid, 2019; Sala-i-Martin, 2017). In fact, a recent study of the Global Populism Database, covering almost 140 chief executives from 40 countries, pointed out that since the early 2000s, Turkey has experienced the largest increase in populist rhetoric around the world, and Erdoğan was identified as the top right-wing populist leader (Lewis et al., 2019). Moreover, populists in the United States (US) and Western Europe have gained political control only in the past few years, whereas the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has singlehandedly ruled Turkey since coming to power in 2002. This lengthy period offers a unique opportunity to

observe the constant variables remaining under different shades of populism in Erdoğan's flip-flopping foreign policy (Çınar, 2018; Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). Finally, considering the abundance of studies on the populist radical right in Western democracies, this paper, by focusing on Turkey, aims to divert attention to the neglected Global South (Adar & Türkmen, 2019; Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).¹ This shift is also necessary to illuminate the consequences of populism in flawed or hybrid regimes throughout the region and to develop a more global understanding of the phenomenon.

For a better discussion of what populist foreign policy entails, one must dissect its components. This paper argues, as its fundamental premise, that populism echoes differently at each layer of foreign policy, despite the centrality of and constant references to the 'people' in its various instances. Focusing on (a) foreign policy decision-making, (b) foreign policy implementation, and (c) foreign policy discourse, this paper identifies personalization, nationalization, and civilizationalization, respectively, as the manifested impacts of populism. Focusing on Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule (2002–2020), this paper offers a paradigmatic case study combined with discourse analysis of a collection of official texts, public addresses, and media reports. To that end, it first briefly elucidates Turkish populism in its historical and political context. From a wider reading, it then establishes the patterns of populist foreign policy in decision-making, implementation, and discourse. It later returns to a detailed study of these patterns – personalization, nationalization, and civilizationalization – in the Turkish case. In the penultimate section, the paper scrutinizes Turkish foreign policy in the context of the current dispute over the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean. It seeks to answer how populism, igniting regional tensions in its dove-to-hawk shift, has informed the Turkish position. The conclusion links the findings of the case study to the larger debate on populism and foreign policy.

Contemporary Turkish populism in context

Mostly thriving on cultural discontent or economic impoverishment, populism first implies a form of politics based on the Manichaean struggle of a morally virtuous people (the underdog, the silent majority, the common man) against a corrupt elite (the establishment, the privileged few, the fat cat). Second, upholding the democratic promise of popular sovereignty, populism defines politics as an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). The dichotomous, antagonistic framework (anti-elitism) and a corresponding demand to restore the sovereignty of the people (people-centrism) lie at the heart of populist politics.

Considering the confluence of several other factors, populism cannot be treated as an all-explanatory phenomenon and is indeed largely limited by

national and regional contexts and affixed ideologies (Woertz & Lecha, 2020). Populists might also defend diverse political positions, but the populist discourse still contains some structural elements that inform the form, direction, and processes of political messages. Accordingly, not only does it provide lenses through which one makes sense of foreign policy initiatives, but its imperatives also create a political universe that envisages some identifiable traits in foreign policy formulation and implementation.

In the case of Turkey, Islamist politics thrived on such anti-establishment rhetoric long before Tayyip Erdoğan and his friends founded the AKP in August 2001. Its antecedent, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), excelled in fuelling the grievances and demands of the conservative rural and urban poor, who felt deprived politically and economically by the Kemalist regime and its later neoliberal practices. The Welfare Party's motto, 'Living Humanely' (*İnsanca Yaşamak*), illustrated the demands of those excluded groups to become first-class citizens (Göle, 1996, p. 29). While abandoning Welfare's discursive critique of neoliberalism and pursuing a policy driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and oriented towards the free market, the AKP maintained the same anti-establishment rhetoric that drew on the cultural alienation of pious Turks within a secular Kemalist regime. A simple, clear-cut dichotomy between the oppressive, secular elite and the alienated, pious masses was the core of this victimhood narrative. Utilizing this alienation as a discursive asset, Erdoğan characterized himself as the voice of the oppressed masses and assumed the role of returning the state to 'the long-excluded genuine sons of the nation' (*Milletin hakiki evlatları*) (Taşkın, 2008, p. 55).

In general, the anti-Kemalist critique appealed to Islamists, Kurds, and liberals alike, propelling the AKP to power at the helm of a broad coalition of underdogs. Supported by Western political actors, the populism of the ex-Islamists-turned-conservative-democrats eventually spurred political momentum in pursuit of a liberal progressive agenda alongside Turkey's attempts to attain full membership in the European Union (EU). Indeed, a shimmer of democratization in Turkey's political landscape created optimism for the resolution of the country's severe problems, such as the civilian control of the military, ethnic and religious minority issues, and the protection of human rights. But not everyone shared this optimism. The AKP faced – and survived – successive Kemalist offensives: the military's indirect intervention on 27 April 2007 dubbed the 'E-Memorandum', the massive anti-government Republic Rallies during the same period, and the 2008 closure case at the Constitutional Court. In response, the AKP government initiated a number of criminal proceedings, most prominently the 2008 Ergenekon and 2010 Sledgehammer trials, which indicted hundreds of retired and active-duty military officers on charges of plotting to topple the government and which ultimately diminished the tutelary capacity of the military. Likewise, the

constitutional referendum on 12 September 2010 empowered the government to alter the Kemalist dominance in the judiciary (Taş, 2015). Once the Kemalists were dethroned, however, AKP populism did not deliver the democratic rule of or by the people it had promised. With no sword of Damocles above them, but brimming with self-confidence bolstered by successive electoral victories, the AKP government in power adopted increasingly illiberal policies towards any form of opposition.

In fact, subduing the secular establishment, the AKP's 'necessary evil', was paradoxically damaging, since it took away the very *raison d'être* of the AKP. It created an existential question for the Party, which had propped itself up on its anti-Kemalist rhetoric and comfortably retained the victim discourse despite being in office for years. The 2013 anti-government Gezi Protests came quite handy for Erdoğan in this regard. He saw the protests as a direct attempt to overthrow him at a time while opponents of Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi carried out the popular *Tamarrud* (Rebellion) campaign that provided social legitimacy to the military intervention there on 3 July 2013. Since Gezi, Erdoğan has directed his anti-elite discourse against the 'Western imperialists', 'interest lobbies', and 'Crusaders' – all combined under the umbrella term *üst akıl* (mastermind), which is determined to hinder Turkey's unbridled rise – and declared a sweeping war of liberation (Taş, 2020). The official indictment against Gezi protestors reflects this mindset, framing the demonstrations as a Western intervention that aimed to destabilize Turkey and usurp its elected leader (*Gezi İddianamesi*, 2019). The 2016 abortive coup only reinforced this anti-Western rhetoric of the liberation war, which unequivocally called for a new founding father around which the people could unite against their enemies.

Over the course of nearly two decades, Erdoğan's AKP, like a 'shapeshifter', has performed multiple populisms, dovetailing a multitude of political ideologies, including liberal conservatism, Islamism, and Turkish nationalism (Genç, 2019; Hintz, 2016). Within its mutually constructive relationship with populism, foreign policy perpetuated its own notion of 'people' and was repeatedly built upon. While flagging an inclusionary, cosmopolitan notion of 'conservative democracy' at home – modelled on the European Christian Democrats – the AKP, in its early years, reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to the Western alliance and embarked on a series of harmonization packages to attain full EU membership. Strategically, such liberal reforms were also meant to weaken the grip of the Kemalist elite on politics. 'Liberal internationalism', seeking to integrate with the EU and the rest of the world, was gradually replaced during the AKP's second term, however, by 'civilizational expansionism', marked with a re-definition of the people as a Muslim nation and with a concomitant assertive Islamist foreign policy activism (Balta, 2018). This revisionist approach, named the Davutoğlu Doctrine after then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, envisioned Turkey as an independent global

power demanding respect and equal footing from the Western camp. It brought a process of de-Europeanization along with rising anti-EU sentiments in the country as well as the reluctance of EU leaders to grant Turkey full membership. The 2011 Arab Uprisings, unsettling the regional status quo, could have provided an unprecedented opportunity for Turkey to realize its neo-Ottoman aspirations. Nevertheless, this hegemonic vision backfired when the Arab revolutions failed, the Muslim Brotherhood retreated after the 2013 coup in Egypt, and the tantalizing Kurdish peace process disintegrated in 2015 following a lack of Kurdish support for Erdoğan's presidential system in Turkey. Making alliances with the far-right political parties at home, Erdoğan adopted an anti-Western, ultra-nationalist discourse in foreign policy, reducing the country's relations with the EU and US to transactionalism. The 'people' now meant the Turkish nation, excluding the Kurds, against a global/Western elite plotting to weaken and divide Turkey.

The following section outlines how populism configures foreign policy in its decision-making, implementation, and discourse. In the Turkish case, it traces the contours of a sustained language and style despite ideological re-orientations and identifies personalization, nationalization, and civilizationization in the respective fields of foreign policymaking, though at varying degrees in different periods.

Personalization in foreign policy decision-making

While populist leaders claim to speak for the 'people' as the *vox populi*, they sacralize the ballot box as the main manifestation of the general will (Sozen, 2019). Accompanying this unfettered majoritarianism are attacks on the checks and balances that enforce limits on the executive power. Populists often exhibit strong disdain for intermediary institutions and treat the procedural and institutional requirements of modern liberal democracy only as impediments to their conception of the general will. This people-centrism in the form of anti-institutionalism has two main consequences for foreign policy decision-making in countries ruled by populists. The first consequence is the personalization of decision-making along with the centralization of power in the hands of the populist leader. The prioritization of the hyper-empowered populist leader, rather than the long-established patterns, defines the foreign policy agenda (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, pp. 14–17). Subsequently, foreign policy issues, relying progressively less on precedent, are politicized to mobilize the domestic audience.

The second consequence is the gradual sidelining of established diplomatic and bureaucratic institutions, shifting the core of decision-making from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the office of the chief executive. In many countries, populist leaders stigmatize and weaken their own diplomats as part of their larger campaign targeting the establishment (Cooper, 2019).

While these processes now lack the accumulated knowledge and experience of senior bureaucrats, a small enclave of advisors in the Presidential House assumes a decisive role in foreign policy. Likewise, the personality-driven approach also gravely affects the language and mechanisms, privileging ad hoc processes, bilateral one-on-ones, and the direct communication of foreign policy issues on social media while circumventing established processes of diplomatic declaration, consensus-seeking, and compromise-building.²

The Turkish Foreign Ministry was embedded with and accentuated by a centuries-old legacy of a distinctive diplomatic culture (*Hariciye Geleneği*), which assigned it a special status and separated from other components of state bureaucracy. Yet Erdoğan consistently targeted senior diplomats with his anti-elitist discourse. He snubbed the diplomatic corps, calling them *mon cher* ('my dear' in French) – a mockery to entrench their image as 'Westernized, arrogant cocktail-party diplomats' (Hürriyet, 2010). Stigmatizing the diplomats as an elite group with no tangible connection to the people, he declared in his 2014 presidential campaign, 'They are *mon cher*, we are the servants' (AFP, 2014). The AKP government has gradually sidelined career diplomats and relied on political appointees, redesigning the ministry and diminishing its relative autonomy. In order to circumvent the Foreign Ministry, Erdoğan also founded new agencies under his direct control, such as the Office of the Public Diplomacy, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Maarif Foundation. He also granted extensive powers to other existing institutions such as Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to operate internationally (Sevin, 2017). These manoeuvres provided Erdoğan with new tools with which to micromanage foreign policy.

Increasingly, the formulation and implementation of foreign policy has become personalized. From his handling of the December 2004 European Council summit, which initiated accession talks, to his infamous 'one minute' interruption at the 2009 World Economic Forum in a clash with Israeli leadership over its Gaza occupation, Erdoğan's overwhelming personality and style have solved or complicated prominent foreign policy issues, bypassing established diplomatic procedures and protocols. This coincides with the larger trend of the personalization or 'Erdoğanization of Turkish politics, which refers to the increasing prominence of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a personalist leader at the expense of institutional actors' (Selçuk et al., 2019, p. 3). This process was inhibited considerably by the political tutelage of the military elite during the AKP's early years; however, Erdoğan found enough room to manoeuvre in the 2010s with the demise of the Kemalist establishment. While he emerged at the helm of a cult of personality, the personalization of Turkish politics was formalized and institutionalized with the 2018 elections, which sealed Turkey's transition into a presidential system. The new system established a hyper-empowered presidency with no

solid checks and balances, largely eradicating the separation of powers, turning the parliament to a rubber-stamp institution, and allowing Erdoğan to rule the country by decree (Yılmaz, 2020). Reaffirming the personalization of the regime, Erdoğan correlated the nation's survival to his remaining in power and stated that if he were to leave his post, the state would also collapse (Sözcü, 2016).

Although the first presidential decree outlined the new political structure, including the new advisory body, the Security and Foreign Policy Committee (Resmi Gazete, 2018), the lack of unified legislation on the making of foreign policy reveals the haphazard nature of contemporary Turkish politics and the high level of personalization. Whereas the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and its head, Hakan Fidan, play a greater role in foreign policy decision-making than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the presidency is the main agent in this process, with a circle of formal and informal advisors selected on the ground of personal loyalty (Neset et al., 2019).

Nationalization in foreign policy implementation

Whereas populism does not necessarily translate into a rejection of internationalism, populists in power show a proclivity towards a (re-)nationalization of foreign policy, leading to an increase in unilateralism and bilateralism along with transactional realism. Populist discourses, referring to the central role of popular sovereignty, stress the weakening of the nation-states under the pressure of regional and global institutions of governance and assure nation-states that they will win back their status as sovereign actors. The course of re-nationalization or de-Europeanization, in which EU-member or candidate countries are reluctant to engage in collective decision-making and with Brexit as its extreme manifestation, is one of the boldest examples of this call to take back control (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). Nevertheless, the demand to restore national sovereignty can be restricted or bolstered by the attached ideology and national or regional power calculations. Indeed, populisms, contrary to theoretical expectations, do not have to be anti-cosmopolitan (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2018, p. 393). The nationalization of foreign policy, in the form of rising bilateralism, also does not automatically dictate isolationism or protectionism. Liberal international institutions come under the attack when they are perceived as threats to the popular sovereignty (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, p. 711).

Contemporary Turkish populism, affixed to a panoply of ideologies in different periods, has not necessarily called multilateral organizations into question but, instead, has increasingly buttressed Turkey's autonomy in foreign policy. In its early years, as the AKP embarked on sweeping liberal reforms to help secure Turkey's EU membership that would safeguard against the military elite, it also sought ways of global integration such as its

becoming a member of the G20 in 2003 (Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014). But this did not hinder Turkey's search for an autonomous role promoting national prestige and gaining leverage at the global scene. Not as an alternative to, but together with the full force of the EU membership process, Turkey adopted a proactive, ambitious foreign policy, assuming an increasing role and promoting stability in neighbouring regions. Without compromising its relations with the West, it normalized relations with neighbouring countries such as Syrian, Iran, and Iraq, and Turkey signed several bilateral agreements, including a free trade agreement in 2004 and an investment protection agreement in 2007 with Syria. By diversifying its foreign policy goals, Turkey expanded its trade relations with the rest of the world, including the traditional focus areas of Turkish foreign policy – the Middle East and the Balkans – but also new areas such as Africa and Latin America. Through bilateral trade agreements, Turkey increased its total exports from 36 USD billion in 2002 to 132 USD billion in 2008 (Kösebalaban, 2011, pp. 148–149). The idea at that time was that European political authorities would consider Turkey more seriously if the country had a stronger presence in the East and beyond instead of 'limiting its choices to a small number of great powers' (Yalçın, 2012, p. 210).

Turkey's search for a more autonomous regional role in the following years, however, paved the way to the 'shift of axis' debate on whether Turkey was turning to the East and away from its long-standing Western allies. When Ahmet Davutoğlu assumed the position of foreign minister in May 2009, he was convinced that Turkey could no longer be a peripheral player but was destined to play a central role in global politics. While the growing disenchantment on both sides reduced the EU from a normative to a strategic framework, the post-Cold War era, in this approach, offered Turkey a historic opportunity to become a regional powerhouse, connected through historical and cultural ties (Özkan, 2014, p. 119). Rejecting the earlier national role attributed to Turkey – a passive 'bridge' between the East and the West – the Davutoğlu doctrine, encapsulated in his term 'Strategic Depth', underpinned Turkey's cultural, historical, and geographic centrality in the region and favoured its potential role as a 'central state' (*merkez devlet*) or an 'order-instituting state' (*düzen kurucu devlet*) (Davutoğlu, 2001). While AKP leaders initially refrained from visiting neighbouring Muslim countries such as Iran due to Turkey's secularist environment, this approach was soon replaced by a self-confident diplomatic assertiveness that sought closer bilateral relations with Middle East countries and enhanced political and economic cooperation. In fact, the AKP adopted its own stance with an overtly Islamist framing in several issues, from a quarrel with Israel over its offensive in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009 to its approach to the 2011 Arab Uprisings, strengthening transnational links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

With the increasing anti-Western tone in AKP's populist discourse after the Gezi Protests and the 2016 attempted coup, Turkey sought even greater independence in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. The de-Europeanization and assertive, over-stretched foreign policy activism during the previous period eventually culminated with isolation, which Ibrahim Kalin, then Erdoğan's top foreign policy adviser, defended as 'precious loneliness' (Gardner, 2015). Turkish foreign policy was stripped of its zealous ideological ambitions to promote the country as a 'great power' and became more transactional, ad hoc, and defined by expediency, leading to high unpredictability and flip-flopping in decisions (Dalacoura, 2017). Several crises with the West, such as Turkey's post-coup 'hostage diplomacy' – the arbitrary detention of Western nationals in Turkey as a political bargaining chip (Erdemir & Edelman, 2018) – and the purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence system, reduced Turkey's relations with the EU and US to a transactional nature, defined by immediate concerns. With this strategic realignment away from the US and NATO, Turkey pursued greater bilateral cooperations with other countries, primarily Russia and China, aiming for a balance of power that would provide Turkey with greater autonomy (Inat, 2019). Yet, amidst successive foreign-policy cul-de-sacs, this has only led to a 'dual dependency' on both NATO and Russia (Yeğin, 2019).

Civilizationalization in foreign policy discourse

The articulation of identities goes beyond a simple 'Self-Other duality' and operates in a complex, contingent, and interwoven web of signifiers (Hansen, 2006, p. 41). In the scholarship on populism, this duality has been largely studied in the form of people-versus-elite juxtaposition in a national setting. However, this perspective is lacking in two regards. First, populisms can define the elite as a transnational actor, such as Western superpowers or multinational oligarchs. Second, the category of the people is constantly negotiated, challenged, restated through discursive practices including articulations of foreign policy because it must be contextualized and discursively located within a larger matrix through time and space. That is why many European populisms, for instance, converge around a preoccupation with a supposed civilizational threat from Islam and adhere to 'civilizationism' (Brubaker, 2017). Contemporary populisms explicitly articulate the concept of civilization, which appears either as 'an imagined community' marking identities or as 'a strategic frame of reference' to explicate the complex international system (Bettiza, 2014, p. 4). That right-wing populism may cling to civilizational essentialism and supremacy does not mean that left-wing cases are exempt from civilizational references (Tietze, 2015).

The AKP has generally maintained a fundamental civilizational discourse that rests on a populist divide between the Western, modern 'elite' and the

Eastern, traditional 'people' (Kaya et al., 2020). Most clearly epitomizing this dimension was a nostalgia for the 'immemorial civilization' (*kadim medeniyet*) of the Ottomans, which had underpinned the populist discourse differently in each period. The AKP's initial inclusionary narrative aiming to integrate with Europe and the rest of the world in the early 2000s identified the West as the main reference point. However, both the AKP and Western authorities promoted Turkey as a component of another civilization and framed Turkey's potential EU membership as a reconciliation of civilizations (Çınar, 2018, p. 183). In the words of US President Bush, Turkey 'provided Muslims around the world with a hopeful model of a modern and secular democracy' (Peterson, 2002). The AKP, as this model, could inspire the entire Muslim world and function as an antidote to the 'clash of civilizations' argument reverberating in the post-9/11 environment. The most iconic example that recognized and reaffirmed the civilizational outlook of AKP populism was the 2005 UN Alliance of Civilizations Initiative with Spain and Turkey as the leading representatives of two discrete civilizations (UNAOC, 2020). Similarly, just after the events of 9/11, Turkey hosted the 'intercivilizational' EU-OIC (the Organization of Islamic Cooperation) forum in 2002. The 2005 election of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as the first Turkish secretary general of the OIC reinforced this model status.

This AKP populism – loyal to Turkey's Western anchor, while claiming a civilizational identity clearly demarcated from the West – precipitated a more rejectionist, anti-hegemonic discourse that disqualifies the West as the epitome of civilization and demands respect for its own (Arkan & Kinacıoğlu, 2016, p. 398). In Davutoğlu's thinking, Islamic civilization could resist the universalization of Western norms with Turkey, the heir of the Ottoman Empire, seated at the centre of this civilizational reawakening (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 46). Hence, the new national role for Turkey was to be not at the periphery of the West but at the centre of its own Islamic civilization. Based on civilizational geopolitics, this required increasing links primarily with the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa due to cultural affinity and historical background. 'This region seeks integration and internal restoration. This region is where our authentic and immemorial civilization was born,' Davutoğlu stated on his desire to establish a new order in the Pax Ottomana (Ardic, 2014, p. 107). Several public diplomacy actors, including TİKA, the Diyanet, and the Yunus Emre Cultural Centres, promoted Turkey's civilizational outlook (Sevin, 2017).

After the 2013 Gezi Protests, Turkish populism articulated a more antagonistic civilizational discourse, which depicted Turkey not only as the heir to the Islamic and Ottoman civilizations but also in a war of liberation from the West (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019, p. 3). While Erdoğan is portrayed as being under attack by 'neo-Crusaders' (T24, 2019), he accused EU politicians of being enemies of Islam in his critique of

a report that favoured the official freeze of negotiation talks with Turkey. 'We should not forget this: We are Muslims and they are enemies of Islam,' he said (SCF (Stockholm Center for Freedom), 2019). In displaying the turmoil in Turkey-EU relations as the manifested clash of civilizations, he approached the West increasingly in zero-sum terms. Concurrently, by defining the Ottoman-Turkish past as a 'civilization of conquest' [*fetih medeniyeti*], Erdoğan also used this civilizational discourse as a moral basis for expansionist interventions in the region (Milliyet, 2018).

Turkey and the territorial disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean

Traditionally, the Western alignment reinforced Turkey's close engagement with Northern Mediterranean countries whereas it adopted a distant approach towards Arab countries and Greece in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean, based on its secular, nationalist official ideology (Park, 2017). Relations with countries in these regions were framed as matters of national security. The epicentre of Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was the preservation of the status quo in Cyprus, partitioned into the Turkish-administered North (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, TRNC) and Greek-administered South (Republic of Cyprus, RoC) upon Turkey's military intervention in 1974. However, AKP departed from this position by attempting to de-securitize and normalize relations in the region. Primarily, it abandoned the established uncompromising attitude towards the resolution of the Cyprus conflict and strongly supported the United Nations' (UN) proposal, known as the Annan Plan, to solve the dispute and reunify the divided island. In its 'zero problems with neighbours' approach throughout the early 2000s, Turkey also normalized relations with Syria, assumed a mediating role in the 2008 Golan Heights conflict between Syria and Israel, and signed free-trade agreements with a slew of countries – all of which contributed to regional stability (Huber, 2015, pp. 150–151).

Nevertheless, Ankara's overstretched policies, in tandem with the Islamist and nationalist character of its vision, triggered an unprecedented state of isolation in the 2010s. Turkey antagonized almost all its neighbours, whereas the wave of Arab Uprisings, the ongoing Syrian war, and Turkey's ambitious use of military power have further complicated the situation. The discovery of large natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea since 2009, has added fuel to the fire raging in the already conflict-prone and volatile region. The US Geological Survey estimated approximately 122 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of recoverable oil in the Levant Basin (Schenk et al., 2010). Israel's discoveries in the offshore Tamar (2009) and Leviathan (2010) fields were followed by those of the RoC in Aphrodite (2012) and of Egypt in Zohr (2015) (Demiryol, 2019). These discoveries were substantial enough to alter the region's economic and security landscape. In

the beginning, the relevant political actors were hopeful about the possibility of collaboration that this hydrocarbon development offered. In 2012, the Turkish energy minister voiced his optimism: 'While energy has produced wars in other parts of the world, here it will be a force for peace' (Bahçeli, 2012). Contrary to initial expectations, however, the situation has only worsened, complicating the possibility that the long-standing regional conflicts would be resolved.

The riches beneath the Eastern Mediterranean Sea attracted several international oil companies, such as Noble, Eni, ExxonMobil, and Total, dragging them into the region's tangle of political conflicts and fragile power relations (Demiryol, 2019). The question of drilling rights in the Levant Basin's gas reserves has ignited a significant maritime dispute among coastal states to exercise their sovereign prerogatives at sea. While the RoC has granted licences to several international energy companies to extract the hydrocarbon resources, it unilaterally claimed its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), encompassing the entire shoreline of the island, and considered Turkish drilling activities as an incursion on its continental shelves.

Turkey's critical approach to these developments was based on two grounds. First, it argued that such deals infringed on the rights of Turkish Cypriots (MFA, 2018). Turkey is the only country that recognizes the TRNC, the self-designated breakaway state in the island's north, and has maintained that the RoC has no right to explore offshore hydrocarbon resource as long as TRNC is excluded from the process. Second, by disputing the legitimacy of the RoC, Ankara also has sovereignty claims overlapping with the RoC's EEZ, detailing its objections in a letter sent to the UN on 12 April 2017 (A/71/875-S/2017/321). In the letter, Turkey questioned the outline of the EEZ that the RoC drew and claimed that Block 6 as part of its own continental shelf (The United Nations, 2017). The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which went into effect in 1994 and is acknowledged as customary law, entitles all coastal states to twelve nautical miles of territorial water and a further 200 miles of an EEZ. However, if the maritime distance between two countries is less than 424 miles, a bilateral agreement is required to determine the mutually agreed-upon dividing line. While the controversial status of the divided island complicates the application of the UNCLOS, Turkey has never ratified the convention and disregards its legal framework, cutting off the means of legal recourse. Boasting the longest continental coastline, however, Turkey demands a fair share of the natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean seabed and opposes the EU-commissioned Seville map, which demarcates the commonly accepted maritime boundaries in the region. The map defines the maximum boundaries for Greece and Cyprus by counting the coast of any inhabited Greek island at the expense of Turkey's interests (Tanchum, 2020).

The dispute has long persisted as a local affair and an extension of the enduring Cyprus Question. Yet, in the last five years, it has progressed into a multinational conflict involving the EU and Eastern Mediterranean countries.³ Overall, this conflict represents another manifestation of the festering discord between Turkey and its Western allies. The following section outlines how personalized decision-making, a growing emphasis on national sovereignty in foreign policy implementation, and a civilizational discourse accentuate Turkey's position in the region.

Turkish populist foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean

Despite making occasional calls to initiate dialogue and build common ground (Karakış, 2020), Turkey has adopted a belligerent approach to the tinderbox of the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğan has repeatedly proclaimed that Greece was 'either going to understand the language of politics and diplomacy or have painful experiences in the field' (Ahval, 2020). Turkey's willingness to prudently use its military prowess in this dispute has provided Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar with a role greater than that of Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu. Notwithstanding this, the Office of Presidency has largely generated and shaped Turkey's regional foreign policy. Throughout the dispute, Erdoğan directly represented the state and held one-on-one talks that replaced bureaucratic negotiations at lower levels (Habertürk, 2019). His style is also evident in his adoption of blackmail diplomacy, negating established diplomatic language and protocols. For instance, reacting to the EU's criticisms of Turkey's actions in the region, Erdoğan asked European authorities to adjust their attitudes: 'You have to reconsider your attitude toward Turkey, which has so many [Islamic State – IS] members in its prisons and also in Syria. These doors can be unlocked and [IS] people can be sent to you. Don't try to intimidate Turkey about the developments in Cyprus' (Taştekin, 2019).

Most notably, Erdoğan signed a presidential decree approving the foundation of the Coordination Office of Cyprus Affairs on 5 July 2019, codifying this personalization (Resmi Gazete, 2019a). While Northern Cyprus relies heavily on Turkey's financial assistance, the office now oversees any agreement between Turkish public authorities and Turkish Cypriots and contributes to the planning and coordination of economic, financial, and technical assistance. This action was meant to institutionally centralize the decision-making process under the Office of Presidency amidst mounting tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Sidelining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vice President Fuat Oktay has been tasked with executing coordination tasks.

Turkey has adopted a nationalist foreign policy in this dispute, emphasizing its sovereign rights and prevailing bilateral agreements over multilateral ones. In fact, Turkey, with the longest continental coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean, has been drilling in the region since 1966, mostly in near-

shore zones, but had not found great success. The first substantial clash between Turkey and the RoC over territorial rights dates back to 2002, when the latter granted exploration rights to a Norwegian energy company in the west of Cyprus, triggering several maritime disputes in the region (Eissler & Arasil, 2014). Switching to a more proactive approach, Turkey and Turkish Cyprus signed a continental shelf delimitation agreement on 21 September 2011, comprising half of the Cyprus' EEZ and the disputed blocks. Since then, Turkey's state oil company (*Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı*, TPAO) has been conducting seismic research in more distant off-shore areas (Sobotzki, 2019).

In 2019, Turkey dispatched into Cypriot waters two drilling ships, Yavuz and Fatih, and two seismic research vessels, Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa and Oruç Reis – all under the protection of Turkish military frigates and gunboats. Yet these manoeuvres indicated more than the need to compensate Turkey's energy demands but also the reassertion of Turkey's autonomous stance against Western powers. Erdoğan stressed Turkey's determination to protect the rights of Turkey and the TRNC: 'No threat of sanctions, either covert or overt, can deter Turkey from her just cause' (Hürriyet Daily News, 2019). This emphasis on popular sovereignty, as well as the fight against the global elite, was more evident in the words of President Erdoğan's communications director Fahrettin Altun: 'Thank God, we have an independent foreign policy. We are present in the Eastern Mediterranean with our own vessels [...] We are defying the oligarchs, the interest rate which is their most important weapon. Yes, you can come all at once! We are here, we will not give up' (Altun, 2019). Altun portrayed the Turkish position in recent developments, from the Eastern Mediterranean dispute to Turkey's financial crisis and currency devaluation, as reactions to Western attempts to weaken the country on all fronts.

The EU showed unequivocal support for members Greece and RoC and sought to contain the escalation of the crisis by implementing minor sanctions on Turkey. On 15 July 2019, a meeting of the EU foreign ministers declared Turkey's gas drilling activities illegal and decided to sanction Turkey with punitive measures, such as suspending negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement, cancelling high-level bilateral dialogue, and reducing the pre-accession financial assistance for 2020 (Council of the EU, 2019). To defuse tensions with the EU, Turkey launched bilateral dialogue initiatives with other countries. In doing so, Turkey also intended to amass a stronger position in order to dictate its terms on the basis of successive *fait accompli*. Most importantly, Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding with Libya's UN-recognized Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) on 27 November 2019 to delimit maritime jurisdiction zones and block further Greek and Cypriot drilling activities. Along with this bilateral deal, which defies the Seville map and defines the maximum maritime boundaries for Turkey, Ankara also signed a defence cooperation

memorandum of understanding with the GNA, which it supported against General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) (Resmi Gazete, 2019b). In this framework, the Turkish government not only delivered armoured vehicles and drones to Tripoli but also sent troops and allied Syrian opposition fighters in order to strengthen the GNA's military power. These deals angered supporters of the LNA – Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates – as well as Greece, Israel, the RoC, and EU authorities, which accused Turkey of obstructing Cyprus's right to explore for gas reserves. While Libya became a geopolitical battleground between rival powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, it constituted an opportunity for Erdoğan to break the barriers imposed in the region and enhance Turkey's international role.

Regional tension has escalated immensely, parallel to the heightened gas exploration and drilling efforts. Becoming more diplomatically isolated, Turkey did not hesitate to display its military readiness and assert its hard power in order to deter and dissuade other countries. As the RoC sought to arrest the workers on Turkey's Fatih drilling ship (Bianet, 2019), Turkish warships intercepted a vessel of the Italian energy company ENI that was exploring the gas field on behalf of the RoC government in February 2018 (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Opting for the principle of deterrence, Çavuşoğlu warned the Greek Cypriots not to 'take the slightest step in the Eastern Mediterranean', alluding to Turkey's 1974 military intervention to thwart a short-lived Greek Cypriot coup. 'If they dare, they will receive the appropriate response like in the past,' he cautioned (Zaman, 2019). An estimated 30,000 Turkish troops have remained in the northern part of the island ever since, while an expanding flotilla of naval vessels, submarines, drones, and patrol craft have escorted Turkish drilling operations (Johnson, 2019). 'We will not allow bandits at sea,' Erdoğan declared, disputing the RoC's right to drill in its demarcated EEZ, which encroaches on Turkey's continental shelf (Erdoğan, 2018).

With Turkey renewing its gas exploration in disputed areas, Greece and the RoC have adopted several strategies ranging from frequent bilateral and multilateral summits to joint military exercises (Farouk, 2019). While Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Egypt collaborate to create a regional energy and security structure, Turkey has remained increasingly isolated in the region's gas rivalry. The foreign ministers of the Southern EU Member States (Greece, Cyprus, France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain), a group dubbed the Med7, signed a joint declaration in June 2020 expressing full support for Greece and the RoC against Turkey's belligerence in the region (Ekathimerini, 2020). Likewise, six Eastern Mediterranean countries (Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestinian Authority, and the RoC) launched the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) on 22 September 2020, embodying the anti-Turkey alliance (Bassist, 2020).

As Turkey enmeshed itself in an escalating multinational conflict, President Erdoğan tended to politicize the dispute along civilizational terms.⁴ Akin to the

case of China in the disputes in the South China Sea, civilizationism enables Turkey to extend its claims transnationally. Recalling the nation's glorious Ottoman past, when the Mediterranean Sea was a 'Turkish lake', drilling and seismic research vessels are named after the victorious Ottoman sultans (Fatih, Yavuz) and admirals (Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa, Oruç Reis, Kemal Reis), who secured the Ottoman dominance in the region in the sixteenth century. 'Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha returns after 473 years [...] The real ruler of the Mediterranean is back,' pro-government columnist Ibrahim Karagül claimed (2019). That the crew of the Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa seismic research vessel forced the Greek Cypriot fleet to listen to the Ottoman military march, 'Ceddin Deden', in May 2017 also reflects the same rhetoric of return (*Hürriyet*, 2017). Similarly, Erdoğan justified Turkey's intervention in defence of the GNA on the grounds of protecting hundreds of thousands Libyans of Ottoman ancestry. 'In Libya, there are Köroğlu Turks remaining from the Ottomans, whose number exceeds one million; they are descendants of Barbarossa and Dragut, and they are being subjected to ethnic cleansing,' he said (Ay & Işık, 2020).

Erdoğan's foreign policy discourse portrays the quarrel as a clash of Western and Eastern (Ottoman) civilizations. 'We will defend Turkey's rights in Eastern Mediterranean to the full extent despite Western threats,' Erdoğan proclaimed (Düz, 2019). In his discourse, the Europeans are evil, turning 'the Mediterranean Sea, the cradle of one of the world's most ancient civilizations, into a grave' after the death of thousands of refugees (Toksabay, 2015). Along with such an anti-Western discourse in the 2010s, Erdoğan bureaucratically grew closer to the Euroasianists, who advocate closer ties with Russia and China and distancing from the West. This power coalition has spawned a discursive amalgamation of Kemalism and Muslim/Ottoman nationalism. This was possible through the discursive references to Turkey's Liberation War (1919–1922), when Mustafa Kemal led national forces to mobilize Muslim nationalism against the invading Western forces (Zürcher 1997–1998). The AKP's new regional doctrine, '*Mavi Vatan*' (Blue Homeland), was inspired by Cem Gürdeniz, a retired admiral harbouring Eurasianist views which he outlined in his eponymous book (Gürdeniz, 2018). During an official celebration, Erdoğan stood before a map that

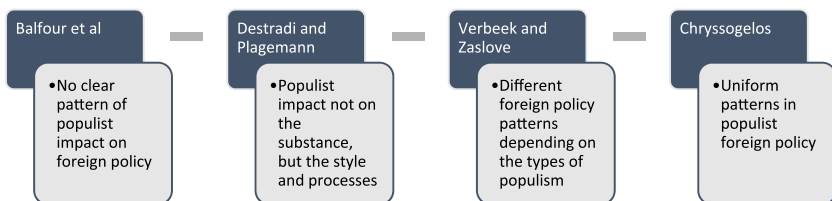


Figure 1. Does populism impact the making of foreign policy?.

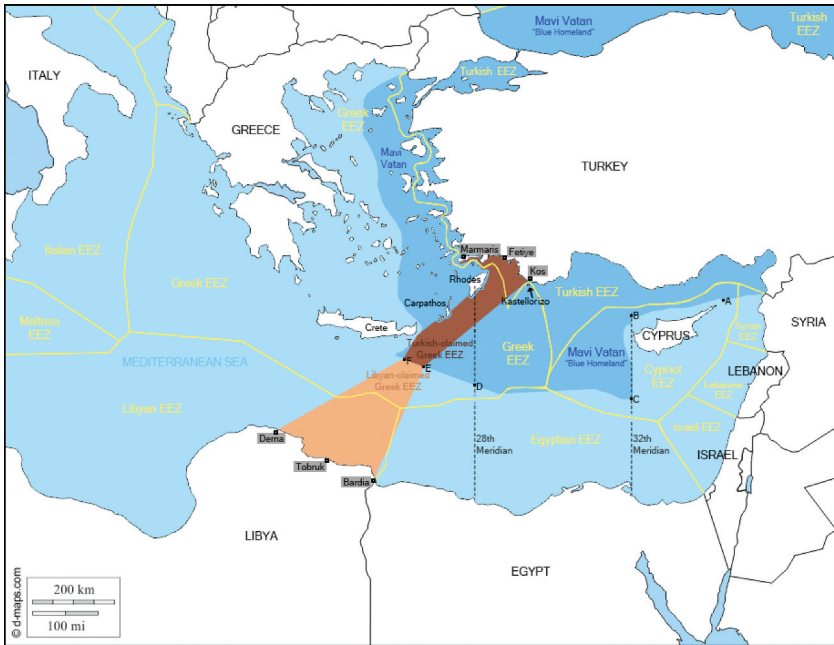


Figure 2. Map of the ‘Blue Homeland’ showing Turkey’s self-acclaimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ), including the 2019 Turkey-Libya deal. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Libya-Turkey_deal_and_Mavi_Vatan.png, retrieved on 10 July 2019.

illustrated the maritime boundaries of the ‘Blue Homeland’, comprising an EEZ of 462,000 square kilometres and excluding out Cyprus, the Dodecanese, Kastellorizo, and Crete (Figure 2). In 2019, the Blue Homeland also became the codename of Turkey’s largest-ever naval exercise, during which it tested its naval capabilities simultaneously in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean for the first time (Hürriyet, 2019). The new doctrine of national defence assumes a greater maritime role for Turkey, which feels it has been let down by its Western allies in Syria and elsewhere and is now looking for new directions and expanding its regional footprint. For Gürdeniz, the RoC’s claim of an EEZ encompasses an occupation of the Eastern Mediterranean, evoking the Treaty of Sévres, which was imposed on the Ottoman Empire after its defeat in World War I and partitioned the empire ethnically and religiously. Erdoğan defined the Turkey-Libya deal as a manoeuvre to reverse the effects of the same treaty (Milliyet, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper aims to avoid the normative bias in academic studies that tend to consider populist mobilization as a dark, irrational force engulfing the

liberal order. Hence, it diverges from a problem-solving approach to assess post-Cold War populisms as democracy's current malady in order to instead scrutinize the inner dynamics of the populist mobilization. To that end, it offers to focus on the neglected policy effects of populism and considers Erdoğan's Turkey as a paradigmatic case to assess whether patterns of populist foreign policy emerge over time. It first argues that, although populism does not dictate a coherent ideological or programmatic agenda, some of its elements still leave a distinct mark on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. The Turkish case corroborates the findings of Destradi and Plagemann, who argue that populism impacts the style and processes, rather than the substance, of foreign policy (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). From liberal conservatism to Islamism to Turkish nationalism, Turkish populism has been attached to a diversity of ideological elements. Yet, through these chameleonic shifts in the substance, the formulation and implementation of foreign policy have exhibited some common patterns.

The second conclusion is that the constant references to the 'people' in populist discourse are misleading and that the resulting emphasis this phrase receives in the study of populism is somewhat misplaced. It challenges the overuse of populism as an all-encompassing, self-explanatory concept and considers the use of alternative sub-terms to study the specific impacts of populism. Against this backdrop, it identifies personalization, nationalization, and civilizationalization in foreign policy decision-making, implementation, and discourse, respectively. In the Turkish case, personalization in the decision-making and sidelining of the established bureaucratic mechanisms reached its apex after the 2018 transition to the presidential system, though it has occurred throughout the AKP era to varying degrees. Similarly, the tendency to assert a more autonomous role in the global arena and establish bilateral relations is a common trait in the AKP's mind-boggling deviation from a staunch defender of Turkey's regional and global integration to an isolated player bound to transactionalism. The civilizational discourse again prevails for all eras of AKP rule. Expectedly, the study of such commonalities requires a more contextualized approach as they can bring different outcomes in flawed democracies or hybrid regimes compared to consolidated democracies.

Finally, the case study demonstrates the importance of avoiding static binaries, such as populist vs. non-populist, yet viewing populism as a dynamic process with its patterns unfolding over time. Although the scholarly literature reveals a fracture between AKP's liberal and authoritarian periods, this paper determines that the reversals are not substantial. The continuity in personalization, nationalization, and civilizationalization indicates that each period carries the burdens of previous periods. Thus, instead of designating turning points throughout the two-decade AKP era, populism

must be recognized in all its continuum and spectrum. This cannot be achieved by a reductionist approach based on populist/non-populist binary logic.

Notes

1. When covering different world regions, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, for instance, does not even include a chapter on the Middle East (Kaltwasser et al., 2017).
2. US President Donald Trump has had by far the greatest number of phone conversations – sometimes at least twice a week – with the Turkish leader, Erdoğan, who bypassed the regular National Security Council protocols to reach the president (Bernstein, 2020).
3. A separate question, in addition to the overlapping claims of countries desperate for cash over maritime jurisdiction zones, is how to get the gas to the market. Turkey's role as a transit country for the supply of European gas and its own energy demand, as the largest gas market in the region, make a pipeline through Turkey an attractive option among competing routes. Yet, due to troubled relations with Turkey, European and Israeli ministers opted to construct the 'Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline' (EastMed), which would deliver gas to Europe via Crete (Demiryol, 2019).
4. In particular, using Cyprus for domestic consumption makes sense considering its position in deeply divided Turkey as a unifying cause.

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