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**Gurhanli, Halil**

**Kovala, Urpo; Palonen, Emilia; Ruotsalainen, Maria; Saresma, Tuija**

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# **POPULISM ON STEROIDS: ERDOĞANISTS AND THEIR ENEMIES IN TURKEY**

**Halil Gürhanlı**

## **ABSTRACT**

Perhaps the clearest indicator of one's partiality towards a Laclauian approach to populism is the belief that it is a constitutive dimension of politics without which the latter ceases to exist. The presence of a frontier between the 'people' and its 'other' is the precondition of politics. But what if this frontier itself becomes the sole point around which those identities are articulated? Is it still possible to speak of politics when there is 'too much' populism? The article answers this question through an analysis of the extreme polarization in today's Turkey over the hegemonic figure of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Praises for Erdoğan government as a democratic model for the Muslim world withered away once the regime had decisively turned towards authoritarianism and begun consolidating Erdoğan's personal control over state and society. A personality cult, named Erdoğanism here, has gradually materialised around his figure, overtaking all previous forms of political identity among his supporters and becoming one with 'the people'. Those who display even a minimal reluctance to submit themselves completely to his will are excommunicated as 'enemies' of the people. Most interestingly, such an extremely polarizing discourse appears to have turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy, for it has been reciprocated by virtually all opposition actors in the form of Anti-Erdoğanism. The very survival of opposition in Turkey seems to have been locked into an anti-Erdoğanist corner, risking to run the whole political field into a zero-sum game between two polar opposites, a case of pure populism.

## Introduction

It is the tragic tale of a Turkish couple that prompted the writing of this article. The Dinçs had been married for almost three years when in early 2016 the husband took his wife to criminal court for allegedly insulting the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Mr. Dinç claimed his wife would ‘swear and curse whenever Erdoğan appeared on television’ and was unyielding in the face of his warnings that ‘our President is a good man and has done well for our country.’ On one such night, Mr. Dinç explains, he warned that he would record her statements and when his wife dared him to go ahead, he finally did it and used the recording as evidence at court. He told reporters: ‘I am sad to end my marriage but I would do the same even if it were my father who was offending Erdoğan’ (Tremblay 2016).

This incident may look mundane to seasoned observers of Turkish politics. After all it is just one of about two thousand cases opened against individuals who are accused of insulting Erdoğan in the past two years, including high-school students, housewives, academics and journalists (O’Grady 2016). The tale of Dinç couple, nevertheless, is of special interest because it uniquely encapsulates just how deeply polarizing a figure Erdoğan has become in Turkey today, penetrating all the way down to the nuclear family and shattering even the most intimate relationships. It seems to suggest that there is no bond strong enough to overcome the love or hatred one feels towards him. Dinç couple could not help but kept quarrelling for years over their irreconcilable feelings for the President, because the way they felt about him overshadowed all other aspects of their relationship and determined who they were to one another: an Erdoğanist and an anti-Erdoğanist.

A recent survey by the German Marshall Fund titled ‘Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey’ demonstrates that far from being an odd couple, the Dinçs in fact constitute the norm. In the course of 14 years of uninterrupted single-party rule of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), politics has turned into an ‘apocalyp-

tic existential struggle': 83 percent of the people do not want their daughter to marry someone voting for the "other" party; 79 percent reject the idea of doing business with them; 76 percent would not have each other as neighbours; and 74 percent would not even allow their children playing with those of others (Nasi 2016).

Families, friends, colleagues and all appear to be powerless in the face of political polarisation. How is this even possible? This article aims to answer this with a single term: pure populism (Laclau 2005, 45–46). Relying on the body of work of Ernesto Laclau, it first lays out a clear definition of populism as a political logic of articulation, in which a logic of equivalence prevails that of difference and society is depicted as divided between two antagonistic camps: the 'people' and its 'other' (Laclau 1990, 2005, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe 2001). This is a definition shared by many unorthodox scholars of populism who have the conviction that mainstream approaches, through their tendency to vilify it as an existential threat against democracy, inadvertently justify the increasingly undemocratic functioning of contemporary political regimes. They welcome Laclau's favourable take on populism as a breath of fresh air in an otherwise 'anti-populist' zeitgeist, a 'post-democratic' status quo where the common goal seems to be ruling without the people (Stavrakakis 2014; Crouch 2004).

But even these 'sympathetic' figures voice criticism over Laclau's assertion that populism, insofar as it postulates a 'radical alternative' to the status quo through the construction of the excluded 'people', is synonymous with politics per se (Laclau 2005, 47; 2007, 225). Benjamin Arditi, for instance, draws attention to non-radical instances of populism where the exclusionary logic is reproduced rather than contested and to the 'dark possibilities' that come along with it, such as a cult of personality and criminalization of opposition (2007, 58, 82). He even hints at a dangerous undercurrent in Laclauian theory that leaves the door open for an indispensable presence of the leader as the culmination of the "people" (Arditi 2010). Similarly, Nadia Urbinati points out that the sine qua non of populism, unification of many under the single banner

of the ‘people’ and against an ‘other’, tends to go towards ‘Caesarism’ and ‘polarization’ (2013, 147). Like Arditì, she remains unconvinced by Laclau’s attempts at downplaying the personalization as a convenient but not indispensable tool populism occasionally employs in order to make constitutive antagonisms more pronounced (ibid. 148–9).

This article concurs with these sympathetic critics. Polarization and identification of the movement under a leader is an ever-present prospect of populism. But the Laclauian theory’s shortcoming is not that it disregards this. In fact it has a name for it: pure populism. Its failure is to dismiss pure populism as an impossibility, a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ point where politics could never reach in reality (Laclau 2005, 45; 2007, 82; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 129–130). Examining the Erdoğanism phenomenon through the lenses of Laclauian ontology, this article makes a dual contribution. On a theoretical level, it demonstrates that a point of pure populism is actually realizable. At which point politics ceases to exist and gives way to a sort of ‘bipolar hegemony’, a zero-sum game between two homogenous camps that are separated by a single frontier and sustain themselves solely through their opposition to one another (Palonen 2009, 331). On an empirical level, it shows that Erdoğan uniquely constitutes that frontier in Turkey today. Instead of merely describing the polarization and personalization in contemporary Turkish politics, it focuses on the ideological context and reveals the logic behind the ways in which they are produced and reproduced.

## **Laclauian framework**

One comes across with the post-foundationalist core of Laclauian framework frequently in the form of a single, provocative statement: ‘society does not exist’ (Laclau 1990, 89–92; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 111; Marchart 2007, 134–138). In his critique of Marxist structuralism, Laclau stresses that envisioning society as a ‘founding totality’ formed by a base and a superstructure assigns it

an 'essential' status with a positivity of its own (Laclau 1990, 90). Its *modus operandi* is presumed as waiting to be discovered behind the superficial empirical variations of everyday life so that the knowledge of all social processes could be grounded on a consistent totality. His objection to this presumption of society-as-totality is based on a linguistically informed thesis for the 'infinite of the social,' which is the idea that 'any system of meaning is contingent, contextual, and relational' (Howarth 2004, 266). For Laclau, the social is a contingent system of meanings that draws, and cannot avoid drawing, a 'horizon within which some objects are representable while others are excluded' (Laclau 2007, 117). Meanings assigned to objects and relations between them are fixated at the expense of infinite others that are left out. Hence society as an intelligible and unified whole providing exhaustive patterns of relationality between all social meanings does not and cannot exist.

Laclau considers this impossibility of society as the condition of possibility for the political, because the residual excess of meaning that is bound to remain out of the frontiers of any one social also paves the way for an 'infinite play of differences' which he calls the discursive (Laclau 1990, 172; Glynos & Howarth 2007, 113–117). It serves as the terrain on which the political, understood as the institution and contestation of the social regimes and practices, functions. The political, in the first place, is an attempt to draw frontiers, to create, however temporarily, a finite order, a hegemonic discourse within an infinitude, striving to 'proceed to a relative fixation of the social' (Laclau 1990, 90–1). Reaching such a relative fixation is not only possible but necessary, for we need a stable system of meaning so that we can avoid getting lost in a 'psychotic' universe where there is no fixed meaning at all (Laclau 2007, 70–71; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 112–113).

The process of reaching a temporarily stable system of meanings corresponds to what Laclau, following Husserl, calls the sedimentation, which consists in forgetting the contingent origins of the social and mistaking them as mere objective presences (Laclau 1990, 34–35). That is to say, naturalizing the social sphere by equal-

izing what it is with what it has always been. Nonetheless, the political is also a contestation of the social that attempts at triggering ‘a reactivation of the contingent moment of foundation,’ unearthing that things have not always been the way they currently are, and ‘thus disclosing the potential for different constructions’ (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 116).

## **Political logics and populism**

If the political is all about the institution and contestation of the social regimes and practices through contingent acts and decisions, political logics are the analytical tools offered within the Laclauian framework to unveil the underlying grammar of those acts and decisions in two opposing yet interconnected categories. While the logic of equivalence involves formation and reinforcement of new frontiers that simplify the political space by splitting it into two opposing camps, the logic of difference is concerned with acts and decisions that are aimed to impede or shatter this process of drawing frontiers by expanding and complexifying it (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 129–130; Glynos & Howarth 2007, 141–145; Howarth et al. 2000: 11–12).

To clarify these logics, Glynos and Howarth invoke the example of a struggle between national liberation forces and an occupying colonial power. While the nationalists would characteristically try to ‘cancel out the particular differences of class, ethnicity, region, or religion in the name of a more universal nationalism that can serve as a common reference point,’ colonialists would ‘attempt to break down these chains of equivalence’ through ‘the age-old practice of divide and rule,’ aimed at separating ‘nationalist groups into particular communities’ (2007, 144–145). Although the political space depicted by an equivalential logic is a crudely simplistic one in which the meanings are condensed around two antagonistic poles, it serves the goal of national liberation perfectly. The logic of difference, conversely, provides such a complex pic-

ture that it weakens the sharp antagonistic polarity between the occupied and the occupier. Leaving no space for a collective mobilization between different communities, it is best suited for the purposes of colonialists.

It is possible to consider these logics in a continuous struggle for domination over the terms of political vocabulary, exerting their articulatory influences over the ways in which politics at any given moment is arranged – a struggle that accounts for the ultimate contingency of these arrangements (Arditi 2010, 45; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 105–110). This is in harmony with the way in which Laclau conceptualizes actual politics as ‘operating at the diverse points of a continuum’ between two theoretical extremes: ‘pure institutionalism’ and ‘pure populism’ (Laclau 2005, 45). He argues that, as *reductio ad absurdum* points of logical impossibilities, these discourses constitute the unreachable poles of politics, whose concurrent presence and tension are nonetheless prerequisites of the very existence of politics and its perpetual movement on that continuum (ibid., 46). Their ‘[t]ension and reflection can be contingently combined in unstable equilibria, but neither is entirely able to eliminate the other’ (Laclau 2007, 120).

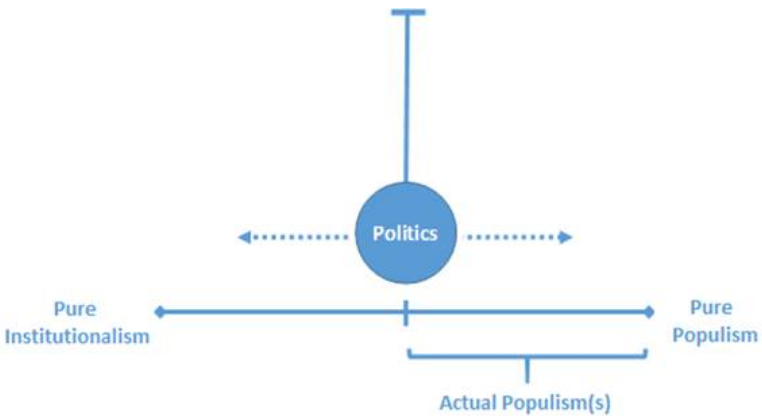


Figure 1: Laclauian Continuum of Politics. P 59

At one impossible end there is pure institutionalism, which is exclusively dominated by a logic of difference that emphasizes only the disparities between particularities and therefore eliminates any ground for their partial identification with each other (Laclau 2007, 62–63; 2005, 45). Laclau argues time and again that a social determined solely by the institutionalist discourse would entail ‘the dismissal of politics tout court’ and reduce it to the level of administration (2007, x). It would liken those in the myths of a totally reconciled ‘society’, such as Platonic republic or Disraeli’s ‘one nation’, where the particular elements constituting a “society” are absorbed into the system in a completely individual manner and transformed into objective differences with absolutely nothing in common but their existence under one community (Laclau 1990, 69–70; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 130). As the positive nature of all its terms is established within an infinitely static structure, there would be absolutely no ground for ‘dislocation’, hence for politics (Laclau 1990, 71–72; 2007, 78). In actual cases, however, the political arrangements where the logic of difference prevails [left half of the continuum in the figure above] liken more the consensual regimes of contemporary Western European countries where popular interests and demands tend to be dealt with in a technocratic manner, leaving little space for the formulation of collective political identities (Crouch 2004, 6; Stavrakakis 2014, 506).

At the opposite end of Laclauian political continuum resides an equally impossible discourse of pure populism. It is a discourse dominated solely by a logic of equivalence, requiring complete collapse of all social differences into a singular identity and consequently leaving no space for their differential particularities (Laclau 2005, 45). Laclau invokes the Freudian notion of a group whose only libidinal tie is love for the narcissistic leader as an example of this impossibly pure presence of logic of equivalence (2007, 52–60, 82). Placing the leader into the place of their ego ideal, group members reach a point of complete identification with one another that results in a total consumption of their particular egos under ‘the name of the leader’ (2005, 40). In Laclau’s own words: ‘The

equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader' (2007: 100). On a macro-political level, this means that pure populism conceives the social as a homogeneous whole whose coherence would be exclusively assured by the presence of a frontier separating the 'people' from its 'other', like in the discourse of messianic movements where a total submission to the messiah constitutes the identity of the movement and incredulous others its opposite (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 130). The world here is so infinitely separated between a righteous movement and its negative reverse evil-incarnated that there exists no difference within those camps. Each and every element constituting them becomes identical with one another, bearing no particularity of their own.

Contrary to general assumption, Laclauian conception of populism emerges as a rather straightforward one once these ontological premises are laid out; it is a certain kind of political logic of articulation in which the logic of equivalence prevails over that of difference, i.e. right half of the continuum in the figure above. Like any political logic, populism institutes the social by imposing a finite and intelligible whole of meaning: a totality (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 141–145). Nevertheless, what makes a discourse distinctively populist is that the totality it institutes is predominantly articulated around an antagonistic division. It is concerned primarily with the construction of a political identity around the 'people' by welding an equivalential chain between various differential elements whose shared 'lack' is conceived as resulting directly from the existence of an 'other'; a 'constitutive outside' that is at once the nemesis of the 'people' and necessary condition of possibility of its existence (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 127–134; Laclau 1990, 17–26; Mouffe 1993, 2). The 'people' of populism is, therefore, a partial component that aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality by instituting a frontier of exclusion, 'a part which identifies itself with the whole' (Laclau 2007, 82; Canovan 2000, 78–79).

Within this bidimensional depiction, it is possible to see the reason behind Laclau's controversial claim that equalizes populism with politics. The ineradicable presence of populism in politics stems from the impossibility of ever reaching the point where the logic of equivalence is entirely absent, i.e. pure institutionalism. There is always an excess of meaning that destabilizes its 'coincidence with the limits of community.' This is why, he insists, 'there is no political intervention which is not populist to some extent' and, thus, the question is not if, but 'to what degree' populism is present in a given discourse (Laclau 2005, 45; 2007, 81, 154).

### **Erdoğanist devotion**

But how about the other end where politics becomes too populist and ceases to exist? Is pure populism really an unreachable limit case as Laclau theorizes? This section makes use of the Laclauian framework and tools to illustrate that the polarization in contemporary Turkish politics has reached to such an extreme that it fulfils the conditions enlisted for a limit case of pure populism. Differential particularities in contemporary Turkish politics are all practically eliminated under two antagonistically constructed identities and the line dividing them: Erdoğanists and anti-Erdoğanists.

From the time of its foundation in 2001, Erdoğan's AKP has won every single election with an ever increasing landslide, consolidating its support base to roughly 50 % of the electorate in the last few years. But especially since his ascension to the presidency in August 2014, Erdoğan is not leading a party but a movement, what is called *dava* [the cause] (Alaranta 2015, 98). Erdoğanists in Turkey pledge their oath of allegiance to the leader not the party, whom they regard as the 'steel core of the cause' (Eseyan 2016) and the 'voice and breath of the people' (Fraser 2016). The party, for all intents and purposes, functions as an institutional tool for Erdoğan to keep appearances in a formally parliamentary regime where

the executive power lays in the hands of PM and the presidency remains largely a ceremonial position.

Arguably this has been the case for long but become most apparent once Erdoğan left his post as the AKP leader for the presidency while maintaining his monopoly over the party. In a move that has de facto suspended the constitution, he keeps picking and appointing the party leader, council members and government ministers, as well as leading the cabinet himself. Most recently, Erdoğan even forced PM Ahmet Davutoğlu to resign from his post for failing to keep a ‘low profile’ and, instead, acting as if he really held any power (Akyol 2016c). He was promptly replaced with Binali Yıldırım, a long-time Erdoğanist with a low enough profile to push through the constitutional changes that would ultimately terminate his own office and transform Turkey into an executive presidential regime – or as Yıldırım himself has put it: ‘to legalize the de facto situation’ (Mert 2016).

But far from being limited to the AKP cadres, Erdoğanists constitute a significant portion of Turkish society who are loud and proud in their devotion to the leader. AKP supporters make up approximately the half of Turkey’s electorate, among whom Erdoğan’s approval rate is around 80 percent (Erdoğan 2016, 2). Millions of users gather daily in various social media groups like the ‘Lovers of Erdoğan’ to celebrate their shared adoration for ‘the eternal owner of [their] hearth’ in the form of photos, songs and poems. Usually venerated as the ‘chief’ [reis] or the ‘master’ [usta], Erdoğan’s image, along with his quotes, make up all the content on those incredibly popular pages. One of their most popular mottos on Twitter reads, ‘Whatever the Chief says, that’s it!’ Another group of devoted Erdoğanists often appear in rallies wearing their signature dress of burial clothes that symbolize their readiness to sacrifice themselves for him (Çağaptay 2015).

It is tempting to discuss the Erdoğanism phenomenon, specifically the astonishing devotion it has aroused in masses and the peculiar relationship it has formed among them, in close contact with the above-mentioned Freudian notion of a group in which the only

common tie is the love for the leader. Having elevated him into the place of their ego ideal, members of such a group reach a point of complete 'identification' with one another, resulting in total consumption of their particular egos under that of the leader (Freud 2001, 105-116; Laclau 2007, 52-60). What ensues is a distinctively libidinal bond formed between the group members and the leader as their shared object-choice of love, in which the latter is idealized to the point of sublime and thus becomes immune to criticism (Žižek 2008, 192).

Statements by Erdoğanists from all ranks and creeds are indeed a testimony to the functioning of such a libidinal bond. Interviewed during a presidential rally, a 65 years-old housewife declared that, like her co-Erdoğanists wrapped in burial clothes, she would 'die gladly' if Erdoğan asked her to, for he was 'the joy of [her] life.' Her friend also stated that her 'greatest desire in this world' was to make her 2.5 years-old son meet the President, who was 'in love with Erdoğan just like his mother' (Çetin 2014). In a similar tone, Nuran Yıldız, the local head of AKP's Women's Branch, encouraged women to become members of the party, which she regarded 'a spousal link to Erdoğan himself' (Keneş 2013). It is important to note that this is in no way a phenomenon limited to the female Erdoğanists. Fettah Tamince, a billionaire businessman, went on record as early as in 2004 stating: 'I have fallen in love the moment I met Erdoğan and since then I see him in my dreams 3-4 days a week' (Süsoy 2004). Ethem Sancak, a leading media tycoon, followed the suit more recently: 'The more I saw him, the more I fell in love. As I got to know Erdoğan, I realized that such a kind of divine love between two men is possible. I say to Erdoğan: 'May my mom, dad, wife and children be sacrificed for you' (Tremblay 2015).

This common emphasis on self-sacrifice is of special interest because the use of religious, particularly Islamic practices, terminology and vocabulary in reference to Erdoğan as a holy figure is another, even more prevalent way in which Erdoğanists express their veneration for the leader. For instance, a glass Erdoğan drank

water from while making a speech was carefully preserved by the head of AKP's Youth Branch in Istanbul and exhibited like a sacred token (Gürsel 2016). The three provinces Erdoğan was respectively born in, served as a mayor and got elected MP from were labelled as 'holy cities' by the then Minister of EU Affairs, for they had 'paved the way for the emergence of the greatest leader Turkey has ever seen' (Hakan 2013). A leader so rare and special, according to another AKP deputy, that 'we shall pray a special prayer twice a day to thank Allah for granting [him] to us' (Taşkın 2011). A leading columnist of *Takvim* daily took a step further and counted Erdoğan as belonging to a holy species of leaders that are 'sent down from Heaven' with a duty to 'put things in order and complete whatever is missing' (Akarca 2013).

It is not easy to dismiss these acts and remarks as hypocritical displays of devotion either, because they often go beyond a rhetorical sanctification of the leader and become outright heresy according to the Islamic norms both Erdoğan and his disciples strictly adhere to. In 2008, a religious book containing a poem with the lines 'Erdoğan is the guardian of the way to Allah, to upset Erdoğan is to upset Allah' were distributed in thousands with the consent of local authorities (Çetin 2008). His name was listed among Mohammad's children in a so-called id paper fashioned for the Prophet by local AKP cadres during election campaign (Karadaş 2012). Government's approval of building a new hospital was praised as 'Erdoğan's Sunnah' – an Islamic term used exclusively for the deeds of Prophet himself (Gezen & Küçükkuru 2013). In fact, Erdoğanists sometimes do not even bother beating around the bushes and express it directly that Erdoğan is like a 'second prophet' to them (Kılınç 2010). So much so that they believe 'even touching him is a form of worship' (Üzer 2011). Ultimately, this belief in him as the 'messenger of Allah' (Velidedeoğlu 2015), 'leader of all believers' (Önal 2014) and 'caliph of the Earth' (Bozkurt 2014) turns literally into deification at times, as in the case of yet another AKP deputy who went all-in with his statement that Erdoğan could rule

the world because he ‘embodies all the qualities of Allah in himself’ (Akyol 2016c).

## **Enemies within**

Considering this intense devotion to Erdoğan that often reaches to the level of worship, it is plausible to propose that Erdoğanists are not a group of ordinary political supporters but of disciples following a sublime leader who is beyond criticism in their eyes. He is nothing less than the perfect embodiment of the cause, the party and the people for them. Any act that breaks their unity poses an existential risk to the identity of every individual member and that of group as a whole, since the latter functions on the premise that its members are one and the same in an entirely homogenous union. Therefore anything less than a complete submission to the leader on the part of a member, regardless of their office, equals automatically to treason and, in order to ensure a successful preservation of group homogeneity, is responded by excommunication. A recent column in the pro-Erdoğan daily Star aptly summarizes the way in which this principle functions and therefore deserves to be quoted in extenso:

[Recent change of leadership in the AKP] signifies a change of mentality regarding how to situate oneself in relation to the leader and how to administer the movement accordingly, [which] entitles not just fidelity but also loyalty and dependence [to the leader] - - The cause and the leader are one and the same thing, which can never be separated. One cannot have a sense of the cause without a bond of loyalty to the leader - -Erdoğan is not just the founding leader of a political party but someone who has materialized the cause in himself and thus become the embodiment of hope for the people and ummah - - None of us is indispensable whereas Erdoğan is our indispensable leader - - It is surely a mistake that anyone, regardless of their office, could dare to equalize oneself with the leader or speak of him as if he is their equal. That is what we believe in and live by. (Metiner 2016.)

In a recent interview, a once-leading member of Erdoğan's inner circle has explained how this principle works among Erdoğanists, speaking of a 'system of intimidation and bullying' to obtain complete submission: '99 % allegiance would not suffice to save you from being turned into nothing in [Erdoğan's] eyes... After even the tiniest of criticisms there comes a machine gun of slanders, black-mails, threats and insults.' (Bekdil 2016; Ongun 2016.) Naturally, the list of loyalists-turned-traitors is getting longer each day.

Let us just take the examples of Bülent Arınç and the ex-president Abdullah Gül. Arınç was a long-time deputy PM, parliament speaker for the party, and one of the most prominent members of 'the cause' overall. Along with Gül and Erdoğan, he makes up the so-called 'founding trio' who established the AKP in 2001. Yet his credentials could not stop the wrath of Erdoğanists once he voiced reservations over the president's interference into government issues and diverged from the official line sanctioned by the leader on issues like the Kurdish problem and freedom of expression. On pro-Erdoğan dailies he was labelled as a 'traitor' who was 'speaking in the language of the terrorists' to topple the president (Akyol 2016a). Erdoğan refused to utter Arınç's name thereafter, calling him instead the 'dishonest one' (Küçükşahin 2016). The same goes for Gül as well. His plans for switching offices with Erdoğan in a Putin/Medvedev style move collapsed when he showed signs of disapproval towards Erdoğan's policy of brutal suppression of public protests in the summer of 2013 and called attention to the risks of increasing polarization (Çandar 2015a; Gardner 2016). He too was called a traitor, acting 'greedy' like 'Brutus' and protecting enemies of the cause (Yılmaz 2015). Since then both have practically disappeared from the political arena.

Other AKP heavyweights accompanied them into political limbo, never to be seen again. The party's founding deputy and ex-minister of education Hüseyin Çelik was labelled a 'cryptic terrorist' for criticizing his party's polarizing politics and promptly demoted from the government ranks (Yılmaz 2016). Ali Babacan, known as the AKP's 'economy tsar' responsible for the country's

financial recovery in the 2000s, was accused of ‘high treason’ for defending the independence of the Central Bank and not sharing Erdoğan’s conspiratorial views about a global ‘interest rate lobby’ undermining Turkey’s economy (Yackley 2015). Sadullah Ergin, ex-minister of justice who spearheaded the legal reforms in harmony with the EU *acquis*, lost his seat after refusing to prepare laws that would bring judiciary under complete control of the executive and was declared a member of terrorist organisation (Çandar 2015a; Ramoğlu 2016). And finally, the most recent casualty in this war between Erdoğanists and their ‘enemies within’ turned out to be Ahmet Davutoğlu, who stood by Erdoğan’s side since the beginning, first as his chief foreign policy advisor, then foreign minister, and lastly PM. Even he could not avoid being excommunicated as a ‘traitor’ who ‘collaborated with the West’ and ‘its Trojan horses inside’ once he diverged from the leader’s will, i.e. attempted delaying the transition towards executive presidency and rebuilding bridges with domestic opposition and the EU (Akyol 2016b).

## **Poverty of anti-Erdoğanism**

Even a bigger source of worry for the future of Turkish politics in general is the fact that the opposition actors inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of this exceptional bond fortified around the messianic image of Erdoğan. Just like his disciples, they place Erdoğan to the epicentre of their own discourses, albeit in the exact opposite way, and effectively reinforce his position as the sole frontier polarizing the society into two camps that are mirror images of each other: Erdoğanists and anti-Erdoğanists.

Streets of Turkey were shaken by mass anti-government protests for several months in summer 2013. Despite being triggered by a council plan to demolish a park in Istanbul for the construction of a shopping mall and residential complex, Gezi Uprisings quickly amassed millions of protestors all around the country chanting a single slogan: Down with Erdoğan. It immediately became clear

that the issue was not just the trees in a park but what they symbolized: Erdoğan government's evermore authoritarian rule (Özkırımlı 2014). Having disregarded the demands and lifestyles of a significant portion of the population, the government began to heavily impose a set of religiously-informed moralistic policies on all spheres of society that made everyday life increasingly more suffocating for those who did not agree with its policies nor shared its values. Regardless of the versatile profile of the groups that made up the Gezi protestors in terms of ethnicity, religion, ideology or party affiliation, they all had one thing in common; the same staunch opposition to Erdoğan. This was largely thanks to his strategy of criminalizing the protestors as 'terrorists' and staking a personal claim on the police brutality they faced, which succeeded in putting him into the heart of a rigid antagonism. In fact, Erdoğan quickly turned the whole picture into a battle for the survival of the 'people' by organizing a series of counter rallies titled 'Respect for the National Will' where tens of thousands of Erdoğanists chanted 'We are the soldiers of Tayyip' and asked their leader to give them the order to 'crash' the protestors (Gürsel 2013). Consolidating his constituency, Erdoğan emerged victorious from all four subsequent elections.

A crude anti-Erdoğanism forms the backbone of other, more organized opposition actors as well. In a bid to mobilize their grass-root supporters and gain further popularity, they actively promote it as reason d'être of their existence and end up reinforcing the Erdoğanists' pure populism. In a typically anti-Erdoğanist speech he gave at the parliament, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of Turkey's main opposition party (CHP), aptly summarized his party's mission: 'Erdoğan dreams of being an executive president but he cannot reach his goal before he crushes our bodies, spills our blood and annihilates us completely' (Demirtaş 2016; Elcivan 2016).

Until recently, electoral support for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), latest successor of pro-Kurdish parties in Turkish history, used to fluctuate around 6 percent, which the party received overwhelmingly from the Kurdish-populated southeast for

advocating their ethno-cultural demands for decentralisation (Casi-er et al. 2011). Despite the leadership's efforts to emphasize the party's leftist stance with a distinct focus on egalitarian issues and a record number of female and minority candidates, for long the HDP failed to break off the ethnic label and its popularity remained limited to pro-Kurdish groups (Celep 2014). This changed almost overnight following HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş's historically brief speech in the parliament, which unmistakably pronounced anti-Erdoğanism as his party's *raison d'être* and enabled it to appeal to a completely different cluster of non-Kurdish voters who saw in HDP the unique opportunity to stop Erdoğan: 'I will express my message in just one sentence: Mr. Erdoğan, you will never be able to be the head of the nation as long as the HDP exists and as long as the HDP people are on this soil. We will not make you the president. We will not make you the president. We will not make you the president' (De Bellaigue 2015). Minutes after #SeniBaşkanYaptır mayacağız [#WeWillNotMakeYouThePresident] hit the worldwide trending topics list on Twitter and in June 2015 elections HDP more than doubled its votes with 13 percent, becoming the third biggest parliamentary group.

Such an unprecedented surge in the support for HDP and its comparatively less radical agenda of decentralization meant a significant loss of popularity for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an illegal terrorist organisation fighting Turkish state for an independent Kurdish state since 1980s (Yavuz & Özcan 2015). In a move quite uncharacteristic for the organisation, PKK leader Cemil Bayık attempted to compensate this loss by engaging in a bit of anti-Erdoğanism of his own, stating: 'This is a war of life and death for both parties. If Erdoğan eliminates us, he will win and be able to defeat everyone on the side of democracy. We are the biggest obstacle in the way of his dreams. We want to topple Erdoğan and the AKP, otherwise Turkey will never become a democratic country' (Loyd 2016).

So, if there is one thing anti-Erdoğanists have in common with Erdoğanists, it is their understanding of politics as an existential

war. The fact that they are in equal degrees obsessed with Erdoğan only fuels their adversaries' purely populist discourse that promotes a vision of the world ultimately divided between the leader-as-people-embodied and his negative reverse evil-incarnated. In the eyes of his disciples, it gives credit to Erdoğan's grandiose views about a global network of conspirators working together to topple him personally. His list of 'enemies' includes, but is not limited to, the opposition parties, Gezi protestors, Kurdish terrorists, finance speculators, Alevites, BBC, New York Times, Jewish lobby, Germany, Italy, Armenian lobby, ultra-nationalists, and homosexuals (Idiz 2013; HDN 2015). As one of Erdoğan's top advisors put in his daily column: 'Turkey stands on a delicate equilibrium where Erdoğan is the golden point of balance. Those coalition of crooks...are ready to turn Turkey into a colony if only they could reach their dream of seeing Erdoğan gone. Their goal is crystal clear: Topple the strong leadership to feed off the treasures, lives and blood of Turkey. Just like in the old times' (Bulut 2016).

This is particularly why any international reaction against Turkey's dramatic slippage down to authoritarianism in recent years, no matter how well-intended, morally upright or friendly-toned it is, fails to strike a chord within the country. Insofar as they inevitably pose a challenge to Erdoğan's infallibility, critics are doomed to get dismissed a priori as 'foreign enemies' of the people and equivalently chained to the 'enemies within' (Cornell 2014; Armstrong 2015). Far from easing the polarisation, they paradoxically deepen it by helping Erdoğan to consolidate his constituencies even further and, consequently, weakening what little chance the opposition may have in dislocating some of them.

The poverty Turkish opposition suffers within the limits of anti-Erdoğanism is perhaps best described by the CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu. In a tone that reflects real despair, he stated: 'Erdoğan is a true narcissist who listens to no one but himself, abides by no rules but his own. We discuss among ourselves whether or not we should take such a person seriously and combat him but, alas, we have to... We have many projects but presenting them has no appeal

right now [when] Turkey is de facto an AKP state. From mayors to teachers, academics to doctors, all consider themselves as servants to its rule. We are asked to correct this picture [while] playing the game of pseudo-democracy, which is imposed on everyone and opposing it equals to treason.’ (Özgüven 2016.)

## Conclusions

The politics in Turkey today seems to be rather analogous to the Dinç marriage. It is a tale of two people who are on the brink of divorce but nonetheless condemned to a perpetual dialogue of the deaf to maintain who they are. It is stuck in a vicious circle, or what Emilia Palonen calls a ‘bipolar hegemony,’ where two homogenous camps occupy the entire political space and sustain their identities solely ‘through their opposition to one another’ (Palonen 2009: 331). Any new cleavages or demands are instantly articulated into this existing system of pro- vs. anti-Erdoğanism, leaving no space for a third position – not in party politics, business life, neighbourhoods or even families. The fact that there seems to be no way out of this deadlock at the moment but a divorce, a complete division of Turkish society into two distinct people(s), is a strong warning for not equating populism with politics per se as Laclau does. Far from being a theoretical limit concept, pure populism is an actual, albeit extreme, possibility, which can be realized when a logic of equivalence rages unabated. Therefore it is plausible to side with Laclau’s ‘sympathetic’ critics who more or less share his ontological categorization of populism as a political logic of articulation without endorsing its ultimate conclusion. As the Erdoğanism case demonstrates, their warnings of an inherent risk of extreme polarization and personalization in populism are far from being ungrounded.

This article argued that, as the dominant discourse in contemporary Turkish politics, Erdoğanism has reached the extreme point of pure populism, whereby a total consumption of one’s ego under that of the leader becomes the precondition of being counted in

‘the people’, who never question or criticize but simply love, obey and follow him. Although it is commonplace to observe that polarization is an ‘instrumental electoral strategy’ Erdoğan employs to ‘consolidate his constituency,’ little attention is paid in the literature to the extreme ways in which this strategy consumes the particular identities of his followers (Keyman 2014). It also simultaneously pushes the opposition to a dark corner where adopting an equally polarizing anti-Erdoğanist stance emerges as the only way of survival, even though this amounts to being labelled ‘enemies of the people’ and paradoxically reproduces the Erdoğanist discourse. This author sincerely hopes that the present article, at the very least, manages to draw some attention to this significant lack in the literature on Turkish politics.

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