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# **Turkish Hospitality and the Impossible Case of Progressive Anti-Immigration Politics**

Topic: Immigration politics and culture

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# Turkish Hospitality and the Impossible Case of Progressive Anti-Immigration Politics

## 1. Introduction

As human rights violations, conflict, violence, and persecution increased worldwide, reported forcibly displaced people<sup>1</sup> passed 110 million by mid-2023 (UNHCR, 2024). The humanitarian crisis created by this immigration trend became an increasingly polarised political subject rather than an issue of human life that brings people together (Schmidt-Catran, 2022, 86). This increasing polarisation results in individuals acting out of compassion or hatred towards those who seek refuge in their countries. It has been found that refugees are especially vulnerable to discrimination, racism, and intolerance, which leads to alarming rates of hate crimes globally (United Nations, 2022). The level of polarisation and violence surrounding immigration politics calls for particular attention to understand the roots of this phenomenon, not only to protect the right to life and dignity of the refugees but also to ensure the protection of democratic institutions. Polarisation, while creating a platform for democratic discussion, has been found to lead to democratic backsliding, democratic erosion, and authoritarianism (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 17). This subject has been deeply discussed in the academic literature along with international relations (IR) practice due to the dire consequences it poses on migrants themselves and the level of democracy of the host states.

While the current literature on polarisation and immigration attitudes offers different reasons why this issue manifests, it is concordant that there is an association between progressive political identity and conservative political identity, and pro-immigration and anti-immigration attitudes respectively (Eger & Joakim, 2022, 230)<sup>2</sup>. Two main branches in the literature that explain the polarisation and group identity immigration attitudes create, cite political elite discourse or nationalism as reasons for this phenomenon. While these explanations cover much ground, their findings are not generalisable for the quickly shifting texture of immigration politics. An example of the inadequacy of the current literature is seen recently in Denmark and Germany where there has been a rise in anti-immigration politics in the left parties (Rauhala, 2023 & Kuras, 2023). The increasing anti-immigration rhetoric of the

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<sup>1</sup> In their book, "Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism", Harsha Walia, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Nick Estes problematise the difference drawn between migrants and refugees. They explain in their book that these differences are artificially created based on state-relations and explain that this can result in an artificial binary of the "acceptable" or "desirable" foreigners and foreigners that are criminalised (19).

<sup>2</sup> While there are individual exceptions or nuances related to the race, skill-level and background of immigrants, the general trend is accepted as conservative individuals holding more anti-immigration beliefs compared to their progressive counterparts.

previously pro-immigration left-wing parties challenges the assumed attitudes of each political identity. However, the literature has explained left-wing parties' newfound proximity to right-wing immigration politics by referencing the general downfall of immigration acceptance within Europe (Esipova, Ray & Pugliese, 2023). Even though the literature is comprehensive and is evolving with politics to explain the recent phenomena, the case of Türkiye, a country influenced by, and influential to the immigration politics of the last decade, offers a unique predicament. Unlike what the literature suggests, those who identify with progressive political identity display anti-immigration attitudes whereas those who identify with conservative political identity display pro-immigration attitudes. Adversely to the cases of Denmark and Germany and most of the global right-wing political trends, in the Turkish case there is a strong, pro-immigration, right-wing party. Moreover, unlike its European counterparts, CHP (Republican Peoples' Party) as a "progressive" opposition party, did not start to adopt anti-immigration rhetoric with the decline of immigration acceptance, but rather its stance stayed the same since the beginning of the "refugee crisis" starting in 2011 (Eskişar & Durmuşlar, 2021, 1239). Amidst the increasing anti-immigration attitudes, Türkiye's conservative, right-wing AKP's pro-immigration attitude and CHP's unwavering anti-immigration rhetoric pose a significant puzzle to the literature and the practice of IR.

It is important to understand what makes Türkiye an outlier due to the influential role it has in international immigration politics. Türkiye is not only the host of the greatest number of refugees in the world<sup>3</sup> but it is also quite influential in the immigration politics of the European Union (EU) (Amnesty International, 2017). Türkiye became more influential in EU immigration politics due to the 2016 Joint Statement & Action<sup>4</sup> between the EU and Türkiye. However, perhaps the most urgent reason for attempting to understand the Turkish case is due to Türkiye's categorisation as a state that was not fit for hosting the asylum seekers<sup>5</sup> (Amnesty International, 2017). The action plan was also criticised by the citizens of the EU for giving Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Türkiye, leverage that he used to threaten the EU when a disagreement arose (The Guardian, 2018).

Even though the action plan brought its fair share of controversy, EU leaders were adamant that the agreement should be revisited and renewed, which led to concern over what

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<sup>3</sup> Türkiye, along with Iran have the largest number of immigrants, 3.4 million each (UNHCR, 2024).

<sup>4</sup>In this action plan both parties agreed that the EU would hand all and any irregular migrations from Greece or Türkiye back to Türkiye. They have agreed for Türkiye to host these refugees in exchange for the EU to mobilise humanitarian aid and an additional three billion Euros of funding for the "facilities of refugees" in Türkiye (European Parliament, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Türkiye was accused of failing to ensure the safety of the refugees (Amnesty International, 2017).

the 2023 presidential elections would mean for EU immigration politics (Altunkaya, 2023). During the 2023 Turkish presidential elections, Erdoğan's promise to "never send a single refugee away" and CHP's pledge to "send back refugees" as soon as the then party leader Kılıçdaroğlu<sup>6</sup> was elected to office played central roles (BBC News, 2022; CHP, 2019). CHP's pledge to reform Turkish immigration politics left the international community concerned for the safety of the refugees seeking asylum in Türkiye, and the stability of the bilateral immigration agreements (Amnesty International, 2022).

Türkiye's influence on international immigration policies calls for attention to understand what makes Türkiye unique. The legacies Türkiye inherited from the Ottoman Empire and its diverse texture have been influential in Turkish culture. This diversity along with its contemporary history fostered a versatile nationalism and elite discourse that informs Turkish immigration attitudes. Erdogan, seeing the Ottoman Empire as the soil on which the Turkish Republic and its culture are built on, informs his immigration policies as the protector of the Muslim world (Kujawa, 10, 2023). This objective of protecting the Ummah<sup>7</sup> is reflected in his categorisation of Syrian refugees as "our brothers" and in his promises of Turkish citizenship to them (Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2016). CHP on the other hand, carrying the legacy of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular vision for Türkiye, separates religion from Atatürk's definition of Turkish culture, without eliminating Islam as a whole (CHP, 2023). CHP, while being respectful of religious values, sees the presence of the understanding of Ummah as a direct threat to the cultural texture of Atatürk's Türkiye (CHP 2019). Erdogan on the other hand sees sending refugees away as a threat to the Islamic tradition and Turkish culture by extension.

The contradiction Türkiye poses to the existing literature in terms of political group identity and immigration attitudes makes Türkiye a unique case. The lack of focus on this case in the literature, and the significant impact it has on both Western-Asian and European relations calls for further research on this subject. Moreover, both AKP (Justice and Development Party), Erdoğan's political party, and CHP citing Turkish culture as their respective attitudes towards immigration necessitates a closer look into Türkiye and the influence one's understanding of their culture has on immigration attitudes. This thesis will aim to mend the knowledge gap in the literature by better understanding the immigration politics of a deeply influential state and

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<sup>6</sup> Kılıçdaroğlu, was the president of CHP, however, after the defeat CHP faced during 2023 presidential elections, he was replaced by Ögür Özel, bringing Kılıçdaroğlu's 13 years as presidency of CHP to a close. Even though the management of CHP has faced change, CHP's approach to immigration remains the same.

<sup>7</sup> Ummah is the Arabic word of "nation" that refers to a nation of Muslim people. It is a supranational term that includes Muslim people regardless of their ethnicity or nationality.

focusing on the role of culture by answering the question: “*How does the understanding of culture influence the discourse on immigration policies in Türkiye?*”. This question will be answered by creating a theoretical framework that is informed by the pre-existing literature and building on it further to create a comprehensive understanding of the influence culture has on this unique case.

## **2. Literature Review**

As the polarisation between pro and anti-immigration attitudes became more prominent, they got associated with the two polar political group identities: progressive and conservative, respectively. Individuals’ perspectives associated with political group identities are especially concerning since group identities heavily influence the way politics is conducted and the level of democracy present (Hillman et al., 2015, 275). Group identities influence voter turnout, the level of the decisiveness of the voter, and political attitudes (Zingher, 2023, 717). As a result, the relationship between group identities and immigration increasingly became a subject that is relevant not only for its association with human rights but also for its influence on national politics.

Bora offers a comprehensive explanation of how Turkish political identities are informed by various types of nationalisms, and their connection to political history and culture. Bora visualises the eras of Turkish nationalism led by different parties as different dialects of the same language (2021, 214). He argues that the root language, the first wave of nationalism of the Turkish Republic is Kemalist nationalism. Named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the root language, aimed to uphold Türkiye as a nation-state with sovereignty, underlining its border security and right to exist as it dates back to the Independence War<sup>8</sup>. This emphasis on the nation-state models the ambitions of Atatürk as a leader who upheld the “European” values and civilisation (Landau, 1984, 4). Türkiye’s active attempt to westernise itself can be recognised within the way its nationalism manifests. The “Pro-Western” dialect of the root language delves deeper into Western supremacist values and believes in the promises of globalisation (Bora, 2021, 214). Here, the first dialect is born which is a nationalism that upholds the Kemalism of the root language and relies on globalisation and neo-liberal economic values. The second dialect, however, is a left-wing Kemalist<sup>9</sup> dialect that envisions a more socialist version of

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<sup>8</sup> The Turkish Independence War was a revolt against the occupation and partition of the Ottoman Empire’s territory following the Empire's defeat in World War I. The War ended up granting the sovereignty Turkish people needed to establish the Turkish Republic.

<sup>9</sup> A series of economic, political, and social principles that Atatürk hoped to implement in the modern Turkish Republic. These principles were built on the ideas of European modernism, secularism and republicanism.

Türkiye. CHP as a complex facilitator of nationalist values keeps the root language, and both dialects alive within its system (2021, 214). The third, ethno-racist dialect came about as a reaction to the Kurdish rights movement. This perspective was later absorbed by MHP (Nationalist Action Party), which relies on pan-Turkism as its party's ethos (Eskişar, & Durmuşlar. 2021, 1231). The fourth, and final dialect comes as a translation of the rising Islamism as a reaction to the series of secularist and modernist laws adopted by Atatürk (Yavuz, 2020, 6). This pan-Islamist dialect was politicised by the 26th president of Türkiye, Turgut Özal, and later perfected by Erdoğan and AKP. This evolution of the root nationalist language of Türkiye shows that both AKP's and MHP's nationalism is informed by values of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism more than the concept of nation.

Kujawa supports Bora's findings by exploring the relationship between political history and its influence on political identity building. She finds Atatürk especially invested in archaeology and prehistory to legitimise Turkish presence in Anatolia to counter Greek and Armenian territorial claims (9, 2023). Kujawa's findings therefore further emphasise the root language's need to establish border security and sovereignty. She argues that at the beginning of the 20th Century, political history started to represent Ottoman traditions, forming a new identity for Turks informed by the policies of Erdoğan (9, 2023). Throughout his time in office, Erdoğan underlined that the history of the Turkish Republic did not start in 1923 as its history is one with that of the Ottoman Empire (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2018). Through continuously referring to Ottoman "heroes" such as Mehmed the Conqueror, Selim I, Suleiman the Magnificent and Abdulhamid II regarding their successes in bringing Muslims together and their ambition to protect the Ummah, Erdoğan has built a specific political identity reflected in both internal and foreign affairs (Kujawa, 16, 2023).

Koyuncu finds that Erdoğan's political identity based on Islamic and Ottoman traditions, conceptualises Islam as his political identity (195, 2014). Through exploring AKP's foreign policy, Koyuncu compliments Kujawa's findings on Erdoğan's goal to represent the Muslim world and adds that this representation creates a distance between Türkiye's Western states and proximity to Muslim states. Koyuncu also finds that Erdoğan defines citizenship ethics by citing Ottoman and Islamic values in his national and foreign affairs (2014). This proximity to Muslim states and moralising messages that define citizenship ethics is also seen in Erdoğan's approach to immigration.

Simonsen finds that adopting moralised messaging in the discourse of the political elite plays a central role in the immigration attitudes of the population (Simonsen, 2022, 1409). He argues that associating immigration with moral convictions creates more polarisation even in

states that do not have partisanship as a relevant issue. This argument remains generalisable to most political contexts as each society has moral values be it religious, cultural, or otherwise. Skitka supports this argument from a psychological standpoint and claims that when people feel burdened with the idea of choosing right from wrong, they become more inclined to become radicalised hence raising the levels of polarisation (2010, 278)<sup>10</sup>.

These moralised messages can be seen as a tool for the regime to establish cultural hegemony. Introduced by Gramsci, cultural hegemony is achieved by not coercion but consensus over ideology (Mitchell 1990, 545). This consensus is not achieved by compromise, on the contrary, it depends on dominance since said consensus is achieved after constant negotiations between the dominant and subordinate groups' ideologies (Hecker, Furman & Akyildiz, 2021, 10). This emphasis that is put on ideology renders hegemony as the ruling elite's ability to sustain their control over public discourse (Hecker, Furman & Akyildiz, 2021, 10). In the case of Türkiye, basing the morals on Islamic values allows the AKP regime to leverage the anti-immigration ideologies of the opposition by branding their discourse as immoral. This binary of moral and immoral not only creates an opportunity to place more burden on citizens and increase levels of polarisation but also, creates an avenue for establishing hegemony.

Hintz further investigates the connection between cultural hegemony and political identities. Her definition of identity hegemony parallels Gramsci's cultural hegemony but focuses more on how negotiations to achieve cultural hegemony lead to political identities in Türkiye (5, 2018). Similarly to Gramsci's definition of the negotiation stage, Hintz and Kujawa define a struggle to establish the dominant, or hegemonic, political identity. They also explain that political history can be used to achieve a hegemonic political identity as it can invoke affective reactions within the public. Erdoğan's citizenship ethics is parallel to the moralising messages theorised by Simonsen, creating an example of how nationalism informed by political history can lead to different definitions of culture and as a result, various political identities. Hintz also finds that the power struggle parties go through to establish a hegemonic political identity, or the negotiation stage as Gramsci calls it, can bleed into foreign affairs (5, 2018). This phenomenon is seen in Turkish immigration policies as Erdoğan establishes closer political and humanitarian ties with Muslim countries compared to their Western counterparts (Hintz, 2, 2018).

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<sup>10</sup> Negative moral messages surrounding immigrants can look like branding them as harmful intruders to the economy, or latecomers with unfair advantages (Simonsen, 2022, 1407).

The negotiations between Kemalist and Erdoğan's dialects to achieve Hintz's identity hegemony and its influence on the public's discourse are seen in the findings of Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen. The authors found two different trends of moralising messaging regarding immigration when it comes to Syrian refugees' categorisation in online discourse: one that uses messages of protecting the borders to uphold the founding fathers' efforts, and one that is more welcoming due to the shared Islamic values with Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens (Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen, 2020, 3351). Here, the values of border protection and religious, and humanitarian responsibility narratives are the main opposing themes. Moreover, Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen find that Syrian refugees face more challenges and racism in spheres of public life that rely on public acceptance compared to those that concern governmental bureaucracy. The difference between public acceptance of the migrants and the acceptance shown by the AKP government policy is indicative of high levels of polarisation concerning immigration (2020, 3351). In online conversations, Turkish people have expressed this lack of acceptance due to incompatible cultural values categorising Syrian men as "barbaric" and a danger to Turkish women (2020, 3356). Arguments regarding Syrian refugees' incompatibility with Turkish culture were found to be accompanied by remarks of religious and cultural racism.

The two trends seen in the discourse analysed by Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen were in line with the nationalism dialects of CHP and AKP where both perspectives attempt to protect the aspect of their culture, they feel nationalistic about. Cultural Studies define culture as a continuous meaning-producing and erasing process that results in different ideologies (Finlayson & Martin, 1997, 187). By drawing this connection between individual, culture, and ideology, Cultural Studies conceptualises individuals as agents that are a part of this meaning-creation. This, in turn, leads to these individuals seeing themselves through a lens of ideological loyalties, aspirations, obligations, and preferences defined by their culture (1997, 187). The individual-focused lens offered by Cultural Studies complements Gramsci and Hintz's political elite-based analysis. This connection can be used to explain how cultural hegemony influences the public. The obligations, loyalties and ideologies defined by Cultural Studies can be further dissected to understand that citizens can be susceptible to moral messaging on certain immigration attitudes due to a sense of loyalty to protect their understanding of their own culture. These loyalties represented in different dialects of nationalism in the Turkish case can be an avenue for the political elite to persuade the public into consenting to its rule through moralised messages.

Mardin supports the idea of cultural affiliations creating ideological and political loyalties and explains that Islam is more than a belief as it has its own traditions, requirements and expectations as a culture of its own (1989, 3). Mardin explains that Islam creates a series of obligations that inform social life as well as political obligations within Islamic societies. He underlines that this series of obligations, or loyalties as Cultural Studies refers, is especially felt as a culture of its own due to religion becoming an axis of polarisation in Türkiye due to the history of polarisation among secular and Muslim citizens (1989, 2). Similarly, White explores the obligations and loyalties at the core of Kemalist nationalism. She explains that in this dialect of nationalism, being a Turk and being a soldier is synonymous (2014, 4). While this approach does not erase the importance of Islam within the Turkish identity and culture, it is not at the forefront. Here, the main obligation that is posed is to protect the land and border integrity that was created because of the martyrdom of soldiers during the Independence War (2014, 5).

Even though the current literature on its own fails to cover the research question raised by this thesis, this connection between various sources can be seen as a strong foundation. These connections create a chain of possible influences covering Türkiye's rebellion against the literature's concordance on conservative political identity holding anti-immigration beliefs. This can be done by investigating the influence one's understanding of their own culture has on their political beliefs by focusing on culture as a collective of ideologies that define agents' loyalties, obligations and aspirations through undergoing meaning-creating and meaning-dismantling processes and how these processes are used by the regime to create a hegemonic culture and political identity.

In the Turkish case, conservative people's immigration attitudes are related to a version of culture that is signified by their religiopolitical responsibilities identified by the Ottoman legacies establishing them as the nation responsible for protecting their "religion brothers". Here, AKP's discourse that moralises politics to follow the virtuously superior, religious path of accepting immigration builds on pre-existing nationalism and the loyalties of its voter base. On the other hand, the progressive group identity feels an obligation to stay loyal to Atatürk's secular principles that uphold border integrity above all, which is further moralised by CHP. The political texture of Türkiye, and its polarisation, are well reflected within its politicians' citation of culture, its dominance of ideologies within its dialects of nationalism, and the way Cultural Studies define culture. Through drawing connections in the current literature, the gap that creates room to analyse Türkiye's rebellion against the literature's concordance on conservative political identity holding anti-immigration beliefs can be addressed.

## *2.1 Conceptual Framework*

### *2.1.1 Culture*

Culture has been deemed “one of the most difficult concepts” to define within the realm of humanities and social science (Hall, 1997, 3). Its perception as a commonly understood universal concept allows culture to cover large aspects of human existence, making it all the more ambiguous (Hecker, Furman, Akyildiz, 2021, 6). However, within the scope of this thesis, culture is defined by referring to multiple definitions.

To conceptualise the relationship between culture and political identity, Cultural Studies’ definition of culture as an ideology that goes through a meaning-creating and meaning-erasing process will be used. This definition not only creates an avenue for multiple and conflicting ideologies within Turkish culture but also establishes a connection between Hintz’s and Gramsci’s hegemony theories and their negotiation processes used by the political elite. Moreover, this definition of culture presents a comprehensive explanation regarding how an individual’s understanding of their culture as an ideology informs their loyalties and nationalism. These loyalties can render citizens susceptible to elite discourse, in this case, susceptible to certain immigration attitudes represented by the elite.

### *2.1.2 Understanding of Culture*

As Bora presents in his visualisation of Turkish nationalisms, Turkish political identities heavily depend on the idea of protecting culture. However, just like Turkish nationalisms, definitions of what culture means are diverse, making each nationalism focus on protecting the values of a different period in Turkish political history. Even though other approaches or nuanced perspectives exist within the public, Bora’s definition of nationalism will be used to conceptualise “understanding of culture” for the purposes of this thesis.

### *2.1.3 Discourse on immigration policies in Türkiye*

Cap defines political discourse as a process that involves reflection of one’s beliefs on what constitutes the ideal future (2023, 3). Cap states that this process involves discussion and persuasion to eliminate differences of opinion (2023,23). This process defined by Cap is parallel to the negotiation stages defined by Hintz and Gramsci in their hegemony theories. As established by the literature review, this negotiation phase is deemed influential in the Turkish people’s conceptualisation of their political identity based on whichever version of nationalism they belong to based on their understanding of Turkish culture. Cap also states that his

definition of political discourse is intertwined with the politicisation of issues concerning public interest (2023, 3). One of these issues could be such as immigration.

Even though political discourse is a difficult concept to define, Cap's definition offers a comprehensive account of the domain discourse. Therefore, Cap's definition will be referred to establish connections to the conceptualisation of other terms and theories of hegemony that will be used within the scope of this thesis.

## *2.2 Theoretical framework*

Even though the Turkish case poses a contradiction to the literature, amending and applying existing literature can create a solid base for a framework to be developed to better explain the puzzle this influential case poses. The framework of this thesis will build on the connections it has to the pre-existing literature on the moralisation of immigration, nationalism, cultural hegemony and loyalties in Türkiye.

The Western sense of nationalism relies on the unifying force of the nation-state which makes more sense in European and Western contexts than it does for colonised states and post-Empires<sup>11</sup>. For instance, the Ottoman Empire's coverage of large amounts of land facilitated an environment where people from different cultures, ethnicities, and religions lived side by side (Bora, 2021, 218). Türkiye's inheritance of the Ottoman Empire's diverse character led to Türkiye lacking definite character, making it challenging to apply Western-centric nationalism's first assumption. This difficulty in attributing a character to Türkiye also manifests itself in the nationalist rhetoric of the three largest parties in Türkiye: AKP, CHP, and MHP. Each party either brings the values of the Ottoman Empire, the initial days of the Republic, or the Turcic tribes, by arguing that the cultural values of that time were the authentic values of the Turkish people before a form of degeneration.

All these parties hold rigid, self-proclaimed "nationalist" values that are not only different from one another but also contradictory. The contemporary parties of Türkiye chose to attach themselves to a historical period of Turkish people dating back to 552 AD, rather than uniting under the concept of a nation-state. The differences that are seen in the definition of "Turkish nationalism" each party holds, allow them to build their respective immigration attitude using moralised values that resonate with their nationalism. This creates a unique case for Türkiye rendering its nationalism and polarisation on immigration politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Nationalism is defined as a doctrine that relies on the assumption that there is a nation with definite character, that said nation's values and interests are more important than all other values and interests, and that said nation should be as independent as possible, which requires sovereignty (Breuilly, 1993, 2).

The explanation each party gives for their respective positions is their understanding of the Turkish culture<sup>12</sup>. The lens provided by Cultural Studies is used to understand how this diversity within Turkish nationalism is formed since conceptualising the influence understanding of culture has on nationalism and consequently, political group identity, can be explained as a collective of ideologies that inform the loyalties, obligations, and aspirations of individuals through meaning-creating and meaning-dismantling processes. Furthermore, to investigate how these loyalties held by the public can be influenced through emotions of nostalgia and moral concern is analysed through the cultural identity hegemony analysis made by Gramsci and Hintz. This deep reading of Turkish dialects of nationalism, and the moralising messaging that is used in reaction to immigration will shed light on how one's understanding of one's own culture informs one's immigration attitudes.

### **3. Background Information**

#### *3.1 AKP, CHP and Political Group Identity in Türkiye*

Even though pro-immigration ideas were associated with Erdoğan's conservative AKP government and its coalition of right-wing, Islamist parties<sup>13</sup>, historically, AKP has attracted individuals that identify with the conservative group identity. Conservative and religious policies of AKP called for women to conform to gender norms, has rejected the existence of LGBTQIA+ individuals and marginalised ethnic groups such as Kurdish people by branding them as a problem that needs to be "dealt with" (Euronews, 2021). These policies garnered the support of a voter base that identifies with the conservative political identity. Anti-immigration attitudes, on the other hand, were associated with the liberal, opposition CHP party along with its left-wing coalition parties attracting those that hold progressive group identities (Al Jazeera, 2023). CHP has been advocating for minority rights, standing for the rights of women, and LGBTQIA+ groups (Michaelson & Narlı, 2023). As a result, CHP became the hub for all marginalised identities, leading to a group identity of progressive politics. Curiously, CHP's promise to "send back refugees" as soon as the party leader Kılıçdaroğlu was elected to office

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to recognise that the underlying assumption for politics is that parties act to get elected, not to uphold their cultural or moral values (Eskişar & Durmuşlar, 2021, 1232). However, it is also evident that the ideologies that inform all three parties' nationalism, and their attitude towards immigration is compatible with their definition of culture.

<sup>13</sup> All the members of the coalition, called *Cumhur İttifakı* (Republic Coalition), namely AKP, MHP, *Büyük Birlik Partisi* (Big Unity Party), *Hür Deva Partisi* (Free Solution Party), *Yeniden Refah Partisi* (Welfare Again Party) are far-right parties that are also Islamists. However, oddly enough *Demokrat Sol Parti* (Democrat Leftist Party) despite having Leftist and Kemalist ideals, ended up declaring support for the Republic Coalition.

in the 2023 presidential elections garnered the support of the same voter base that identifies as progressive (CHP, 2019).

The political identity association each party formed is representative of their nationalism dialect and the legacy they affiliate with. As an emerging state, Türkiye, under the guidance of Atatürk, cut its cultural and linguistic ties to its Ottoman predecessor, concretising this divergence through establishing new laws (Landau 1984, 12). With a Western understanding of modernity in mind, Atatürk's reforms ranged from women's rights, market liberalisation and the adoption of the Latin alphabet over the Arabic alphabet (Yavuz, 2020, 5). However, the reform that created the foundation for the rest of the changes was the separation of religion and state. The Ottoman Empire, defined by its Islamic head of state, the Caliphate to not only the Ottoman Empire but to all Muslims, founded its laws and customs on Islamic traditions. Therefore, all these reforms, especially one that declared Türkiye as a secular state, were met with opposing levels of support.

For some, Atatürk's reforms built upon liberation and education created an unexpected, democratic state from the ruins left by a failed Empire and wars against imperial occupations (Kim, 2001). For the rest, Atatürk's reforms were a war on Islam, as they found the reforms to be sudden and premature (Brown, 1988). For the part of the population that was a result of the reforms, modern Türkiye was a betrayal of the Ottoman's roots, culture, and ancestors (Şener, 2020). This feeling of betrayal created a nostalgia for the reign of the Ottoman Empire, where Muslim citizens felt free to exercise their religion and traditions (Yavuz, 2020, 7). This feeling of nostalgia found a political representation within Neo-Ottomanism and was utilised by political figures promising to make Türkiye great again where "great" stood for the return of Islamic principles (Yavuz, 2020, 5).

### 3. 2 *AKP's Nationalism Dialect of Neo-Ottomanism, Pan-Islamism, and New Türkiye*

While Turgut Özal<sup>14</sup> introduced Neo-Ottomanism to Turkish politics, he still upheld Kemalism. Similarly, Erdoğan's initial years in office yielded an applauded "Turkish Model" balancing political Islam, secularism, progress in human rights, and a successful liberal market (Özbudun, 2006, 547). The success experienced in the first years of Erdoğan's time in the office created the *New Türkiye* project, hoping to elevate Türkiye to the stage of powerful states (Hecker, Furman, Akyıldız, 2021, 6). After 22 years of its formation, *New Türkiye* is still used as the slogan to indicate Erdoğan's nationalism and his plan for the future of Türkiye.

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<sup>14</sup> 8th President of Turkish Republic.

During these two decades, *New Türkiye* solidified Erdoğan's national Neo-Ottoman, Islamic identity as early as 2007, even though this political agenda was not translated into Türkiye's foreign policy until 2012 (Yavuz, 2022, 661). Expecting the Arab Spring to inspire political solidarity among Muslim states, Erdoğan shifted his pro-EU foreign policy to be in favour of Pan-Islamism, strengthening his Neo-Ottoman national policy. After this shift, Erdoğan's *New Türkiye* did not only include the reinstatement of Islamic values, but also the rejection of Western ones (Yavuz, 2022, 662). This approach also informs Erdoğan's current immigration attitude where his rhetoric is favourable towards his religion "brothers" and less favourable towards the EU. Pan-Islamism being a part of Erdoğan's foreign policy is also reminiscent of the rise of Ottoman Pan-Islamism during 1912. Similarly to its modern version, Ottoman Pan-Islamism was born as a reaction to the West's expansionist policies, hoping to find allies among Muslim states (Aydın, 2007, 195). Parallel to its modern progression, Ottoman Pan-Islamism also emerged after a series of pro-Western reformist efforts during the Tanzimat Era<sup>15</sup> between 1839 and 1876. Therefore, the revival of Pan-Islamism under Erdoğan's policies can be seen as another layer of nostalgia towards forming a reaction to the pro-Western reforms brought upon by the Tanzimat Era and now, Atatürk.

This reimagined Türkiye led to a cultural and political shift. Consequently, *New Türkiye*, once connotated with international praise, became an enigma puzzling political theorist who attempted to understand how Türkiye found itself in a "post-Kemalist, post-secular" era (Aytürk et. al, 2019, Öztürk, 2019). An explanation for this question was suggested by Mardin in the form of a political binary. According to Mardin, Türkiye consists of two peripheries that hold opposing political, religious, and most importantly cultural values. His argument follows Türkiye's modernisation period as an attempt that was initiated top-down (1973, 185). Here, the top is signified as the core, where pro-Western, secular reforms are accepted, and the periphery is the religious masses that these reformist values fail to reach (1973, 185). While Mardin's take has been criticised for being too simplistic in terms of its dichotomous reading of Türkiye's socio-political culture, it does hold quite a lot of significance in the populist political elite where they capitalise on this identity of the periphery, contextualising it as a process of victimisation of the religious masses. The political shift

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<sup>15</sup> A period in which a series of "modernising" reforms were made in the Ottoman Empire. The reforms hoped to bring the Ottoman Empire up to par with its European counterparts. Therefore, the changes took the definition of modernisation that is parallel to an European understanding. The negative reactions to this Era stemmed from mostly Muslim communities, as they were concerned that these reforms would corrupt the state.

experienced in *New Türkiye* can be explained as the periphery's attempt to re-centring itself as the core (Hecker, Furman, Akyildiz, 2021, 8).

This idea of the periphery/core divide is also supported by White, who argues that the current polarisation was created by AKP to create their own version of nationalism (2013, 9). Similarly to Bora, White also explains AKP's version of nationalism as one that is shaped by Ottoman nostalgia, as one that is intentionally distant from the Western understanding of modernity carried by Atatürk (2013, 9). This intentional and stark difference in nationalism<sup>16</sup> creates an avenue to capture Gramsci's cultural hegemony as it depends on the negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups (Hecker, Furman & Akyildiz, 2021, 10). Seeing as though Türkiye has been divided into dominant and subordinate groups since its establishment, the current polarisation can also be seen as a stage of negotiation.

### *3.3 CHP's Nationalism Dialect, Western Modernism, Post post-secular politics, and Kemalism*

As the party that stands opposite to AKP in the religion/ secularism polarisation axis, CHP was established through various resistance groups created during the Turkish War of Independence. These various groups such as the Young Turks movement and the Association for the Defence of National Rights (Müdafaa-i Hukuk Cemiyeti) were united during the Sivas Congress in 1919 chaired by Mustafa Kemal, (Kiriş, 2012, 398). In 1923, the party known as CHP today was declared a political organisation and Türkiye was declared to be a Republic, appointing Atatürk as its first president. The previous presence of revolutionary parties and the influence of the Independence War were both felt within the ideology of CHP, especially during the "Single Party Period" where numerous reforms were implemented to create the Modern Turkish Republic.

Until 1950, CHP stayed as the single party of Türkiye, creating an authoritarian regime to accelerate the implementation of these reforms based on republicanism, secularism, nationalism and revolutionism (Ciddi, 2009). The initial union in 1919 was focused on the question "How can we save the land?" and even though the main question evolved into "How to create a state that is competitive to its Western counterparts?" after 1923, it still had the reminiscence of the initial question, its nature of urgency and significance (Kiriş, 2012, 398). During this time the Caliphate was abolished, and CHP's position as the single party was

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<sup>16</sup> Eroğan's nationalism, while being focused on nostalgia, Islamic values, and the Ummah, does not go against the Pan-Turkic nationalism of MHP which is exclusionary of Arab people. This is because of the Islamic paradigm that is created by the AKP rule, which is a common ground for all far-right parties to see eye to eye. This both further proves the cultural hegemony Erdoğan's nationalism dialect has achieved, but also shows the significance of the religious/secular polarisation axis.

actualised after the Martial Law was passed to ban the first opposition party, the Progressive Republican Party (PRP)<sup>17</sup>. In its short-lived political life, the Progressive Republican Party based its opposition on CHP's policies regarding religion, arguing that CHP has eroded the morality of the Turkish people. They have also extensively criticised the authoritative nature of politics CHP has maintained (Özoğlu, 2011, 85). After being found responsible for the Sheikh Said Revolt,<sup>18</sup> PRP was shut down with the power CHP allowed itself through Martial Law (Kara, 2017, 120). After the PRP was shut down, the sense of urgency and importance was felt even deeper as reforms were criticised for erasing the Ottoman legacy and Islam was implemented within three years<sup>19</sup> between 1925 and 1928.

In 1931 CHP's official "6 Arrow Program" defined Republicanism, Folkism, Nationalism, Laicism, Statism, and Reformism as the fundamental determinants of the party ideology, and their dialect of nationalism. Even though other declarations came before the 6 Arrows, they were mostly concerned with practical matters to establish the political systems in which Türkiye could be governed. On the other hand, 6 Arrows along with Nutuk was an ideological declaration of what Kemalism stood for (Ter-Matevosyan, 2019, 48). These reforms, the banning of PRP, and secularism being one of the backbones of the root language of Turkish nationalism are often cited as limits on religious rights, creating a sense of injustice among those that are nostalgic towards the Ottoman Empire. This polarisation between the secularists and Islamists manifested its significance when CHP lost the second democratic election Türkiye held in 1950. The party that took charge after CHP was the Democrat Party (DP), which mostly centred its election campaign on reinstating Islamic values back to Türkiye (Oxford Islamic Studies, 2011)<sup>20</sup>. With the election of DP into power, the first change in the hegemonic culture was seen, where the dominant CHP was replaced by what signified the subordinate group.

Since the defeat CHP faced in 1950, they have never been elected to the presidency. Even though this might imply that the cultural hegemony of far-right Political Islamism, and the nationalism it represents resonates with most people living in Türkiye, the results of the

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<sup>17</sup> Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası

<sup>18</sup> A revolt that was for Kurdish rights and for the reinstatement of Islamic law and the Caliphate. Under the leadership of Sheik Said, Diyarbakır was taken under siege resulting in a devastating catastrophe in the form of multiple battles that lasted for a month in 1925.

<sup>19</sup> These reforms included, and were not limited to the ban on Islamic Monestrarries, shift from the Arabic alphabet to Latin alphabet, the Hat law (banning of the fez) (Kara, 2017, 120-122).

<sup>20</sup> DP has amended social laws that were implemented by CHP. They have overturned laws prohibiting Arabic call to prayers, religious radio broadcasts, and Islamic instruction in schools. Their focus on religion is also attributed to their need to distract citizens from the economic crisis started during the 1950s (Oxford Islamic Studies, 2011).

2023 presidential elections told another story. CHP, losing with only a 4,36% difference<sup>21</sup> is the closest they have gotten to winning an election, indicating that more people asked for a change compared to previous years. This can be attributed to the changes CHP's nationalism dialect has gone through since the 1950s.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

After Türkiye transitioned to the presidential system in 2018, the new system's adoption of a majoritarian logic resulted in official coalitions being established before elections. Although these changes were designed to consolidate Erdogan's power and strengthen the executive branch, they also pushed opposition actors across the political spectrum to unite as a bloc (Balta, Elçi, & Sert, 2023, 5). While the new system increased the influence of smaller parties, it allowed parties representing specific social divisions to emerge (Balta, Elçi, & Sert 2023, 5). These parties have found a place for themselves within the opposition People's Coalition (Millet İttifakı), which has significantly increased the importance of issues such as immigration.

Although immigration has been a sensitive subject in Türkiye since 2011, the 2023 elections have functioned as a single-issue election centring immigration at its heart. As explored by Schmidt-Catran, discourse on high-risk moments such as elections can lead to further polarisation within the public (2022, 86). Schmidt-Catran also argues that right-wing conservative parties' populist talking points especially during high-risk moments such as elections can lead to anti-immigration attitudes in the public (2022, 86). Examples of politicians centring on immigration in their election campaigns have been seen in states such as the United States of America (USA), Finland, Denmark, and recently Türkiye, underlining the relevance of the 2023 elections. CHP using immigration as the basis of their opposition, along with the support shown to single-issue parties such as the Victory Party (Zafer Parti)<sup>22</sup> represents Schmidt-Catran's findings on polarisation and further shows the influential role immigration played.

The clear representation of polarisation around immigration during this election positions the 2023 general elections as an important case study. The obvious divide between the parties about immigration made it so that the citizens were tasked with placing themselves

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<sup>21</sup> Election results as reported by the Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Founded by Ümit Özağ in 2021, Victory Party rose to popularity during the 2023 elections as a far-right, ultra-nationalist that focused on the explosion of Syrian and Afghan refugees during the 2023 general elections.

in rigid anti or pro-immigration boxes. The party each group voted for served as a clear self-categorisation, and the election rallies and campaigns for each party served as the justification for each category. These justifications relying on opposing conceptualisations of Turkish culture, and the subsequent polarisation around each definition call for an analysis of the language used during the 2023 general elections.

Moreover, although Türkiye has been receiving Syrian refugees for over a decade, the last four being under an open-border policy, the polarisation peaked in 2023. The period that led up to the elections revealed how Türkiye has been treating refugees, where they are placed by the political elite, and the conflicting plans each block proposed for their future. Even though the dignity and safety of refugees should be the utmost priority, during these elections both have been challenged and overlooked within the narratives of all campaigns.

Therefore, to answer the research question posed by this research, critical content analysis will be used to assess the language used by Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan in the 2023 general elections. The content analysis will be done through a semi-structured coding frame. The coding frame is shaped through predetermined categories, but flexible indicators ensure a systematic approach and an iterative process. To further be mindful of the nuanced narrative surrounding this topic, paragraphs will be used as coding units.

### 3.2 Data & Sources

To answer the research question, content analysis of interviews conducted during the 2023 election campaigns will be done. These interviews and speeches, published online as part of news articles or video content, include the party leaders' perspectives on the candidates, immigration, and polarisation.

### 3.3 Coding Frame

As seen in Table 1, the following coding frame will be used to analyse the influence of one's understanding of their culture on their immigration attitudes. The coding frame focuses on religion as the main axis of polarisation, the fundamental determinant of Erdoğan's dialect of nationalism and cultural hegemony as introduced in the literature review. The following two categories are used to capture how immigration attitudes are represented in relation to respective definitions of culture, and their proximity to Islam: *perception of one's culture*, and *moral characterisation of migrants*.

The subcategories for the *perception of one's culture* are used to code definitions of Turkish culture and their relation to the dialect of nationalism they subscribe to. Through its

indicators, the first subcategory differentiates between definitions of culture associated with religious beliefs, values, traditions, and those that focus on secularism, Kemalism, the legal rights of marginalised communities, and border integrity. This subcategory is significant as it codes for the main axis of polarisation. The subcategory *Turkish culture in relation to collective memory* aims to further provide insight to the first subcategory and create more context by placing cultures to their respective dialect of nationalism. Since the dialects are categorised in relation to collective memory and specific historical moments according to Bora, this subcategory aims to understand how politicians represent understandings of people's own culture.

The subcategories for the second category aim to provide an explanation for how moralised messages lead to moralised views on immigration. Subcategory of *positive characterisation of migrants* provide a nuanced perspective into positive attitudes towards migrants. This subcategory creates space for the discourse mainly used by Erdoğan where positive messaging towards migrants is expressed due to their religious and ethnic background as Middle Easterners. Moreover, it also measures for those who support inclusive immigration policies and present a welcoming attitude towards the migrants regardless of their background. This subcategory is crucial as it avoids generalising assumptions regarding voter bases and recognises attitudes that value inclusivity and diversity as principles. Similarly to the second subcategory, the subcategories of *negative characterisation of migrants* provide a nuanced perspective into attitudes towards migrants, specifically concerning negative categorisations. While the subcategory codes for statements that are negative towards migrants due to their specific Muslim and Middle Eastern background, it also represents negative attitudes that are not related to the religious background of the migrants. The indicator identifies xenophobic narratives that accuse migrants of causing societal issues such as the poor economic state of Türkiye or levels of unemployment. This category creates an avenue to represent negative attitudes not motivated by Islamophobia and can apply to any immigrant in Türkiye.

Each subcategory will be coded either as a positive code if it is connected to religion or a negative code if there is a lack of connection to religion. Furthermore, the sources will be colour-coded to indicate which one of the candidates the quote belongs to. Through the coding process, how each party representative defines their culture, and where they stand in terms of their immigration attitudes will be made clear. Moreover, the systematic analysis of the sources will provide significant insight into the relationship between pro and anti-immigration attitudes and the definition of one's culture through different dialects of nationalism.

**Table 1: Coding Frame**

Category	Subcategory	Indicators	Description	Code
<b>Perception of one's culture</b>	Turkish culture in relation to religious values	Views on one's own culture with a focus on religious beliefs, values, traditions, and heritage	Indicates a perception of one's own culture as one that is based on the values of Islam.	CR+
		Views on one's own culture with a focus on secularism, Kemalism, and legal rights of marginalised communities along with an emphasis on border integrity.	Indicates a perception of one's own culture as one based on the values of secularism.	CR-
	Turkish culture in relation to collective memory	Views on one's own culture with a focus on Ottoman legacies, traditions and values, yearning for the “golden days” of the Empire	Associating the beginning of Turkish culture with the history of the Ottoman Empire.	O+
		Views on one's own culture with a focus on Independence war and Atatürk's efforts to establish Turkish Republic	Associating the beginning of Turkish culture with the establishment of the contemporary Turkish Republic & Independence War.	O-
<b>Moral characterisation of migrants</b>	Positive characterisation of the migrants	Support for inclusive immigration policies, advocacy for their rights and welcoming attitude towards immigrants based on their status as “religion brothers”	Indicates support for immigrants conditionally to their respective religious beliefs. This implies a welcoming attitude due to their responsibility to the Ummah.	PR+
		Support for inclusive immigration policies, advocacy for their rights and welcoming attitude towards immigrants based on their status regardless of the religion migrants subscribe to	Indicates support for immigrants unconditionally to their respective religious beliefs. This implies a welcoming attitude due to the values of diversity and inclusivity.	PR-
	Negative characterisation of the migrants	Negative stereotypes, and xenophobic rhetoric based on anti-immigration beliefs irrespective of the religious beliefs of the migrants.	Indicates the presence of negative perceptions towards immigrants, and scapegoating of immigrants for societal issues with no mention of their religious beliefs or background.	NR-
		Negative stereotypes, xenophobic or Islamophobic rhetoric, or anti-immigrant sentiments based on the religious beliefs or the Middle Eastern background of the migrants	Indicates the presence of negative perceptions towards immigrants, fear of cultural dilution, and scapegoating of immigrants for societal issues specifically because of their religion or background.	NR+

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations & Limitations

It should be noted that this research does not aim to imply a “correct” way of voting or pose value judgments about how individuals should conceptualise their own culture. The inherent goal is to identify how immigration attitudes change based on different understandings of the same culture. Through this research, the reasons behind anti-immigration rhetoric and polarisation surrounding this subject are hoped to be identified to create a more sustainable, intersectional, and inclusive approach to immigration. A concern for migrants’ integrity, safety, and dignity are values that are at the heart of this paper.

Furthermore, the historical, political, and cultural accounts of Turkish politics presented in this research are limited to the relevant happenings to the research question. While recognising that Türkiye does not employ a two-party system and that some parties might have different views than those of AKP and CHP present, the largest and most influential two parties are the main focus of this research. Moreover, the citizens who do not fit into the binary of CHP’ or AKP’s dialect are not included as the analysis is limited to opinions published in the content covered in the methodology.

It should also be recognised that Türkiye does not only receive migrants from Middle Eastern states and not all that seek refuge in Türkiye are Muslim. Türkiye receives migrants from diverse backgrounds, especially from Ukraine and Russia (Akgundogdu and Trissel 2023). However, a discourse that encapsulated the same level of polarisation and intensity has not been present for non-Muslim, European migrants which indicates the polarisation of religious and cultural values further. While understanding the attitude towards migrants with non-Muslim and non-Middle Eastern backgrounds is equally valuable for conceptualising the immigration attitudes in Türkiye, the focus of this research is limited to migrants from the Middle East.

#### 4. Analysis & Discussion

The analysis of the interviews and speeches given during the 2023 election campaigns illustrate each party's definition of Turkish culture and their approach to immigration.

Both Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan employ narratives that are expected from their dialect of nationalism, redefining what makes Turkish culture through those nationalistic talking points. Both politicians refer to cultural values within their dialects' definition to justify their attitudes towards immigration policies that oppose each other. Both Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan attempt to create a sense of unity within their voting base and beyond by utilising similar talking points regarding their contempt towards the European Union states. While Kılıçdaroğlu categorises European states as "imperial forces" to create the "*us versus them*" narrative, Erdoğan relies on religious differences, and the European states' so-called "moral deficiencies" to endorse the same narrative. Even though neither party supports the actions of the Western states, each party speculates a different reasoning behind the West's actions.

According to Erdoğan, Western states are "*them*", however, "*us*" stands for the Muslim and Middle Eastern people. This definition includes migrants unlike Kılıçdaroğlu's, which sees them as a threat. Moreover, Erdoğan speculates that the West is expressing their unwillingness to host refugees due to their Islamophobia. Kujawa, while explaining how Erdoğan utilises Islam as a political identity, finds that Erdoğan has recently created a narrative where he categorises Atatürk's war against imperial states during the Independence War as a war Muslim people had to fight against an attempted Crusade<sup>23</sup> (Kujawa, 10, 2023). This narrative of

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<sup>23</sup> "Our encounters with Crusades are not too far back into history, Gallipoli was a Crusade." (Türkiye Gazetesi, 2013).

Türkiye being under attack of a modern Crusade due to its status as a Muslim country<sup>24</sup> is seen during his election campaign speeches, where he asks the “West” if they are “preparing for another Crusade” (Habertürk TV. 2023). While his “us” relying on religious values is in line with the dialect Erdoğan embodies, this increasing inclusion of Atatürk and the Independence War era indicates an expansion beyond the dialect he is assigned.

In the same speech, he warns the West that he can “pay an unexpected visit in the middle of the night” drawing a parallel to Ottoman attack techniques. This comparison Erdoğan forms between himself and Ottoman Empire supports Kujawa’s analysis regarding Erdoğan’s attempts to create a political identity based on the culture and values of the Ottoman Empire by referring to the Ottoman heroes. This categorisation of the West as “Crusaders” adds to Erdoğan’s moralising messages that are based on religion. This rhetoric is seen when Erdoğan states that he will not “send back” the refugees as the opposition promises to. Erdoğan’s narrative emphasises that he is inherently different from CHP and the Western states that do not want to house the refugees. He states that his reasoning for wanting to house the migrants is because he knows “who an Ansar<sup>25</sup>” is, “who a Muhajir<sup>26</sup> is as a “prophetic method” (Haber Global, 2022). The comparison Erdoğan forms between the migrants and the Muhajirs, himself and Ansars along with his citation of the Prophet Muhammed are attempts to moralise immigration through belief systems. This approach also reflects Koyuncu’s analysis that Erdoğan uses Islam as a political identity that informs his national and foreign policies. Furthermore, Erdoğan’s employment of collective memory that predates the Ottoman Empire shows that Islam is not only employed as a political identity and a culturally significant moralising tool but also as another historical period that is seen as a predecessor of the modern Turkish Republic.

The analysis of Erdoğan’s narrative also builds on Bora’s finding that all political parties attach their identity to a certain historical moment by involving historical happenings that transcend the borders of the Ottoman Empire and Türkiye. This further reflects the importance of the culture each politician associates themselves with, as Erdoğan’s association informs his political identity and decision-making in immigration policy more than the concept of the nation-state or the legacy left by the founder of the Turkish Republic.

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<sup>24</sup> Türkiye’s categorisation as a “Muslim” country is contested by some as the Turkish Constitution defines Türkiye as a secular state. While no one contests the wording of the constitution, certain citizens argue that most Turkish citizens are Muslim, which makes Türkiye a Muslim state. This argument has also been contested.

<sup>25</sup> Ansars were the indigenous people of Medina who housed Prophet Muhammed and his supporters during the Hijra as Muhammed and his supporters immigrated from Mecca.

<sup>26</sup> Muhajirs were the people that immigrated with Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Medina.

Factors other than establishing a distinct political identity and foreign policy that motivate Erdoğan in his pro-immigration attitudes also become clear through content analysis. As illuminated previously, Türkiye received migrants from the Middle East for many years before the open-border policy was accepted in 2020. The alarming conditions in which the asylum seekers find themselves have been a topic of conversation, especially among human rights activists. Amnesty International reported that the refugee camps in Türkiye fail to offer necessary resources such as nutrition, hot water and adequate medical attention to its residents (2017). Furthermore, Human Rights Watch revealed that Türkiye has been engaging in human rights violations and war crimes in the “safe zones” created in Tel Abyad. Human Rights Watch claimed that Türkiye forcefully, and unlawfully deported numerous refugees and oversaw their abuse within the camps (2024). These conditions and actions that violate international humanitarian law seem incompatible with the welcoming and hospitable narrative Erdoğan employs. Especially since asylum seekers who successfully enter Türkiye under a protective ID or through being granted citizenship still fail to receive equal opportunities. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that most Syrian refugees are working informally and under poor conditions (2024). ILO also found that refugees were expected to work overtime with pay that was below minimum wage with no medical or occupational safety (2024).

AKP officials’ narrative does not attempt to conceal the refugees’ poor working conditions or their categorisation as “cheap labour” within Türkiye. Prof. Dr. Yasin Aktay, the previous AKP Deputy Chairman and 25th and 26th parliamentarian for Siirt, claimed that “if Syrians were to leave, the Turkish economy would collapse.”<sup>27</sup> (Duran, 2021). Soon after, AKP Deputy Chairman Mehmet Özhaseki said “Now, in some cities, they (refugees) hold up the industry. Look at the Gaziantep labour market, hundreds of thousands of people are working in the most labour-intensive jobs.”<sup>28</sup> (Duran, 2021). While this narrative emphasises the importance refugees hold in the financial fabric of Türkiye, it also categorises them as informal labourers and diminishes their value as human beings. AKP officials’ narrative attempts to justify the immigration policies of the AKP government through a focus on the labour market’s dependence on the informal labour of Syrian refugees. This emphasis on the economy comes at a time when Türkiye is in an economic crisis which further essentialises the immigration policies. This concern for the economy can also be seen as an alternative explanation as to why

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<sup>27</sup> "Çok önemli bazı yerlerden Suriyelileri bir çekin, Suriyeliler bir gitsin ülke ekonomisi çöker"

<sup>28</sup> "Şimdi bazı şehirlerde sanayiye onlar ayakta tutuyorlar. Gaziantep sanayisine gidin yüz binlerce insan en ağır ve en zor işlerde çalışıyorlar. Kayseri sanayisinde de öyle. İşçi bulamıyorlar, bu adamlar çalışıyor"

Erdoğan as a right-wing politician is pro-immigration. However, Erdoğan’s narrative regarding his immigration policies lack mentions of the economic state of Türkiye and relies on cultural and nationalistic rhetoric instead. This focus on culture and religion, especially at a time in which finances carry such urgency, only emphasises how important cultural and religious values are in Turkish politics.

Kılıçdaroğlu also brings attention to the dire situations in which asylum seekers live in Türkiye: “They (migrants) work for half of the minimum wage. A business owner from Gaziantep told me that he is very happy with the Syrians, that he makes them work eighteen hours instead of eight. He (the business owner) said that he does not even need to pay taxes for the Syrian workers, he said that they are cheaper than robots.”<sup>29</sup> (BaBala Tv, 2023). Kılıçdaroğlu also stresses that in his opinion the asylum seekers themselves are not happy in Türkiye either and expresses that the “refugee crisis” is not the asylum seekers’ fault. Kılıçdaroğlu argues that the AKP regime is responsible for the crisis, and the unequal opportunities migrants receive in Türkiye (Independent Türkçe, 2022b). While this rhetoric could be seen as Kılıçdaroğlu blaming the system that creates unhealthy standards of living for the asylum seekers instead of negatively characterising migrants as the problem, his rhetoric extends beyond this sentiment. Kılıçdaroğlu states that while he sympathises with the problems asylum seekers face, he needs to put Türkiye first as he cannot accept Türkiye’s demography to change.

This idea of protecting the demography of Türkiye appears as a trend in Kılıçdaroğlu’s election campaign speeches and interviews. Kılıçdaroğlu defines freedom, and the borders of Türkiye as a concept that is dependent on a predominantly Turkish demographic. In his words: “we want to live freely in our country, we don't want our demographic structure to change.”<sup>30</sup>. This concern for the demography is seen in Kılıçdaroğlu’s criticism of the 2016 Joint Statement & Action plan as he asks, “How can someone sell out their own country in exchange for three billion Euros?”. Comparing hosting refugees to selling out the country and categorising the refugees as a threat, explains Kılıçdaroğlu’s concern for Türkiye’s ownership belonging to Turkish citizens. It also illuminates how he visualises Türkiye as a state, as he does not refer to a physical border or an actual agreement to sell out Türkiye, since hosting refugees does not threaten the states’ border or land security. However, this fear of losing the sovereignty of

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<sup>29</sup> Buraya gelen insanlar Asgari ücretin yarısıyla çalışıyorlar Gaziantep'te bir iş insanı şunu söyledi vallahi sizin Macalardan çok memnunuz, Suriyelilerden memnunuz 8 saat değil 18 saat çalıştırıyoruz Asgari ücretin yarısını veriyoruz. Ne vergi var, ne sigorta var. Robottan bile daha ucuz!” (BaBala TV, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> “Biz kendi ülkemizde özgürce yaşamak istiyoruz. Kendi ülkemizin demografik yapısının değişmesini istemiyoruz.” (Euronews, 2023).

Türkiye to imperial states by “selling out” land or rights is parallel to the dialects of Kemalist nationalism. Kılıçdaroğlu argues that “The national borders of Türkiye are a matter of honour because they determine the lines of (our) sovereignty” (Euronews, 2023).<sup>31</sup> Within this rhetoric, the narrative of protecting the border integrity above all else is felt just as it is seen in the root language of Kemalism where border integrity was heavily emphasised right after the Turkish War of Independence. In the same sentence, the modern dialect of CHP is also felt as the migrants are categorised as a threat to Türkiye’s borders, its citizens’ honour, and Türkiye’s sovereignty. While being in line with the dialect he is associated with, Kılıçdaroğlu’s definition relies more on the background of Turkish residents.

Similarly to Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu also uses a “*us*” versus “*them*” narrative. Moreover, both politicians use the affect created by the collective memory of the Independence War. However, where differences emerge between Erdoğan’s and Kılıçdaroğlu’s rhetoric is Erdoğan’s reliance on religion and Kılıçdaroğlu’s dependence on the idea of independence from an oppressive government that “sells out” its own country, and imperial forces that collaborate with said government. This rhetoric is especially visible in Kılıçdaroğlu’s criticisms of the the 2016 Joint Statement & Action Plan by stating that this deal was a way of turning Türkiye into the “refugee prison of imperial forces<sup>32</sup>”. This narrative of *us* versus *them*, where “*us*” stands for a political agent of change, and *they* are *imperial forces* and a corrupt government, is reminiscent of the happenings that led to the Independence War. This sentiment and connection to independence and border security shows a strong compliance with the root language.

Kılıçdaroğlu embodies all the dialects CHP represents as an entity in his narrative quite strongly, other than his approach to religion. Although Kılıçdaroğlu refraining from commenting negatively on any religious values is in line with the Kemalist root language of his nationalism, his lack of emphasis on the importance of religion’s separation from politics, lies outside of the scope of Kemalist dialects. Kılıçdaroğlu’s lack of criticism for the asylum seekers or the government on the grounds of religion or anti-secularist behaviour is also seen in his speeches regarding Turkish values and culture. In multiple instances Kılıçdaroğlu mentions that Islam must be the moral guidance that Türkiye follows<sup>33</sup>. Kılıçdaroğlu’s increasing proximity to Islam has also been noticed by the public where both sides of the

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<sup>31</sup> “Hududun namus olmasının temel gerekçesi, hudut egemenlik sınırlarımızın belirlendiği alandır” (Euronews, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Ben ne mültecilerin sömürülmesine ne de güzel ülkemizin emperyalistlerin mülteci hapisanesine dönüştürülmesine razıyım (CHP, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> ““Islam wants us to establish and maintain justice” (Birgün Gazetesi 2022).

political spectrum have expressed surprise towards Kılıçdaroğlu hosting Iftar dinners during Ramadan (Çakır, 2023). Kılıçdaroğlu has been more and more open about his identity as a Muslim and an Alevi person. While his Alevi identity has brought upon its fair share of conversation due to the differences in sects within Türkiye, it also diminished the criticism of him not adhering to Islamic values. This criticism of Kılıçdaroğlu's lack of faith was seen in the language Erdoğan used against him, claiming that he cannot be a moral politician<sup>34</sup>.

Staying loyal to his proximity to religious values, Kılıçdaroğlu does not employ negative talking points regarding the Syrian and Afghan refugees' belief systems. However, Kılıçdaroğlu mentions that specifically Syrian and Afghan refugees are a threat to the Turkish demographic texture, implying that Turkish citizens and migrants with Middle Eastern backgrounds are inherently different (Euronews, 2023). Kılıçdaroğlu implies that Western states refuse to offer refuge to migrants also because of their cultural differences. This reasoning provides a narrative that is representative of the root language since it suggests that Türkiye and its European neighbours share similar cultures that are incompatible with those that are coming from Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds.

Another instance in which Kılıçdaroğlu expands beyond the dialect attributed to him within the literature is his convergence with the ethno-racist dialect mostly represented under MHP's roof. While MHP's ethno-racism is directed towards Kurdish people, we see Kılıçdaroğlu utilising it against Middle Eastern refugees. Kılıçdaroğlu openly explains that He "does not have a problem with Turkic migrants" that he has a "problem with the Syrians<sup>35</sup>" (BaBala TV, 2023). Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that Bora's characterisation of dialects is relevant in the narrative of the then opposition leader, and it becomes possible to expand on Bora's valuable visualisation by analysing immigration attitudes.

The analysis of the speeches and interviews given by Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan illuminates interesting trends within their representation of Turkish culture, their dialects of nationalism and its influence on their immigration attitudes. While both Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan represent elements of their own dialects, they have also moved beyond the borders of these narratives. This expansion poses a valuable contribution to the literature as the current literature's extensive coverage mostly relies on the trends that took place in the last twenty

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<sup>34</sup> "Şimdi bay bay Kemal, yanındakilerle beraber emri nereden alıyor? Kandil'deki teröristlerden alıyor. Biz de emri Allah'tan alıyoruz. 14 Mayıs'ta emri dağdan alanları mezara gömmeye var mıyız? Dini, bayrağı, ezanı olmayanlar Bay Kemal'i destekliyor." (Şuekinçi 2023).

<sup>35</sup> "Sizinle ilgili bir sorun yok sığınmacılarla ilgili bizim Suriye'den gelen ve Suriye'den gelen sığınmacılarla ilgili sorunumuz var sizin Afganistan'da gelen Türkmenler diğer Türkmenlerle herhangi bir sorunumuz yok." (BaBala Tv, 2023).

years within these parties and their leaders. While both politicians have been consistent with the dialects of nationalism they were associated with during this time, the two years in which the politicians campaigned for the 2023 Presidential Elections led to them becoming more accepting of the values they have criticised previously. Erdoğan expressing appreciation for the sacrifices made by Atatürk and the Turkish public, and Kılıçdaroğlu representing himself as a Muslim, resulted in both employing a more unifying language. While this choice to shift their rhetoric allowed them to avoid being criticised for being against Turkish values depending on the definition held by either voter base, it has not created meaningful tolerance in their attitude towards immigration policies. Both politicians have adopted this newfound tolerance to justify their immigration attitudes. This led to anti-immigration rhetoric to reach masses, and pro-immigration rhetoric to be used as an election tool while asylum seekers are hosted under conditions that are against human rights.

## **6. Conclusions and Outlook**

This research aimed to understand the reason behind Türkiye's outlier status regarding its immigration attitudes since those who identify themselves as progressive express anti-immigration opinions whereas those who identify as conservative hold pro-immigration attitudes. Through exploring different types of nationalisms and political identities, it has been found that Türkiye's specific case as a post-Empire resulted in different definitions of the same culture to surface, informing the political elite's rhetoric regarding immigration. The content analysis that was conducted on the campaign Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu constructed during the 2023 general elections made it apparent that this divergence in the definition of Turkish culture resulted in citizens having loyalties to either cultural values born from religious beliefs or related to Atatürk's legacy. This loyalty in turn influences their immigration attitudes, a subject that was defining for the 2023 presidential election.

Türkiye's position as a post-Empire makes the nationalisms within its borders diverse and often divergent to one another. This diversity is represented as conflicting nationalisms existing in the larger parties in Türkiye. Through the analysis conducted in this thesis, meaningful amendments to the literature have been made. While the current literature poses an extensive and valuable explanation for the cultural and political identification that took place within Türkiye since its establishment, this thesis finds that this identification has evolved significantly during the 2023 Presidential Election cycle.

During these twenty years, Erdoğan has created a political identity for himself that faces the East as opposed to the West. To justify this perseverance, Erdoğan has relied on rhetoric

that sheds a positive light to the collective memory of the Ottoman Empire and its heroes. Erdoğan, parallel to this memory, has presented himself as the protector of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, and its previous role as the leader of the Muslim world. This categorisation resulted in him being highly critical towards the history of the Independence War and the process that established the modern Turkish Republic. This part of the history, according to Erdoğan, was when the Caliphate was dissolved, and anti-religion policies were adopted. However, in his recent rhetoric, Erdoğan creates a narrative that is inclusive of this part of Turkish history in which Atatürk fought to establish Türkiye by dissolving the Empire. However, this inclusion does not extend to Erdoğan celebrating these decisions, it simply acknowledges that the Independence War and the Çanakkale Battle<sup>36</sup> were important turning points in which the Turkish public showed great bravery in the face of grave difficulties. Moreover, the period of time also serves to strengthen Erdoğan's anti-European Union narratives by establishing a trend in which the "West" has been attacking Türkiye since its conception due to its status as a Muslim country. Therefore, while not opposing the past political identity Erdoğan has created for himself, his rhetoric has evolved to be more inclusive while also serving his prioritisation of religion and Ottoman legacies.

The same pattern of becoming more inclusive of the values they criticised before is seen in Kılıçdaroğlu's rhetoric that positions him as a devout Muslim. Even though Kılıçdaroğlu, being faithful to the root language, has never spoken poorly of Islam, has been adamant about separating religion from politics. However, the echoes of Kılıçdaroğlu's advocacy for secularism have been missing in his election campaign, which positions him outside of the Kemalist dialects, and his own political identity he represented since the beginning of his political career. Moreover, Kılıçdaroğlu's rhetoric towards immigration has expanded beyond his previous dialect that represented inclusion for all disadvantaged groups, entering into MHP's ethno-racist dialect. This shift resulted in Kılıçdaroğlu valuing "Turkishness" and sustaining "Turkish demography" more than the rights of disadvantaged groups.

While both politicians have been expanding beyond the previous borders of their respective definitions of what Türkiye, Turkish nationalism and Turkish culture is, their immigration attitudes have been quite stagnant. Erdoğan has persisted that Türkiye as a Muslim country has to accept migrants due the examples Prophet Muhammed has posed which created

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<sup>36</sup> Çanakkale Battle was a campaign that took place during WWI that resulted in Ottoman Empire's victory under the guidance of Atatürk and his other commander colleagues. At the time, Ottoman Empire was falling apart, and it lacked the resources to fight with the Western opposition. Therefore, this Battle is remembered with pride for most Turkish people since it is seen as a symbol of great sacrifice, determination, and subsequent victory.

a moral obligation to be an Ansar. Similarly, Kılıçdaroğlu also moralised immigration, which makes his position as concrete as Erdoğan's. However, instead of religion, Kılıçdaroğlu refers to the affective reaction collective memory of the Independence War creates. Kılıçdaroğlu, while claiming to be sympathetic to the problems migrants have faced, reiterates that he has to put Türkiye first to not only protect its border integrity, but also its demographic texture. Kılıçdaroğlu, while not employing anti-religion rhetoric, implies that Middle Eastern migrants are incompatible with the Turkish public. This anti-immigration narrative being employed during an election cycle as a polarising tool does only result in discriminatory language to reach the masses, but it also politicises an issue about human rights. Moreover, the dialogue both parties sustained during their election campaigns created a focus on the morality of supporting immigration, and aided accountability to be diverted in regard to the inhumane conditions in which asylum seekers live under. Both parties' reliance on Turkish culture to justify their attitudes, also showcases the importance of ones' understanding of their own culture within the politics of Türkiye.

Currently, forming identities around different definitions of culture is an ongoing practice within the Turkish political sphere. Erdoğan's specific construction of the Turkish political memory continues after the elections and adds to Erdoğan's conceptualisation of not only Turkish culture but also Turkish people: "If you look at history books, you will see that Turk equals Muslim" (Duvar, 2024). Erdoğan's current rhetoric sustains that Islam is not only the backbone of Turkish identity and culture but also as a guiding factor and a source of moral foreign policy. Erdogan expresses that we need "Qurans' guidance more than ever" to disrupt the cycle of exploitation and oppression perpetuated by Western states in relation to their lack of involvement in Türkiye's role as a host for asylum seekers (AK Parti, 2024). Therefore, Erdoğan's narrative continues to complement Simonsen's findings about the moralisation of immigration.

Even though both parties have claimed to want what is best for the asylum seekers who reach the doors of Türkiye after facing inconceivable hardship, the challenges they face within the borders of Türkiye and in the safe zones protected by Türkiye have not been addressed. While it is important that constructive dialogues take place in order to create safe immigration policies, the most important aspect of immigration has been left out of the conversation: the dignity, rights and livelihood of the refugees.

The conclusions from this thesis also create an avenue for further research. A study can be done to include non-Middle Eastern, non-Muslim migrants to compose a comparative account of different immigration attitudes in Türkiye. Moreover, further research can be

conducted to understand the overwhelming nationwide victory CHP achieved at the 2024 local elections, less than a year after losing in the general elections. Creating a deeper understanding of the influence of immigration attitudes, or lack thereof in local elections, and the situations that created different outcomes can provide insight into the level of influence immigration attitudes hold in various types of elections. Moreover, further focus on a recent election in which the AKP government has failed to claim victory can be helpful to assess where the negation between dominant and subordinate groups are heading.

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