

Article

Turks versus the West: Civilizational Populism in Turkey's Ruling Coalition

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Abstract: Civilizational populism is readily observable in Turkish politics. This study analyzes how the ruling political parties in Turkey (Islamist JDP and ultra-nationalist NAP) reframe extant civilizational ideas into a populist format to reproduce civilizational populism for ideological and pragmatic reasons. The research implements a two-level analysis of civilizational populism. On the first level, the article reveals the intellectual origins of the ideas on civilizations. On the second level, it analyses how these ideas are used by political actors in constructing populist civilizational discourse in daily politics. This methodological approach to civilizational populism shows that politicians use old ideas that are well-known by their supporters while framing them as their populist narrative. Thus, civilizational populism occurs in Turkey as a continuity. This study finds out that (i) Civilizational populism is a salient phenomenon proving how Islam and nationalism are socially and politically coded as friendly categories in Turkey; (ii) Political actors are the agents of populism but not the inventors of the many ideas they instrumentalize; (iii) Civilizational populism in Turkey is constructed on an anti-Western narrative which is essentialist and culturalist. Consequently, the article reveals that the culturist and essentialist critique levelled by other civilizations at Western political actors can be levelled similarly at the Muslim political elite.

Keywords: civilizationism; civilizational populism; turkish politics; Mehmet Akif Ersoy; Necip Fazıl Kısakürek; turkish Islamic synthesis



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1. Introduction

What might now serve as the classical definition of “populism” is offered by [Mudde and Kaltwasser \(2017, p. 6\)](#):

... a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”.

The crux of this definition is the view that human society divides into two opposite camps that exist in radical opposition. The distinguishing feature of civilizational populism is its globe-level separation line that paints itself, independently of domestic politics, onto the civilizational level, where the antagonistic sides are “our” civilization and “other” civilizations. This civilizational populism nevertheless operates across the domestic and the global boundary, both of which are imagined to be the *loci* of the complex cultural differences between “us/our” and “the other”.

Civilizational populism is readily observable in the politics of Turkey. The Islamist and the nationalist political parties are the agents of civilizationism in this country. However, these two political groups’ civilizationism predates their populist narrative. This, therefore, requires a two-level analysis of civilizational populism. On the first level, we find the intellectual origins of the ideas on civilizations; on the second level, we see how these ideas

are used today by political actors as they construct their populist civilizational narrative. The heart of this two-level analysis is in its power to show that politicians use old ideas that are well-known in their constituencies, but they frame them as their populist narrative. Civilizational populism, therefore, occurs as a continuity. Combining civilizationism with populism has two profound impacts in Turkey. In the first place, it has perpetuated an ontological/ideological dichotomy invented by the two essentialist authors, i.e., Ersoy and Kısakürek. Secondly, it has served to radicalizes the masses against the “other” by deepening the anti-Western feelings in the county. A recent survey shows that 67.9% of Turks believe that the European countries want to divide and disintegrate Turkey in the present just like they did to the Ottoman Empire in the past. Furthermore, 70.1% believe that the European countries have helped strengthen separationist organizations such as PKK in Turkey (GMF 2021).

On this line of reasoning, we shall first analyze the intellectual origins of populist civilizational thought in Turkey. To achieve this goal, we shall outline the germane writings of Mehmet Akif Ersoy and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. These two names are chosen because their thoughts on civilizations are formative on all spectrums of the Turkish right.

Next, we shall observe the Islamist JDP (The Justice and Development Party) and the ultra-nationalist NAP (The Nationalist Action Party) to illustrate how political actors engage in civilizational populism. We study these two parties together because they have formed a block as a result of the Turkish-type presidential system promulgated in 2017. As no party is able to secure the required number of votes to form a parliamentary majority, nor yet the 50-plus percent of votes to win a presidential election, this constitutional amendment laid the ground for an atypical political configuration of political parties with blocks of groups in quest of power. While the JDP and the NAP constitute the ruling block, the Republican People’s Party (RPP, the secular-Kemalist party) and the Good Party (GP, a center-right opposition party) represent the main opposition block. The Peoples’ Democratic Party (the pro-Kurdish and minority left-wing party) leads the third block composed of other small left-wing parties.

The goal of this study is to analyze the ruling political parties (the JDP and the NAP) to illustrate how civilizational populism operates with a two-level procedure where political actors reframe extant civilizational ideas into a populist format.

2. Why Are Politicians Interested in “Civilization” in Daily Politics?

We argue that a political party engages with civilization for two purposes: one is pragmatic, the other ideological. On the pragmatic track, politicians believe that it is in their interest to frame the subjects of their addresses to the public with reference to civilization. This may happen in different ways. For example, they frame various issues in a civilizational discourse because they expect that this will help persuade their followers, or they may appeal to civilizational populism expecting that it might help them escape political responsibility by creating an external enemy, a rival civilization. To illustrate this through various recent cases: President Recep T. Erdoğan, overwhelmed by a growing currency crisis, frequently blames Western foreign powers (*Gazete Birlik* 2016) for this crisis. As we heard in a recent speech of a Good Party deputy, Erdoğan’s rivals are accusing him of being a puppet of Western powers who serves the Greater Middle East project (*CNN Turk* 2017). Though Erdoğan and his rivals use a civilizational narrative for completely different purposes, their discourses are structurally similar, for they both posit a homogenous West that plots against Turkey.

Viewed from this perspective, the engagement of civilizational populism for political persuasion is simply another version of framing. Political actors do it to be persuasive. Once analyzed from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, civilizational populism is performative, and, thus, functional in the context of political argumentation and persuasion (Edwards 2004, p. 265; Fairclough 2013). Political actors simply use civilization like they do in other instances of framing, such as referencing wider cultural and social structures (Fairclough 1995, p. 132). In this way, civilizational discourse serves political pragmatism.

Tannen's "speaker's expectation" (Tannen 1993, p. 22), a variant of critical discourse analysis, is useful for understanding why Islamist and nationalist politicians appeal to civilizational concepts in framing their political discourses. Accordingly, actors frame their discourses in keeping with their experiences in the target setting of shared emotions and knowledge. They do this because they expect that the audience will then quickly understand what they mean (Ensink and Sauer 2003, p. 5). This enables framing to pass as a rational process, despite its being embedded with cultural, even religious, structures:

People routinely "calculate" which knowledge they have and which knowledge their partners have, so as to establish which knowledge is shared. Interaction thus relies on cognitive factors since it presupposes knowledge. (Ensink and Sauer 2003, p. 1)

This is, as Gordon explains, the construction of one-to-one alignments with discursive frames, as well as the alignments among themselves and what they say (Gordon 2015, p. 325). In practice, this is a linguistic strategy (Tannen 1994, p. 23). However, it is effective, since, as Ensink and Sauer (2003, p. 5) underline, framing operates through knowledge frames, shared symbols, patterns, meanings, and ideas familiar to the speaker and the audience. Similarly, political actors pragmatically advance an interpretation in which a civilizational discourse operates as the central motif, expecting that such an interpretation will help them persuade people. Political actors know that the ideas they reference about civilization presuppose the dialogue with their constituencies. They, knowing that the public is already informed (or educated) about various civilizational ideas and concepts, frame their political discourse through them.

This predictably transforms political discourse into a two-layered structure, one of which relies on a civilizational argumentation. Populist political actors can, thus, easily explain any issue, be it an economic or a foreign policy crisis, with a civilizational argumentation. This is what Tannen describes as a framing in an overlapping and intertwining process (Tannen 1994, pp. 22–23). As a result, any event comes over as having two levels of explanation: the political/domestic, and the civilizational/international.

When it comes to the ideological track, politicians utilize civilizational discourse to affect and transform the society as part of their ideological agenda. This is more meaningful in the case of Islamist and nationalist parties, as they are naturally ideology-driven parties that seek the transformation of society. Thus, at this level, civilizational populism is more an ideological commitment than a pragmatic tactic. A typical example of this is the nationalist and Islamist parties' civilizational discourse to consolidate anti-EU sentiment. Civilizational populism is used in such contexts as the ideological-agenda part of an identity-building strategy, as Brubaker (2017) notes. This point is additionally critical. Brubaker observed, in various European contexts such as in Germany and the Netherlands, how civilizational populism is different from nationalism. As the self-other dichotomy is framed in terms of civilizations, civilizational populism, paradoxically, goes beyond the various dichotomies generated by nationalism. It is, thus, that in civilizational populism we are no longer within the realm of national discourse. Instead, we are in a discourse in which the terms of reference are abstracted from cultures and civilizations (Brubaker 2017).

For example: a nationalist may take an anti-European stance, having aligned his nation with the underdeveloped non-European nations, or an Islamist political populist may seek the support of secular voters for his/her anti-EU policies. Therefore, civilizational populism can reference different (sometimes even contradictory) elements like religion, national identity, homeland, secularism, and culture. What makes such a flexible (and sometimes contradictory) approach possible is, simply, the semantics of the "self-other" dichotomy of civilizational populism that reaches beyond the domestic boundaries. The self-other boundary at a civilizational level enables politicians to easily gather different domestic elements into the cluster of "self."

Seen in this way, civilizational populism is a radical form of populism where political actors' concern for consistency is loosened. Political actors enjoy more autonomy when they blame the civilizational "other" in essentialist and culturist labels (Bradley 2018; Grillo

2003). A political actor secures more social legitimacy when labelling the *civilizational* other as “wicked.” To borrow from [Hauk and Mueller \(2015, p. 368\)](#): Civilizational populism supplies one culture by interpreting other cultures or civilizations critically. It is easy to criticize other civilizations in moral and cultural terms. In this way, civilizational populism is inherently the cognitive bias that enables the creation of social categories ([Mahalingam 2003, p. 735](#)). It typically operates with three tenets: (i) Global politics is formed by homogenous civilizations; (ii) “Our” civilization should be protected from others; and (iii) The normal state among civilizations is hostility. All three of these tenets are predicated on the premise that the mixing of civilizations is naturally evil.

Last but not least, a critical point is how civilizational populism introduces a different causal perspective into domestic politics by simply blurring the boundary between the domestic and the international. Populists want people to imagine the civilizational-level dynamics as the real (or macro) causes of daily politics. Thus, civilizational populism always incubates a populist jargon on international relations. This is usually done by proposing an ideational (non-material) causal chain where culture, identity, and values are imagined as the reasons behind international politics. Any event, such as migration or a regional conflict, is reframed as various forms of civilizational conflict. However, we should not forget that there is already an established scholarly perspective that sees civilizations as the proper units on which to analyze global politics ([Bettiza 2014](#)).

As the most famous case, Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilization?” has become a major paradigm in academic and public circles for analyzing global politics ([Huntington 1993](#); [Haynes 2019](#)). Huntington’s civilizational perspective has attracted the attention even of the average citizen. Equally interesting is that other authors, such as Toynbee and Spengler, approached global history through the lens of civilization. They were global public figures even before Huntington.

As these examples illustrate, civilizational narrative has a natural potential to become popular, for it simplifies complex dynamics as one cluster of civilization, and that becomes easy to grasp, and appeals to the public ([Hu 2022](#)). Thus, students of civilizational populism should recognize that any civilizational narrative has a natural potential to attract the average citizen’s interest. Though the reasons of for this interest are beyond the scope of this work, [Lawson’s \(2006, p. 398\)](#) analysis of why historical sociology has received relatively little attention from scholars of the international relations community might provide some clues.

According to Lawson, the general methodology of international relations scholars reflects “a retreat to theoretical bunkers in order to defend a particular set of precepts, concepts, and methods; and renewed attention to micro-narratives that provide ample details about the richness of thick historical experience. However, this approach provides little insight into the broader patterns, trends, and trajectories that make up contemporary world politics” ([Lawson 2006, pp. 398–99](#)). In other words, modern scholarship is more interested in “micro-foundations” ([Lawson 2006, pp. 398–99](#)). Unlike this approach, civilizational narratives operate mainly through the macro-foundations that are the patterns and trends of global history. Doing this, civilizational narratives connect with the larger public easily, as these narratives are formed with the emotions, culture, identity, and religion that average people understand easily, and value.

3. The Origins of the Civilizational Narrative in Turkey

The civilizational narrative of the Turkish right relies predominantly on the binary of Turkish culture and the Western civilization. This is exclusively an anti-Western narrative. No other civilization (for example Chinese or Indian) has a comparable, or any, space in the lexicon of Turkish civilizational discourse. This might be a result of two historical factors: Firstly, losing the Ottoman empire at the beginning of the 20th century created an “eternal” trauma, especially for the conservative and religious segments of the society. That period is framed mostly as the result of the Western states’ plot. This political upheaval has

perpetuated the anti-Western discourse and hostile feelings that shape the civilizational narrative of modern Turkey (Arisan 2016; Uzer 2020).

Secondly, Turkish modernization, which had its origins in the 18th century, created a complex legacy for Turks. Modernization, which is sometimes called Westernization, has become a major—though enigmatic—pillar of the modern Turkish identity. All major political groups define themselves in terms of the West, either as pro-Western or anti-Western. It is this that can be said to have created what might be dubbed “an enigmatic understanding of the West among Turks,” even among those who are committedly antagonistic to the West, such as the Islamists and nationalists. The enigmatic character of this understanding is in that they mostly value the recognition of themselves as equal to the West. They recognize also that the Western civilization is the civilization with which they should compete. Therefore, the idea of the West among the Turkish Islamists and nationalists is never simple; it is a complex of incorporating and contradicting dynamics (Kadıoğlu 1996).

Civilization is a *longue-durée* phenomenon (Yurdusev 2003, p. 74). Populist politicians are, therefore, not the inventors of the established opinions on civilization. As explained in the theory section above, it is better to imagine them as the utilizers of already-existing opinions on civilization that are known by people. These opinions are semi-anonymous, produced and transmitted by historical experiences and social memory, as well as by the agents of the literary, such as poets and novelists. This requires, first, a study of the intellectual origins and lexicon of civilizational opinions that affect right-wing parties in Turkey.

To achieve this, we study Mehmet Akif Ersoy and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, as they have played the major roles in the formation of the Islamist and nationalist civilizational narrative in Turkey. As influential poets and authors, Ersoy and Kısakürek played the key roles in the transmission, as well as the reframing, of civilizational thought. Reminiscent of the premises of Emerson’s theory of the poet (Blasing 1985, pp. 9–11), the works of Ersoy and Kısakürek are the critical literary means through which the large conservative and nationalist people are engaged with the civilizational narrative. Their works constitute a major part of the basic texts that inspire political and intellectual socialization among Turkish Islamists and nationalists.

Islamism and nationalism are different but friendly political trajectories in Turkey, which is also a critical point in understanding how the Islamist JDP and the ultra-nationalist NAP formed a block to rule the country. There is no strong and established religious paradigm in Turkey that problematizes the contradictions of nationalism and religion. Islam in Turkey is mostly coded in the political realm, usually with a right-wing conservative interpretation. Islam and Turkishness are, therefore, imagined as intertwined categories (Bacik 2011, p. 141). The outcome of this somewhat strange dialogue is the rise of various peculiar ideological elements that inspire both Islamists and nationalists. This is an intellectual domain where Ersoy and Kısakürek can be found.

Indeed, Islamists and nationalists have also their distinct ideologues and authors who are read only by their followers. For example, Nihal Atsız, a racist pro-Nazi author (Uzer 2002, p. 119) who has inspired Turkish nationalists, is rarely read by Islamists. Similarly, Esad Coşan, a late leader of Naqshbandiyya (a religious order) and popular among Islamists (Bacik 2019, pp. 137–39), is rarely read by nationalists. However, the dialogue that we have outlined above between Islam and nationalism has generated an intersection field, which is dubbed “the Turkish-Islamic synthesis,” makes of several ideologues and authors shared references for both camps.

The Turkish-Islamic synthesis, a major paradigm in contemporary Turkish politics, asserts that Turkish culture is a mixture of (pre-Islamic) Turkish values and Islamic beliefs. It does this by highlighting the importance of religion in Turkish identity (Oprea 2014, p. 133). The critical point here, as underlined by Cetinsaya, is that “those who adopt a Turkish-Islamic synthesis among the Islamists and Turkists in present-day Turkey are influenced by the same sources, i.e., the same thinkers and books from the 1950s to the 1970s” (Cetinsaya 1999, p. 351). Though we limit the study to Ersoy and Kısakürek, other

names can be added here, such as Erol Güngör, Ahmet Kabaklı, Fuat Köprülü, Nihat Sami Banarlı, and Yahya Kemal Bayatlı.

As mentioned above, Ersoy and Kısakürek are among the most prominent names in the intersection of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis that still influences both Islamists and nationalists. In this vein, President Erdoğan frequently quotes Kısakürek's poems in his speeches (Yeni Akit 2015; Yeni Şafak 2020). Similarly, Devlet Bahçeli, head of the NAP, frequently quotes Kısakürek (Bahçeli 2021). Erdoğan even recorded a commercial cassette where he recites Kısakürek poems. This was before he became president (Tarih Kanalı 2016). Erdoğan describes Kısakürek's works "as a guide for himself and future generations" (Singer 2013, p. 82). Both politicians deem Kısakürek the *üstad* (master). The same is valid also for Ersoy, as he is frequently quoted by politicians (Yeni Akit 2021; Yeni Şafak 2022). Both Erdoğan and Bahçeli regularly reference Ersoy and Kısakürek in framing their daily political narrative, such as criticisms of the opposition, justifications of policies, and criticisms of foreign powers.

The works of Ersoy and Kısakürek provide the relevant ideas that right-wing leaders use easily in their communication with their constituencies, as those ideas are already known by them. However, this is not simply a pragmatic discursive strategy. Right-wing politicians who reference those discourses as their ideological commitments value Ersoy and Kısakürek.

Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873–1936), the National Poet, is the author of the Turkish national anthem. He lived in the late Ottoman period and in the early Republican era. He is arguably one of the most iconic characters of Islamists and nationalists. Beyond his ideological impact, Ersoy is recognized for his personal integrity. He is a role model in the Islamist and nationalist context. Ersoy was a member of the first Turkish National Assembly gathered in Ankara in 1920, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Despite his fame and popularity, Ersoy was at first an opponent of Atatürk, and lived in Egypt at the time (Özkan 2015, p. 75). The quarrel between Atatürk and Ersoy was reminiscent of that of Jinnah and Iqbal in Pakistan: whereas Atatürk was establishing a secular nationalist project, Ersoy advocated a more Islamic paradigm. Ersoy was a nationalist in the sense of searching for a harmony between national values and religion (Akış 2011, p. 41). He imagined Islam to be the engine of national development. In Ersoy, nationalism is not defined by the ethnic term "Turkishness," but as an Ottomanism supported by Islam. These nuances notwithstanding, Ersoy was undoubtedly a nationalist, as Kara underlines (Kara 2007, p. 138).

Ersoy's ideological legacy has survived him over a long period, due particularly to his anthology, *Safahat*. Many of his verses in *Safahat* are memorized, and they are quoted in daily life, as well as in daily politics, by both Islamist and nationalist politicians. His didactic-poetic style enables his verses to be referenced easily in nationalist and religious settings (Şimşek 2015, pp. 105–20). Many of his poems, in which Ersoy narrates historical events, anecdotes, and political theses in a poetic style, are long. However, they are full of poetic slogans that are easily reduced to political jargon.

Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983) was an influential poet. A prolific writer, Kısakürek wrote plays and short stories alongside his discursive works. Unlike Ersoy, Kısakürek began his career as a secular. However, in 1934, he made a radical ideological transition, and embraced the Turkish-Islamist synthesis. He published *Büyük Doğu* (the Great East) between 1943 and 1978, one of the most polemical and influential magazines that deeply affected Islamists and nationalists in Turkey.

Though Kısakürek was never a racist like Atsız, a number of his polemics played key roles in the formation of the anti-Semitic narrative in Turkey (Özkaya 2018, p. 210). His legacy has played a formative role in Erdoğan's anti-Semitic discourse (Jikeli and Silay 2014). Kısakürek is influential particularly in the intellectual socialization of Islamists and nationalists. His poetic skills remain influential, particularly for his games with words, and abundance of scintillating metaphors that Islamists and nationalists like to borrow.

Moreover, as a prolific author, Kısakürek penned a number of books on Islamic as well as European history, despite that he had no education or expertise in history. These books, through which Kısakürek manipulated historical facts in line with his ideological perspective, became the foundations of Turkish populist history. To give an example of his influence: Kısakürek was able to reframe Abdulhamid II, an oppressive Ottoman monarch, as an esteemed figure among Islamists and nationalists (Kısakürek 2003).

4. The Civilizational Narrative in Ersoy and Kısakürek

Both Ersoy and Kısakürek engaged intensively in civilizational subjects such as Western civilization, Islamic civilization, and the relations between them. Like many other ideologues of contemporary Turkey, their thoughts can be construed also as responses to Turks' perceptions of Western civilization. Given the large scope of their work, we confine this section to their civilizational narratives, under three major headings. These are formative, as evidenced in present-day political actors' civilizational populism:

- i. Western civilization is materially strong but morally weak. Turkish-Islamic civilization is morally superior.
- ii. Western civilization is hostile to the Turkish-Islamic civilization.
- iii. The collapse of Western civilization is imminent.

4.1. West: Technologically Strong Morally Weak

To start with Ersoy: Probably the all-time most influential reference to Western civilization is his description of Western civilization in the Turkish national anthem, i.e., *İstiklal Marşı*:

The horizons of the West if bounded with the walls of steel,
I have borders like my faithful bosom.
Let it bellow out, do not be afraid! How can ever muzzle such a creed,
The single-fanged monster you call "civilization?"

All students have memorized the national anthem by the secondary school level, and it has been explained to them in detail in literature classes throughout their secondary and high school years. Therefore, the above verse of the national anthem can easily be imagined as the most influential framework for teaching the average Turk about the West. The verse can be considered the standard, even official, Turkish view of Western civilization.

In this verse, Ersoy makes an essentialist and rigid distinction between "the self" and "the other", between the Turkish-Islamic and the Western civilizations. Western civilization is recognized as strong, but this strength stems from material power. Otherwise, Western civilization is morally weak. Furthermore, relying only on material power, it does not deserve to be recognized as a civilization. On the contrary, "our" civilization is superior, as it has faith. Ersoy imagines the Turkish-Islamic civilization and the Western civilization as two opposite and clashing camps: the former symbolizes morality; the latter represents immoral materialism.

We can trace Ersoy's harsh critique of Western civilization also in his other works. In one article, Ersoy states that Western civilization is never a humanitarian civilization (Babacan 2021, p. 54). Reflecting this, Western civilization is usually presented in his poems as morally collapsed. In his famous poem on the Dardanelles campaign of World War I, he declares *vahşet* (savagery or wild atrocity) a characteristic of Europe (Ersoy 2008, p. 385). A short perusal of his poems reveals highly pejorative evaluations of Western civilization, such as "unreliable," (Ersoy 2008, p. 180), "charade," (Ersoy 2008, p. 180), "disgraceful", (Ersoy 2013, p. 263), and even "bitch" (Ersoy 2008, p. 385).

Ersoy recognizes that the Western civilization is advanced in science and technology. However, this does not excuse its being disreputable or disgraceful (*rezil*) on the social and cultural levels. Western civilization has never carried its material success into the field of *maneviyat*, i.e., to the moral ground. Moreover, for Ersoy, this is not a mere failure of

intent. Indeed, the West intentionally ignored the moral and social prerequisite (Ersoy 2013, p. 264).

Ersoy reads Western civilization from a highly essentialist and culturist perspective and sees only moral collapse. He warns that the West's social and cultural ideas should never be allowed to enter his country (Ersoy 2013, p. 113). Ersoy framed the West so harshly when the Ottomans were in a state of disintegration, and the Turks were defending Anatolia, a period highly traumatic for Turks. Ersoy's grim framing of the West may also have been influenced by the general political setting of global politics that was seriously against the Turks. Recognizing the West's undisputed superiority in the economic, military, and technology fields, Ersoy might have felt that only morality remained to him for creating the Turkish-Islam–Western civilizations binary.

A logical consequence of Ersoy's moral condemnation of the West and his recognition of its technological and scientific superiority is to propose a selective Westernization. In one of his poems, Ersoy proposes that the ideal policy on the West is to borrow its science, but nothing from its social and cultural thought. Going beyond the scientific field would be "ape-like emulation" (Ersoy 2008, p. 155). As expected, Ersoy condemns those who defend a fully-fledged Westernization that can happen only with the adoption of Western social and cultural ideas and values, particularly the Western habit of disengagement from religion (Ersoy 2008, pp. 165–66). However, he is equally critical of those who reject everything from the West. Ersoy (2008, p. 170) formulates his idealistic stance on the West thus:

As imitation is not a cure for all, ever.

Grab the West's art, grab its science.

Ersoy justifies his idealistic argumentation by claiming that science/technology and the arts have no nationality (Ersoy 2008, p. 170). In addition, to prove how a radical Westernization would not improve Turkish society, Ersoy cites the Russian modernization as an example of failure caused by a wrong-headed effort to imitate Western culture (Ersoy 2008, p. 149). His reference to Russia in this context is significant also for the revelation that he does not see Russia as part of Western civilization. This is more apparent where, in a public lecture, he proposed that the Turks could cooperate with the communist Russians to destroy Western institutions (Ersoy 2013, p. 265). This nuance is still relevant, as the standard Turkey–the West binary does not include Russia. Turks do not see Russia as a core Western state.

When it comes to Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, his civilizational narrative is similarly built on an essentialist East–West dichotomy. In Kısakürek, while the East symbolizes soul and spirituality, the West represents reason and materiality (Köseoğlu 2021, p. 169). He draws a sharp ontological line between the Turkish-Islamic and Western civilizations. His absolute anti-Western imagination of "the other" evokes Western Orientalism, which is "the West and the rest" reductionism (Köseoğlu 2021). Accordingly, his rigid civilizationism, which conceives the world as "the West and us" divide, is a reverse-Orientalist/Occidentalism dichotomy (Köseoğlu 2021, p. 164). His famous Islamist *Büyük Doğu* (the Great East) project envisages raising religious and nationalist generations who will challenge the Western hegemony (Kısakürek 1999b).

Kısakürek defends a Manichean nation and civilization concept based on antithetical religious and cultural identities. According to his imagination, there are two nations: the Muslim nation and the non-Muslim nation. "The heathen", referring to the West, is a single nation (Uzer 2020). In this way, Kısakürek embraces an essentialist civilizationism as well. He argues that everything has originated from the East. The East is the source of every blessing and goodness. In this worldview, the East corresponds to the Islam that is "our spirit" (Kısakürek 1999b). Thus, the East possesses a spiritual superiority over the West. The East is essentially multidimensional and radiant, thanks to its spirituality; the West is intrinsically shallow and prosaic, as it is based on rationality (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 15). Despite recognizing the material advancement of the West, he despises any native project that is not based on the principles of the "Eastern spirit" (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 3).

In parallel with orthodox Islamic teaching, he claims that those beliefs and values that do not recognize, and are not compatible with, Islam are superstitious, and, thus, a nullity (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 10).

In his uncompromising approach vis-à-vis the “evil” West, Kısakürek pursues a selective approach to judging “the other.” He depicts the Western world as a “machine civilization” deprived of any moral and spiritual value: The West has technology, but nothing else (Köseoglu 2021, p. 168). In his dualist civilizationism, which is very much like that of Ersoy, the East will eternally be superior “in real terms” as it possesses a moral and spiritual authority over the West (Kısakürek 2014):

The East says to the West: Even if you conquer the Sun;
I hold the moral truth; the material deceit is with you.

In various sections of his *İdeolocya Örgüsü* (*The Plait of Ideology* 1999), which he considers his masterpiece, Kısakürek repeatedly claims that Western civilization is “morally rootless and unfounded,” despite its technological and economic wealth. Its “prosaic” rationality is “hubristic” and “ambitious.” According to him, the West today is a talented illusionist who manages to propagate its injustices as just and normal (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 15). In contrast to its advancement in the material world, Kısakürek argues, Western civilization is morally corrupt, and suffers from depression because it has remained alien to the inner world of spirituality and moral values. As a result, he alleges, everything has worsened in the West, especially after the First World War. Everything has been “bastardized” and “degenerated,” leaving Western societies suffering deep social and moral crises (Tökel 2005, p. 3).

For Kısakürek, the emulation of Western civilization has created fake solutions, and fake heroes. He is, thus, harshly critical of the Turkish modernization project. He categorically rejects the secular philosophy of Turkey that is making it turn its face to Western civilization. These so-called reformers are so wicked, baseless, snobbish, and parrot-ish that they have every reason for failure (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 13). To him, the Westernization movements and reforms are the real causes of political, social, and cultural decay in the country. He longs for “the good old days” with the selective historical interpretation of the Ottoman raiders as the regulators of world politics (Kısakürek 2013). Like Ersoy, Kısakürek imagines a civilizational revival with a return to the pure and “talismanic” roots of Islam. It is the youth of “the Great East,” “aide-de-camp” of Islam, who will lead the true revival against the West (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 2).

4.2. The West as Enemy

As the second major motif of his civilizational narrative, Ersoy presents Western civilization as hostile to Turks, and to their civilization. Ersoy imagines as conflictual the nature of the relations between Islamic and Western civilizations. This is framed by a two-level argumentation: Firstly, Ersoy highlights power. Reminding us that Muslims are weak, and the West is powerful, it is normal for him to expect Muslims to face many caveats created by the West (Ersoy 2008, p. 266). From what can be seen as a rather realistic perspective, Ersoy explains the conflict between the West and the Islamic civilization as caused by structural dynamics, mainly power. For Ersoy, so long as they are weak, Muslims have no alternative within the current system, even in daily life, for the rules of the game are designed by the West (Ersoy 2008, p. 403).

However, on a second level, Ersoy clarifies that the hostility of the West towards “us” is not solely a consequence of power relations. Rather, the West is hostile because of its wicked nature. Unlike on his previous level, Ersoy here shows his full-blown essentialist critique of the West. The West is by definition evil, and it is, therefore, our enemy. A clear reflection of this essentialism is in his definition of Europe as *zebunküş* (cruel, merciless to the weak), recognizing only one principle: power (Ersoy 2008, p. 229; Aydın 2012, p. 49). For him, the West does not take moral values into consideration. The West, he writes, has “an eternal hatred” for the East (Ersoy 2008, p. 428). Reflecting this trait, Europe is poised

to use any opportunity to “daunt the Muslims” (Ersoy 2008, p. 162). Poetically, he frames the West as “the bloody horror of the East” (Ersoy 2008, p. 411).

Thus, the West appears in Ersoy’s poems as a power that continuously provokes Turks and their homeland. The term he picks to describe this is *kundakçı* (arsonist) (Ersoy 2008, p. 301). He then explains that Western civilization “sharpens its teeth” against Muslims, as its goal is first to “break them into pieces,” then “swallow” them (Ersoy 2008, p. 184). Ersoy frequently warns that the West weakens Muslims by provoking conflicts among them (Ersoy 2013, p. 190).

Kısakürek’s Westerners are depicted as a single body that is eternally disdainful of the East. This “conceited” Western attitude covers a continuity from the Ancient Greeks to date. This is the attitude that approaches Eastern societies as “illiterate,” “helpless,” and “idiotic” human flocks (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 6). In this pejorative Western construction of otherness, Eastern societies do not have analytical thinking skills; they cannot understand cause and effect relations, they do not appreciate the importance of individual and societal freedom, but they bow to Sultans and despots. Accordingly, the Eastern image in the eyes of the ordinary Westerner is the destructive man on horseback who once spread terror and threatened the Western lands (Kısakürek 1999b, p. 6). This conflictual dichotomy of two civilizations has been in place for Westerners since the beginning of time: It is not “us” who planted the seeds of this animosity; it is they, “the other” (Kısakürek 1999b). Here, we again observe the essentialist framing of the civilizationist narrative:

“It was the Westerner who made the distinction between East and West first. . . . Since that day, no matter how [the Westerner] sees the Eastern world as divided into different and opposite spirit climates within itself. . . . But eventually the Westerner, with overwhelming majority and average understanding, cannot take his most merciful and prudent gaze towards the East beyond the simple fantasy plan and the dream of “One Thousand and One Nights”, like the turban of an Indian raja and the diamond on its top in Piccadilly. As we have pointed out, this is the commonplace view of the West, peculiar to the literate rabble...”. (quoted and translated by Köseoğlu 2021, pp. 164–65)

However, Kısakürek reminds us that the unique criterion for determining friends and foes within the tenets of the “Great East” is the principles of Islam. In other words, those incompatible with the spirit and values of Islam cannot be accepted as friends. Intrinsically, this essentialist civilizational imagination holds the right to determine any ideology as superstitious and null if it does not arise from the very self (Kısakürek 1999a, 2016). Consequently, the East and the West constitute two antagonist camps that are theoretically and practicably irreconcilable.

Another salient characteristic of Kısakürek’s hostile imaging of “the other” focuses on Turkey’s own citizens who are not content to be one of “us,” but insist on keeping their original identities. Here, he designates the minority groups as “treacherous and dark elements,” and proposes cleansing technics redolent of the German Nazis, who were intent on saving the “pure civilization” (Kısakürek 1999b):

“All necessary measures shall be taken to ensure that the Turkish homeland belongs only to the Muslims and Turks. It will be thoroughly cleansed of treacherous and dark elements. The first elements that must be cleansed are the Converts and the Jews. They are followed by the Greeks, Armenians, and other minor communities (Christians) that must be removed, as they are not compatible with our religion, spirit, and values. The major criterion in cleansing the Turkish homeland of all treacherous and dark elements is only this: You either be one of us, or you just leave us!”. (Özkaya 2018, p. 211)

The repercussions of such an indoctrination against “the other” among the Islamists and nationalists have had long, enduring impacts in Turkish politics, which we analyze in the following section.

4.3. *The Collapse of the West Is Imminent*

A complimentary element of Ersoy's narrative on Western civilization is the idea that its collapse is imminent. Ersoy frequently states that he cordially hopes for the immediate collapse of Western civilization. However, this is not pure hope. He presents the expected failure of the West as a realistic development. To him, even the "wise people and philosophers of the West" share this expectation (Ersoy 2013, p. 263). Logically, such an imagination serves mainly to persuade the disciples within the cluster of civilizational ideals. It massages the emotions and expectations of disciples in order to inspire them to act for the "glorious" future vis-à-vis the enemy, even if the self is helpless in various ways.

We observe the expectation of the West's imminent collapse also in Kısakürek's narratives. In them, he argues that Western societies have been "writhing" for ages, due to their neglect of moral and spiritual values, despite those values being the source of material knowledge. He prophesizes that the West will face the abrupt calamity towards which it has been moving step by step throughout the twentieth century (Kısakürek 1999b, pp. 3–15). Eclectically, he claims that the civilizational crisis in the West has come to light during the second half of the nineteenth century: it became apparent that it is "immoral" and "rootless." In fact, the Islamist civilizationist narrative pontificates the prospective perishing of the Judeo-Christian Western civilization, for it is to meet its *nemesis* in the decisive triumph of the believers, as a promised right. In this rhetoric, victory is the destiny of the righteous members of the "true religion," Islam, and the heathens are doomed to fail (Süt 2010).

5. Civilizational Populism in Turkish Politics

This section explores how Turkey's governing block, the Islamist JDP and the ultra-far-right NAP, engage in daily politics with civilizational populism as the agents of civilizationism. As political parties are clusters of many actors on different levels, one may safely analyze the conduct of civilizational populism at the party level, albeit in many different ways. We limit this analysis to party leaders, for it is they who dominate the formations of civilizational populism. This is, firstly, because political parties in Turkey are leader-oriented parties (Özbudun 2002). Secondly, it is because a party's narrative's couching of civilizational thought is usually perceived as a critical task in the framing of the party's ideology. This critical task tends to be left to the leader's discretion.

Methodologically, following the schema we observed in the civilizational narratives of Ersoy and Kısakürek, we shall analyze two parties under three heading: The West is Morally Corrupt; The West is the Enemy; The Collapse of the West Is Imminent. This methodology is critical because it helps us observe the continuity of the populist political actors and the architects of the civilizational narrative. It helps also to support our two-level analysis in which we point out that political actors make use of the already existent ideas on civilizations.

To begin with the first case: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's JDP serves as a model of the "Islamist populist" party configuration (Yilmaz et al. 2021). Erdoğan has ruled Turkey for more than two decades with an agenda composed of Islamism, nationalism, and populism, especially since his Islamist-authoritarian turn after 2013 (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022, p. 8; Taş 2022). This democratic backslide, coming after the defeat of the Kemalist-secular establishment, ran in tandem with the period in which the JDP intensified the instrumentalization of those anti-Western civilizational discourses that we observe in the works of Ersoy and Kısakürek.

As we noted in the previous section, the first element in the civilizational narrative is the moral critique of the West. In a manner similar to that of Ersoy and Kısakürek, Erdoğan pursues a selective approach to Western civilization. In his pragmatic discourse, the West can exist as an acceptable model only on the strength of its technological development. Otherwise, it is "immoral", and essentially "evil", threatening, and demoralizing the superior values of Muslims and Turks (Star 2019). Accordingly, Erdoğan accuses Turkish

modernization of transferring the “immoralities” of the West, but not its science and technology. Addressing Turkish students studying at Western universities, he said:

“As our national poet, Mehmet Akif Ersoy said: We did not borrow the art and science of the West. Unfortunately, we adopted their immoralities that are against our values, whereas we had to work full speed to acquire Western technology”. (Milliyet 2008)

Erdoğan’s informal coalitional partner, Devlet Bahçeli, head of the NAP, disseminates a similar moralist critique of Western civilization. An ultra-nationalist party, the NAP has been an ardent defender of Turkish nationalism. Some scholars, such as Arikan (2002), Canefe (2020), and Yavuz (2002), have drawn attention to the NAP’s fascist characteristics. In the NAP’s imagination, everything about Turkishness is superior (Cizre 1992), and “the other” is always flawed and faulty. Despite its richness, Bahçeli argues, the West is selfish, and is always full of itself. He claims that while the West does not care about the predicaments of poor nations, and feeds its stomach only, Turkey rises like a castle of hope and remedy for the oppressed peoples of the world (Adıyaman 2022). In Bahçeli’s antagonist stance, the West resides in permanent immorality and inconsistency:

“Westerners shamelessly pretend to be civilized, but they cannot even hide that they are against human values. They only make politics and trade of human rights. It is Turkey that defends human rights, not by words but by deeds. We approach international events through the eyes of the heart, but for Western countries, interest and profit are the most important things”. (Adıyaman 2022; Akan and Uslu 2020)

The second element in Turkish civilizational populism is “the West is our enemy.” The West, according to Erdoğan and his Islamist cadres, is hostile to “us” and against the rising of a powerful Turkey. To thwart Turkey’s “glorious rise,” the Western powers, “the evil front,” do not hesitate to do whatever is needed (Hürriyet 2018). Furthermore, the West plans to destroy Turkey by implementing explicit and implicit methods. The “treacherous and dark elements” that infiltrate the Turkish state and society, they argue, are the most useful tools to serve the nefarious aims of the West in Turkey (Demir 2017; Er 2016).

In parallel with Kısakürek’s designation of the “internal enemy,” minority groups and other masses that emerge from unorthodox stock are the “traitor puppets” of the Western powers who act against “the pure self.” However, the dominant belief among the Islamist JDP cadres is that no matter what the “enemy” and its comrades do, they will not manage to hinder the rebirth of the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of President Erdoğan (Kisa 2021, p. 616).

As we mentioned in Section 4, creating an anti-Western and religious youth has been envisaged by both Ersoy and Kısakürek. In this ideological continuity, Erdoğan and his followers have set out to raise a “pious generation” that aims to realize the civilizational dreams and to challenge the enemy. A social engineering and Islamist nation-building project (Yilmaz 2018), the “pious generation” is reminiscent of the “golden generation” imaginations we observe in the works of Ersoy (2008) and Kısakürek (1999a). It categorically rejects the Kemalist strategy of educating young people in line with the Western and secular perspective. In this historical and discursive continuity, the youth is redesigned on the Islamic, conservative, and nationalist model, and endowed with absolute loyalty to the nation and fatherland, and to its moral values (Lüküslü 2016). In Erdoğan’s imagining of it, this civilizational revival is expected to bring victory against “the other” by returning to the roots of “the self”:

“We want a pious generation. With the permit of God, we will grow a religious youth, a religious generation. If we succeed in this; we will not see emaciated addicts on the streets in our cities. We will not see thieves around. We will not see alcoholics”. (En son haber 2019)

On another occasion he said:

“As the grandchildren of an ancestry that had closed an age and opened a new one, we enjoy the power, will, and ability to build a new and great future for ourselves. That is why we say “Great Turkey.” That is why we say “Strong Turkey.” That is why we bequeath our youth a vision for 2053 and 2071”. (Tcbb 2017)

The civilizational narrative in the NAP’s political discourse also holds an ontological conflict with “the other,” which includes all elements outside the Turkishness cluster. The West pioneers all hostilities against “us.” The NAP argues that there are permanent internal and external anti-Turkish camps (Bacik 2010), led by foreign powers, who conspire against the state. Bahçeli explains this as follows: Western countries wage psychological warfare against Turkey on every available occasion (Milliyet 2023), and that “The Turk is the Turk’s only friend” (Karlsson 2006).

According to Bahçeli, the West is the same enemy as the historic Crusaders who invaded Muslim lands. Muslim Turks’ rooted existence in Anatolia for a thousand years has constantly unnerved the “peoples of the cross,” and those enemies of the crescent have resorted to the very same dark scenarios against Muslims and Turks (Mhp 2023). Accordingly, Turkey has been faced with conditions similar to that meted out by the Treaty of Sèvres, by which the Western powers razed the Ottoman Empire in 1920. Recalling Kısakürek’s anti-Western and anti-other minority mentality, he argues that there are domestic traitors and collaborators with Turkey’s enemies in every sector of life. However, he says, the West and its “collaborators” will not manage to hamper Turkey’s national rise (DHA 2022; Yeni Dönem 2020). In the same spirit as Ersoy’s and Kısakürek’s “golden generation” dreams, youth is an indispensable tool in the civilizational contestation in the fight against the enemy. It should be indoctrinated and mobilized for the current and future interests of “the self” as a long-term social engineering project designed to guarantee national existence and honor against the feints of its enemies. In this context, the NAP tradition hosts the controversial and militaristic youth project, the “Idealist Hearths Union”, also known as the “Grey Wolves” (Balci 2011). Bahçeli extolls the idealist youth as essentially heroic: they are the conscience of Turkishness, and the root of the soul of the Turkish-Islamic ideal. The “Grey Wolves” will save the nation that the whole world wants wiped out. Turkishness will not die out, thanks to the resistance of the youth (Mhp 2021). In the endless belligerent relations with “the other”, Bahçeli argues, “terrorists will look for a place to hide when they come across the Grey Wolves: The enemies of Turks and Islam will be surrounded by mountains of fear” (Cumhuriyet 2021b).

The third salient propaganda in the Turkish civilizational narrative is “the collapse of the West is imminent”. For party interests, Erdoğan frequently engages that type of discourse to frame and reframe daily politics. He seeks to persuade his followers in any socio-political and economic crises by arguing that Turkey is in a much better state than are the Western countries. He makes disputable comparisons between “the self” and “the other,” sometimes to polish his own image, and sometimes to fabricate scapegoats to hide his failures, and the systemic predicaments of the state. For this context, Erdoğan invented a new trope: “The West is jealous of us” (Kisa 2021). Despite Turkey’s ever-deepening financial crises in recent years, he argues that the West is jealous of Turkey. To persuade his followers, he sometimes employs discourses that fully misrepresents the factual situation:

“You see that the US and UK are desperate, right? They do not even have gasoline. There are queues in Germany, queues in France. They cannot even find food to eat. You see also there is no such problem in Turkey. Do you know why the West is jealous of us? Because of these dams, bridges, tunnels, and metros that we have built”. (Sol 2016; Cumhuriyet 2021a)

From the moral perspective as well, in parallel with Kısakürek’s anti-Western apocalyptic argumentation of the 1970s, Erdoğan claims that the West is collapsing, as it has neglected moral and spiritual values and institutions:

“The institution of family is the backbone of our national existence. Without keeping and maintaining it, society will be paralyzed. This is the biggest danger

threatening the Western societies. [Do you know why] the West is collapsing . . . Because the institution of family in the West has been ruined, and has died out". (Tccb 2020)

From Bahçeli, we hear that the Western world has been shaken off its foundations amid economic, political, and social chaos: the economic crisis is deepening, societies are becoming more polarized and poorer, political institutions and leaders are incapable of solving problems (Mhp 2022). The Western political entities, he argues, have been violating human values; law and justice have been left to rot in the West. They are against the flow of history (Güven 2020). Thus, the West's imagination in the nationalist propaganda is also facing a juridic and moral collapse. For instance, the EU has been hosting "terrorists" by discarding all moral and legal principles. Consequently, such an entity is doomed to collapse institutionally and morally (Gazete Duvar 2020).

"The West's imminent collapse," or "the West is weak," are particularly agile propagandist moves for creating a mood of expectation among the public. This can be described as the psychological-tactical dimension of the anti-Western civilizational narrative. Logically, strong anticipation increases the popularity of a political thesis. In this context, Fouad Ajami's (1992, p. 6) description of the Arab public as always having big expectations as a result of many failures in the past is explanatory for the Turkish public. Emotions have a serious impact on politics in Turkey (Erişen 2013). Responding to this mindset, political actors always feed the idea that the collapse of Western civilization is imminent, or how that the West is weak. This easily creates a continuous readiness to buy political ideas that promise to correct the historical failures of the "us" group. As Neta Crawford writes, "people may follow normative prescriptions because they want to feel good about themselves". (Crawford 2000, p. 154)

6. Conclusions

Our analysis of the Islamist JDP and the ultra-nationalist NAP reveals several features of the conduct of civilizational populism in Turkey. Firstly, the Islamist JDP and the ultra-nationalist NAP share a similar agenda of engaging with civilizational populism. They use almost the same arguments and metaphors because they are both inspired by the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Thus, civilizational populism is yet another case to prove how Islam and nationalism are socially and politically coded as friendly categories in Turkey.

Secondly, Islamist and ultra-nationalist political actors frame civilizational populism with existent, widely known ideas. As we have illustrated, both the JDP and the NAP rely heavily on Ersoy and Kısakürek to formulate their civilizational populism. Thus, political actors are the agents of populism but not the inventors of the many ideas they instrumentalize. The findings of our research suggest the understanding of civilizational populism as a continuity in politics: It does not emerge as a radical split with what is already known. It is, therefore, a reframing of extant and commonly known ideas about "our" and "the other" civilizations.

Thirdly, civilizational populism in Turkey is simply an anti-Western narrative. The crux of this civilizational populism is its critique of the West. This critique is no more than an essentialist and culturist one. Usually, "civilizational discourse" is understood to be a reference to the mainly Western actors' initiatives in the wider Islamic world: the Western leaders are criticized for pushing for a civilizational clash, or of using the "clash of civilization" thesis to justify their wars (Abozaid 2018; Drury 2004). Our discussion has displayed that the culturist and essentialist critique levelled by other civilizations at Western political actors can be levelled similarly at the Muslim political elite.

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