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Political homophobia as a tool of creating crisis narratives and ontological insecurities in illiberal populist contexts: lessons from the 2023 elections in Turkey

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Abstract

This article analyzes how the Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) 2023 election propaganda utilized political homophobia as a populist tool to construct and reinforce political antagonisms and carry out a crisis-driven politics in search of continued hegemony. Relying on critical discourse analysis of qualitative data, it demonstrates that during the 2023 election period the AKP's antagonistic operationalization of anti-LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) discourse unfolded in three modalities: as a culturalist rhetoric and a nativist technology of othering at the intersection of Islam and anti-genderism; as a tool of defining and vilifying political opponents as "inner enemies"; and as a policy perspective and path towards legal action and institutionalization of political homophobia. Within this frame, the article demonstrates that the gendered performance of crisis-driven politics is a core mechanism of the current democratic erosion in Turkey. It argues that homophobic propaganda is a key tool for the AKP not only to enact the processes of othering through fearmongering and scapegoating, but also to restructure politics through crisis-driven imaginaries, post-truth epistemologies, and emergency legislation that lacks political responsiveness.

Keywords: political homophobia; illiberal populism; crisis narratives; ontological insecurities

Introduction

In the last decade, political campaigns against LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) individuals have become commonplace in many illiberal populist regimes such as Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Turkey (Edenborg 2023; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Moss 2017; Stella and Nartova 2015). Political actors in such contexts increasingly rely on anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric to build ingroups and outgroups, while classifying rights claims and public visibility related to non-normative sexualities as deviancy. Allegedly embodying the popular will, they present themselves as the defenders of the people's religious, cultural, and moral values, the heterosexual family institution, and "innocent children" *vis-à-vis* perceived threats (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). While these campaigns are contextually

different in terms of their efficacy and institutionalization, they demonstrate that political homophobia in illiberal populist regimes operates as a “technology of othering” reinforcing the hegemony of antagonistic political imaginaries (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Sloomaeckers 2019).

Bosia and Wiess (2013) define political homophobia as a purposeful, systematic strategy adopted by political actors and states, which is central to the othering processes underpinning the questions of national identity, culture, religion, and political hegemony. In populist rhetoric, political homophobia heavily rests upon “crisis talk” that instills ontological insecurity among the public by constructing enemies and threats around family, nation, and culture and actively targeting individuals’ drive towards security for political gains (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022). Especially at contentious political moments such as election times, when populists’ needs to bolster “us versus them” juxtapositions are more urgent than ever, political homophobia can assume new meanings with aggravated frames and become more antagonistic in style and content.

The 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey provide an ideal case to examine how political homophobia functions as a populist tool of othering and triggers ontological insecurities and a crisis-driven political imaginary, rendering “us versus them” juxtaposition as the main driver of politics. The 2023 elections represent a historic and existential turning point in Turkey in terms of political civility, rule of law, gender equality, and pluralism. The closely contested race between the People’s Alliance led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP) and the opposition’s Nation Alliance composed of six political parties including the main opposition Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; CHP) was widely interpreted as Turkey’s “make-or-break” moment to restore essential democratic institutions, free media, civil society, and academic freedoms (Esen and Gumuscu 2023; Ugur-Cinar 2023). The elections, which coincided with the Turkish Republic’s centennial, were securitized by both political camps with arguments that it is an extraordinary political moment in which people are facing the task of choosing leaders who can tackle the existential threats awaiting Turkey in its second century. While the People’s Alliance constructed a threat perception by framing the opposition bloc as “terrorists, villains, corrupt elites,” the opposition block regarded the elections as the “last exit” before Turkey’s transition into dictatorship and theocracy (Yavuz 2023).

In this article, I examine the rhetorical modalities of this antagonistic discourse inherent in the 2023 elections with a particular focus on the AKP’s hateful, anti-LGBTI+ election campaign. Heteronationalism has featured as a key function of the AKP’s discourses in the election rallies, meetings, press releases, and in the party manifesto (Bianet 2023; Kaos GL 2023). Heteronationalist political imaginaries rely on homophobia to enforce the nation’s religio-conservative, anti-gender, and hegemonic masculine image and are constitutive of ethno-national political projects (re)defining the contested meanings of nation (Sloomaeckers 2019; Suchland 2018). AKP officials conveyed through the homophobic election propaganda the message that the party’s anti-LGBTI+ policy approach is attuned to vernacular social conservatism, mirroring the popular will, and is adopted to protect the people against the “morally corrupt” social forces, lobbies, and interest groups (BBC 2023).

Heteronationalism has always been a part of the AKP's discursive politics and policy vision during its more than twenty years of rule (Arat and Nuñez 2017; Engin 2015; Muedini 2021). However, especially in conjunction with the party's dramatic drift towards authoritarianism in the post-2011 period, political contestations around gender and sexuality have reached new heights and heteronationalism has mainstreamed in the party's discourse and policy (Cindoglu and Unal 2017; Kandiyoti 2016; Ozbay 2022; Savci 2021; Unal 2021, 2023b). The 2023 elections demonstrate that heteronationalist frames of gender and sexuality have become hegemonic in the AKP's antagonistic juxtapositions of ingroup and outgroup identity.

Drawing on the recent feminist scholarship on populism, gender, and anti-LGBTI+ politics, and the ontological security literature (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolzcuk 2022; Kinnvall 2004; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Kuhar and Patternotte 2017; Moffitt 2015), I analyze how the AKP's 2023 election propaganda utilized political homophobia as a populist tool to construct and reinforce political antagonisms and carry out an ethno-nationalist project that serves a crisis-driven politics. Populism is not primarily built on "thick ideology" but draws on a political narrative that enacts the elite–people antagonism through a set of myths (the myth of the savior and the victim), securitization of referent objects ("nation, culture, and morality under threat"), and a crisis-driven imaginary ("heterosexual family in crisis") (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Mudde 2004; Wodak 2015). It is vital to highlight the context-specific combination of these narrative elements and their different forms and intensities in the construction of ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility.

The relevance of ingroup–outgroup distinction for populist success has been underlined in a number of scholarly works (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Gera 2023). Especially at election times, when crisis narratives lead to affective intensification in contentious politics, ingroup–outgroup distinction becomes even more important for populists to reinforce reified notions of belonging and create new discursive conditions through which ontological insecurities are consolidated (Kinnvall 2018; Mitzen 2006).

The discussion below demonstrates that the AKP's populist framing of "LGBT" as outgroup has come to the fore in various modalities during the 2023 election period as a culturalist rhetoric and a nativist technology of othering at the intersection of Islam and anti-genderism, as a tool of vilifying political opponents as "inner enemies," and as a policy perspective and a path towards legal action and institutionalization of political homophobia. Explaining how these different functions of homophobic propaganda have unfolded in AKP officials' speech acts, I argue that political homophobia is a key tool for the AKP not only to enact the processes of othering and social categorization through fearmongering and scapegoating, but also to restructure politics through crisis-driven imaginaries, post-truth epistemologies, and emergency legislation that lacks political responsiveness.

This argument is presented as follows: The first section briefly introduces the theoretical framework to analyze the gendered construction of otherness and crisis narratives in populist logic, followed by an overview contextualizing this theoretical debate in the Turkish context. The third section unearths the different rhetorical modalities of the AKP's homophobic propaganda and highlights their implications on aggravated polarization and gender policy making in Turkey. The article concludes

that the AKP's homophobic propaganda turning political adversaries and marginalized minorities into enemies serves to wage a "culture war" on gender in the quest of continued hegemony and makes state homophobia more difficult to resist. It also reveals that resistance and resilient counter strategies opposing the draconian policies and discourses of the homophobic regime have never been more urgent.

The gendered instigation of moral panic and crisis in populist political imaginary

The juxtaposition of "morally superior us" versus "morally corrupt them" is central to the construction of the idea of "people" in populist politics (Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak 2015). This political logic relies on an antagonistic, nativist imaginary that defines the people in an exclusionary and divisive way. It suggests that "states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde 2007, 19).

As the populist logic outcasts the non-native elements (people and ideas) from the definition of the "good" people, it essentializes, disavows, censors, scapegoats, and marginalizes them through discourse, policy, and legislation (Wodak 2015). In this sense, othering processes do not only aim for demarcation and differentiation between "us and them," but also engage in systematic targeting, discrimination, and dehumanization of the "other" through hateful discourse, draconian policies, and state-sponsored violence (Slootmaeckers 2019).

Crisis-driven imaginaries are integral to populist actors' construction of enemies and the non-native elements. Turning specific political issues and policy areas into problem spaces, populist discourses trigger feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear around ontological security, i.e. conceptions of stable self to be protected across time and space (Kinnvall 2004; Wojczewski 2020). While ontological security refers to a "security of being" and has to do with a person's sense of safety in the world, ontological insecurity implies a crisis situation where "identity and autonomy are always in question due to anxieties and dangers" (real and/or perceived) (Agius et al. 2020).

This politics of fear, and its claims for the exceptionality of the crisis at stake aim to normalize the antagonistic divide of society and the political actions enacted to reproduce this divide. Moffitt (2015) identifies some crucial steps in populists' performance of crisis and their constructions of threats: the identification of the problem; elevation of the problem to the level of crisis; framing "the people" versus those responsible for the crisis; presenting the populist leadership as a remedy to the crisis; and the perpetual propagation of crisis. The discursive combination of the crisis narrative, insider–outsider categorization, and politics of fear are among the most typical strategies of boundary making in populist rhetoric when constructing "common enemies" in terms of difference, deviance, and threat (Sakki and Pettersson 2013; Verkuyten 2013).

Recent feminist studies underline the centrality of gender and sexuality to the construction of enemy and crisis narratives in populist logic (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Patternotte 2017). In the current era, populist movements combine their conservative nationalist ideologies, which regard women

as the gatekeepers of the symbolic, cultural, and biological boundaries of the nation, with antagonistic discourses that construct political enemies with a recourse to opposition to “gender ideology” (Graff et al. 2019; Korolzcuk and Graff 2018). Gender ideology, in this context, is a derogatory term used to signify opposition to a broad amalgam of principles, ideas, and tools of feminist and queer politics such as gender mainstreaming, gendered accounts of violence, gender studies, reproductive rights, and non-normative sexualities (Mayer and Sauer 2017). At the center of the recent booming of anti-gender politics lies the idea that socially constructed meanings of gender are morally and socio-politically dangerous and harm society at large by forcing people to act against their “innate” nature.

Anti-gender politics helps populist actors activate ontological insecurities related to “authentic” moral values and traditions that must be defended from and immunized against “cultural infection” (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022). As such, it depicts an imagined secure future that is free from gendered threats and identifies the enemies that seemingly obstruct the realization of this imaginary. This “war on gender” activates a hegemonic struggle with a recourse to negative affects such as fear, rage, hate, and resentment, repackaging them into a collective ontological purpose and generates a discourse coalition or opportunistic synergy bringing different actors, i.e. state, religious, and civil society actors, under the political struggle of protecting “traditional” family values (Graff and Korolzcuk 2022). Especially in contexts where discourse coalitions between different anti-gender actors are effective and supported by the political rule, anti-gender politics becomes hegemonic, aiming for discourse closure with the belief that “there is a particular social arrangement which can bring about the closure and transparency of the community” (Laclau 1996). Accordingly, the ideal of complete and harmonious society can only be achieved through a culture war on “gender ideology” which requires affective, antagonistic narratives about the enemy.

Anti-gender politics and political homophobia in contemporary Turkey

Patriarchal and homophobic discourses and policy perspectives have always been profoundly entrenched in Turkish politics and manifest themselves across the political spectrum (Dönmez and Özmen 2013; Özbay and Soybakis 2020). Throughout modern Turkish history, both left- and right-wing political actors have viewed conservative gender norms as a distinguishing character of the so-called cultural authenticity and national belonging (Coşar 2007). In the current AKP rule, what we witness is the interweaving of gender politics with the simultaneous processes of neo-liberalization, Islamization, and ethno-nationalist politics that serve the AKP’s dramatic reshuffling of the gender regime towards an Islamically accentuated anti-genderism and its use of political homophobia as a major fault line in defining “us versus them.”

According to Ilga’s 2023 Rainbow Index, Turkey ranks as the second worst country in Europe in terms of anti-LGBTI+ attacks and rights violations (Ilga 2023). State involvement in discrimination against LGBTI+ people has become systematic under AKP rule in the form of denying LGBTI+ rights and taking an active part in discriminatory practices at discursive, policy, and ideological levels (Muedini 2021). The AKP adopts anti-LGBTI+ attitudes as an expression of “authentic” national and

religious identity and defines the nation's image with "traditional" family values and rejection of non-normative sexualities (Savcı 2021). This heteronationalism manifests a populist logic in the sense that it employs homophobia as a "litmus test" to identify who belongs to the nation and excludes LGBTI+ people from the definition of the "ideal" people (Unal 2023b). LGBTI+ lifestyles and rights claims are not only considered to be incommensurable with the so-called Turkish values, but they are also framed as a fundamental threat to "our way of living." This threat perception is utilized to mobilize a politics of fear around salient political issues (national belonging, culture, and family) by turning them into existential threats.

Especially in conjunction with the party's dramatic drift towards authoritarianism in the post-2011 period, discursive politics has become a key arena for the party to achieve hegemony in coding socially constructed meanings of gender as antithetical to the "authentic" culture and heterosexual family imaginary (Arat 2022; Cindoglu and Unal 2017; Kandiyoti 2016; Unal 2024). In the early 2010s, the AKP's anti-gender, neo-conservative populist project became implicated in hateful discursive statements that have become a staple of the party's provocative and antagonistic communication style. Former State Minister for Women and Family Affairs, Aliye Kavaf stated that she believes "homosexuality is a biological disorder, a disease . . . something that needs to be treated," while former Minister of the Interior İdris Naim Şahin associated homosexuality with immorality, indecency, and inhuman situations (Arat and Nuñez 2017). In a similar vein, in 2013, Türkan Dağoğlu, deputy chair of the Committee on Health, Family, Labor, and Social Affairs in the parliament said that "LGBT is a behavior that is outside the bounds of normality" (Engin 2015).

Parallel to this proliferation of homophobic discourse, the 2010s witnessed an unprecedented increase in the public visibility and empowerment of queer and sexual rights organizations, which Özbay and Öktem (2021) call Turkey's "queer times." In 2013, during the Gezi Park uprisings, a nationwide cycle of urban protests against rising authoritarianism, LGBTI+ people were particularly visible, actively taking part in counter-hegemonic resistances both at individual and organizational levels. Cooperating with a variety of groups from various movements, they formed intersectional coalitions, which influenced both the LGBTI+ movement and the Gezi protests (Ünan 2015). In this period, the proliferation of LGBTI+ mobilization created new possibilities for dissemination of queer culture and inspired new forms of challenging dominant gender norms.

Pride walks, organized since 2003, exemplify the expansion of LGBTI+ social and physical spaces. Despite the authorities' restrictions, LGBTI+ activists have successfully mobilized by adopting dissident slogans such as "we will not leave the streets and you will get used to us" and making effective use of digital platforms (Altay 2022; Unal 2023a). However, since 2015 when pride walks were banned for the first time, governmental authorities have imposed increasing restrictions on pride walks and LGBTI+ public visibility in general. In the aftermath of the failed coup d'état in 2016, a state of emergency was declared, which lasted for two years and provided the government with the pretext to carry out a massive but selective crackdown on civil society, particularly targeting the rights groups deemed as "immoral," namely feminist and LGBTI+ activists. In the post-2019 period, the government authorities imposed further restrictions on pride walks and feminist protests by instrumentalizing the COVID-19 pandemic to justify the suppression of

minoritized subjects. In 2020, President of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) Ali Erbaş claimed during a weekly sermon that homosexuality causes pandemics and diseases. Upon the public uproar, AKP leader and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said what Erbaş said was totally right and that “an attack against the Diyanet chief is an attack on the state” (France24 2020).

In the new presidential system, which was put into force in 2017 and paved the way for Erdoğan to personify the state in his political persona, contestations around gender and sexuality, and hate speech against LGBTI+ people have reached new heights with a securitization logic, i.e. an extreme and strategic version of politicization of gender and non-normative sexualities constructing existential threats that require emergency measures beyond the normal bounds of political procedure (Buzan et al. 1998; Unal 2023b). A significant policy issue at the center of the growing securitization of gender has been the Istanbul Convention (IC, formally the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence), a comprehensive international agreement that requires states to address violence against women as a form of gender-based violence and to take anti-violence measures. Turkey was one of the first countries to initiate and sign the IC in 2011 and ratified it in 2012 with the support of all political parties in the parliament. The IC came into force in August 2014, making Turkey liable to prevent any form of violence based on gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. While the AKP celebrated the ratification of the IC and regarded it as a “matter of national pride” in 2011 (Erdoğan 2011), in the context of democratic backsliding, it completely abandoned this celebratory approach by turning the IC into a problem space. The party sought to justify Turkey’s withdrawal from the IC, claiming that the “gender ideology” of the IC allowed gender identification independent of biological sex, granted a legal status to homosexuality and transgenderism, and dismantled the “ideal” family structure in Turkey (Altan-Olcay and Oder 2021).

In this period, the securitization of gender and the othering of LGBTI+ people have become a core of the party’s populist logic based on antagonistic binaries dividing the society into two irreconcilable camps, namely the “good and virtuous” people and the “corrupt and evil” elites and enemies (political and cultural elites, opponent political and civil society actors, foreign states, international organizations). During the 2023 elections, the party’s homophobic discourse and securitization logic were consolidated and served as a tool of feeding into pernicious polarization, which McCoy and Somer (2021) define as the division of society into mutually distrustful camps that fosters autocratization and incentivizes citizens and political actors to endorse non-democratic action.

The 2023 elections

Elections operate as carefully orchestrated legitimization strategies for authoritarian regimes in safeguarding and bolstering the status quo (Beetham 2013). For authoritarian populist leaders, securitization of elections serves to trigger ontological insecurities and intensify the affective politics through which they can appeal to negative emotions such as fear, anger, and hate, and claim to be the savior who can deliver urgent action against existential threats (Nai 2021; Şahin 2021). Legitimation

claims in times of elections play a significant role in leading to electoral success. Justifying hegemonic political actors' ideological, discursive, performance, and policy-based strategies, they serve multiple objectives such as the reproduction of the regime hegemony, clientelist ties, privileges, and political alliances (Homolar and Scholz 2019).

In Turkey, elections have always been pivotal both in democratization processes and in the context of democratic backsliding (Tepe and Alemdaroğlu 2021). The 2023 elections represented a critical juncture for the AKP to consolidate its two-decade-long rule, and appeal to both domestic and international audiences to portray its governance model as superior and fair in the face of increasing allegations of autocratization (Esen and Gumuscu 2023; Ugur-Cinar 2023). As a party that shifted from being a challenger of the regime to a hegemonic power, the AKP attributes symbolic importance to Turkey's centennial in 2023, calling it the "Century of Turkey". The symbolization of 2023 elections as a "new chapter" in Turkish history and politics has provided the AKP with rhetorical tools to effectively communicate the party rule's omnipresence, capabilities, and hegemony and appeals to people emotionally.

Previous research demonstrates that populist parties that have stayed in power for long enough need to keep their Manichean political logic perpetual and legitimize it through constant attempts to (re)construct enemies (Balta et al. 2022; Destradi et al. 2021). In the AKP's case, construction of enemies stems not only from political polarization, i.e. ideological discrepancies and political cleavages, but also from affective polarization, feeding into the definition of ingroups and outgroups through negative affects such as hate, resentment, and rage (Harteveld et al. 2022). Scholars of populist public communication underline that antagonistic mobilization of negative emotions such as continuous provocations including insults, hate speech, dehumanization, and dramatization, help illiberal political actors construct relations of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, legitimizing hostile emotional reactions towards otherized groups, they serve to gain public support for hateful politics (Hameleers et al. 2017; Widmann 2021).

Othering, scapegoating, and vilification as processes of differentiation and demarcation between "us" and "them" have been adamantly apparent in the AKP's 2023 electoral propaganda from the beginning. Manifesting the antagonistic tenets of populist discourse, the AKP relied on an affective language, polarization, simplification, stereotyping, and hate speech and utilized anti-genderism and homophobia to reinforce its juxtaposition of "us" versus "them." Particularly targeting LGBTI+ identities, it also translated homophobic discourse into prognostic policy visions aimed at responding to threat perceptions associated with perceived enemies.

Building its entire election propaganda around negative emotions and a polarizing discourse, the AKP employed the term "LGBT" as an empty signifier, i.e. an ambiguous, imprecise, and situational category, to denote the enemies of the nation that are allegedly guilty of disintegrating the national moral fabric. This use of "LGBT" was stretched and molded to assemble a wide range of anti-gender discourses as coalescing forces in the reinforcement of the "us" versus "them" logic. As such, the party not only constructed threat perceptions around gender and framed LGBTI+ people as "perverse, criminal, and alien," but also stigmatized any oppositional

project, whether it supports “gender ideology” or not, by labeling it “LGBT.” In this sense, it regarded “LGBT” as a carrier for a decadent ideology subverting the “natural” gender order and a signifier for the party’s epistemological, ideological, and moralistic opposition to non-normative sexualities and political projects related to them.

Methodology

The qualitative data in this article mainly focus on the political speeches of the AKP leadership, more specifically President Erdoğan, who is known for fostering a strong leadership cult around himself based on authoritarianism, demagoguery, machoism, and neopatrimonialism (Çınar 2018; Eksi and Wood 2019). The personification of the state in Erdoğan’s persona and the increasing significance of the personality cult in the party is taken into account in data collection. The analysis below notes that personality cult functions as a political legitimation strategy that reinforces a leader’s position in the absence of democratic methods of legitimation (Sperling 2016). The data include Erdoğan’s speech acts during the 2023 general and presidential election campaigns as well as his day-to-day public communication activities such as political commentaries, interviews, and public speeches during the period between October 2022 and April 2023 preceding the election campaigns and in the immediate aftermath of the elections (until September 2023). Wherever relevant, examples of other senior AKP officials’ speeches echoing and amplifying Erdoğan’s rhetoric were also incorporated into the data. An online search was made in the archives of various news outlets representing a broad spectrum of ideological positions (*Bianet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Diken*, *Gazate Duvar*, *Kaos GL*, *T24*, *Yeni Şafak*) and on the website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (TCCB), which contains the transcriptions of Erdoğan’s speeches and interviews. The data were collected with a focus on speech acts that included references to key search words such as LGBT, LGBT lobby, LGBT ideology, gender, and family.

Adopting Wodak’s (2015) discourse–historical approach (DHA), I analyze these data by foregrounding attention to the context-dependent and gendered rhetorical strategies that serve the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Regarding discourses as context-dependent semiotic practices, the DHA stresses the importance of macro-level contextualization of texts and aims to expose their situatedness in the socio-political historical context (Wodak and Nugara 2017). Reisigl and Wodak (2009) underline that nomination (how events/objects/persons are referred to) and predication (what characteristics are attributed to them) play a key role in populist discursive strategies to distinguish between the ingroup and outgroup. The DHA provides the tools to scrutinize what arguments, political agendas, and modalities of power are served through processes of nomination and predication, and the othering realized through them. Relating discourse examples to the macro-level contextualization, I identify the AKP’s strategies and argumentative schemes of enemy construction, discuss their situatedness in the current context of pernicious polarization in Turkey, and highlight their political implications leading to extreme securitization policies.

Below, I discuss three main modalities in the AKP’s antagonistic use of the label “LGBT,” namely, culturalist rhetoric and nativist technology of othering at the

intersection of Islam and anti-genderism, defining and vilifying political opponents as inner enemies, and institutionalization of anti-LGBTI+ discourse through legal action. These discursive modalities and their institutionalization expose the gendered construction of fear, moral panic, and insecurities that lie at the heart of the AKP's populist politics and highlight that the party's construction of ingroups and outgroups is highly gender dependent.

Culturalist rhetoric enacting nativism at the intersection of Islam and anti-genderism

The AKP's anti-LGBTI+ culturalist election propaganda frames "LGBT" as deviancy with a recourse to a culture talk that reifies culture with attempts to establish group membership based on self/other confrontation (Abji et al. 2019). It draws on the idea that the so-called authentic Turkish culture based on Islam as a moral guidance framework and heteronormative family ideal cannot be reconciled with non-normative sexualities. As a result, LGBTI+ lifestyles and rights claims are pushed out of the national with the strategic use of the label "LGBT" as the constitutive outside of the Turkish culture and nation and framed as a threat to the ingroup identity that needs to be eradicated. The AKP uses various metaphorical framing devices to invoke a sense of urgent concern and a shared sense of vulnerability *vis-à-vis* the so-called dangers of "LGBT." In election rallies and other speech acts, Erdoğan and other senior AKP officials systematically deemed LGBTI+ individuals as "perverts," "deviants," "viruses" and defined "LGBT ideology" as "heresy" (Gazete Duvar English 2023b; Kaos GL 2023).

Reicher et al. (2008) outline the core mechanisms in the construction of collective hate towards outgroups as follows: (i) the construction of an ingroup; (ii) the definition of targets as external to the ingroup; (iii) the representation of these targets as endangering ingroup identity; (iv) the championing of the ingroup as (uniquely) good; and (v) embracing the eradication of the outgroup as necessary to the defense of virtue. In line with what Richer et al. (2008) suggest, the AKP's culturalist rhetoric skillfully defines the abstract category of "LGBT" as the "other" of Islamically accentuated gender nativism and turns it into a threatful enemy, while at the same time celebrating the moral superiority of the ingroup. In this narrative ecology, the outgroup is ostracized through a denialist rhetoric that rejects the existence and authenticity of the LGBTI+ identity and its belonging in the nation.

At a rally in İzmir, president Erdoğan said: "In this nation, the foundations of the family are stable. LGBT will not emerge in this country" (T24 2023). He reiterated the same denialist stance on other occasions, stating that "the thing called LGBT is alien to our playbook" (Bianet 2022). The "foreignness" of "LGBT" is also justified through a geopolitical narrative that frames it as a global conspiracy to destroy the heterosexual family: "This issue also has a global dimension. We are aware of the global plans of dark powers targeting the family structure in the age we live in" (Yeni Şafak 2023a).

A constitutive aspect in the AKP's culturalist rhetoric is the notion of sacred familialism and "family-archal." The notion "family-archal" originates from Erdoğan's 2020 statement that "Turkey is not a patriarchal or matriarchal, but a 'family-archal' nation ... The concept of family is so sensitive and important to us" (Arti Gercek 2020). Sacred familialism, an ideology and policy perspective built

on the role of women as devoted care providers and blessed mothers, has become increasingly evident in conjunction with the AKP's illiberal transformation, and materialized in family-oriented social policies and pro-governmental grassroots activism (Adak 2023; Akkan 2018). Using the notion of "family-archal" as a tool to juxtapose the "morally superior" traditional values with "deviant" norms, the AKP enacts a crisis-driven narrative that imagines the heterosexual family under the influence of "pervert" ideologies. Erdoğan states:

The family structure is what makes societies strong and what weakens them ... This is the main reason for the attacks on the family structure in many countries in recent years ... We have never allowed the attempts of these perverted movements to target our family structure and our youth in our country ... (Yeni Şafak 2023a)

In this crisis-driven narrative ecology, the Islam-gender nexus provides the AKP with useful tools to justify its interlocking framing of the idealized majority as morally superior, the otherized group as deviant, and unworthy of recognition, and its ideology as alien and threatening. The Islam-gender nexus implies that the AKP's gender grammar is deeply intertwined with the politicization of Islam constructing self-other antagonisms through a moral politics (Unal 2022). The simultaneous utilization of religious and gendered tropes and language lays out the discursive terrain to map out the boundaries of gender nativism and imparts gendered political imaginaries to contextualize the "purity and authenticity" of the people.

Stressing Muslim belonging as a distinguishing marker of gender nativism, Erdoğan states:

As a country where 99 percent of the population is Muslim, it is impossible for us to accept this poison [LGBT] ... We, as the AK Party, can never look positively at LGBT with our value judgments ... This is a requirement of our religion, we look at this issue from here ... (Kaos GL 2023)

This simultaneous utilization of gender and religious tropes also resonates in the speech acts of other senior officials in the party: "We are not LGBT children like you ... we are children of Ayatul Kursi [a verse of the Quran]" (Diken 2022b).

As the statements above suggest, the Islam-gender nexus stands at the center of the party's hegemonic attempts to construct an imagined antagonism between "the native and the national" (*yerli ve milli*) and "LGBT." As such, it serves to express gender nativist claims with a persistent emphasis on the Islamic tradition understood as a panacea to the "morally corrupt gender ideology."

The use of "LGBT" as an empty signifier to designate "inner enemies"

Previous studies have underlined that notions such as LGBT, LGBT lobby, gender ideology, and genderism serve as catch-all terms and constitute a canvas for a range of anti-gender grievances around reproductive and trans-gender rights, gender violence, and the inclusion of gender equality in school curricula (Kuhar and Patternotte 2017; Mayer and Sauer 2017). Throughout the 2023 election process,

the categories of “us” and “them” were continuously reflected, reproduced, and transmitted in the AKP’s antagonistic use of “LGBT” as an empty signifier to frame political opponents as enemies. The framing of political opponents as enemies happens when space for deliberation is blocked and political conflicts are turned into antagonistic positions where the opponents are categorically vilified and dehumanized through strong affective registers (Mouffe 2013). Adopting this antagonistic logic, the AKP’s skillfully crafted rhetoric functions as a Schmittian friend–enemy distinction that regards politics as the act of defining who are part of your community and who are not and thus reduces it to an existential distinction between friend and enemy. It securitizes and blames political opponents for being hijackers of the national will, terrorists, anti-family, and anti-religion and constantly uses gendered registers to juxtapose their alleged “deviancy” with the “purity” and victimhood of the “homogenous” people. Claiming political competence and moral superiority, the AKP has always claimed to be the savior, guardian, and servant of the people and attacked political opponents, undermining their character by claiming that they are incompetent to govern (Çınar 2018; Yılmaz et al. 2023). In the 2023 elections, this enemy category into which the political elites and opposition actors would be placed was expanded with gendered claims that opponent actors are dangerous, terrorist, and immoral because they are “pro-LGBT”.

The category of “LGBT” as an empty signifier was useful for the party on many levels. By labeling the opposition “pro-LGBT,” the AKP not only constructed a crisis narrative around “gender ideology” and presented it as a Trojan horse to demolish the family institution, but also identified a new crisis narrative where ferocious “inner enemies” allegedly cooperate with “perverse” political agendas. In doing so, the party aimed to bond with the people over concerns that the “sinister” agendas propagated by “inner enemies” were radically changing the country and that if these enemies come to power through elections, they will plunder the moral structure of the country.

Erdoğan’s election rallies centered heavily on these concerns constructed around ontological insecurities. “14 May will be a day to teach a lesson to those who support LGBT,” he stated in an election rally in the province of Gaziantep on April 22, 2023 (Gazete Duvar English 2023b). “We will bury those pro-LGBT in the ballot box,” he told the crowd at his rally in İstanbul (Kaos GL 2023). This antagonistic framing of “LGBT” has continued throughout Erdoğan’s election propaganda, featuring as a staple of the AKP’s polarizing politics at rallies in fourteen different cities (Kaos GL 2023). On different occasions, Erdoğan called the opposition coalition known as the Table of Six the “Rainbow Table” that “intends to pave the way for perverted, terrorist movements and destroy the family institution” and urged the public not to bring the Table of Six into office:

My nation will not give an opportunity to these perverts, nor to those who turn a blind eye to these movements . . . It will not allow this Rainbow Table to be set up under the name LGBT . . . (TCCB 2023a)

A major legitimization strategy in this gendered ordeal to vilify “inner enemies” is post-truth epistemology, i.e. the blurring of the boundaries between facts and lies (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Post-truth discourse and its tools such as mis/disinformation,

“alternative facts,” conspiracy theories, and the general distrust of expert knowledge are intrinsically linked to the populist juxtaposition of the “common sense” wisdom of ordinary people with the “expert knowledge” of elites (Waisbord 2018). Populist actors utilize post-truth discourse to mobilize their own alternative truth narratives that aim to promote a Manichean form of politics around key issues such as gender, religion, and national identity.

The AKP’s claim that the opposition will legalize same-sex marriage has been operational during the election period to perpetuate the crisis narrative around non-normative sexualities. However, it is an ungrounded claim since no opposition party declared commitment to such a policy vision neither during the election period nor before (Teyit 2023). When the party programs and the joint memorandum text of the opposition are examined, it is seen that there is no promise regarding LGBTI+ people and the issue of non-normative sexualities is non-existent in the opposition bloc’s political texts and discourses.

Some Table of Six leaders have made positive and negative statements about LGBTI+ in the past, displaying a wide array of positions. In 2022, the CHP conveyed a pro-LGBTI+ message on billboards, stating that “sexual orientation will no longer be a disadvantage by law,” but this statement was not included in the election promises. On the other hand, Islamist Felicity Party’s leader Temel Karamollaoğlu adopted an anti-gender perspective, stating that the heterosexual family is under threat because of the rising “LGBT” claims, and a traditional family consists of only a man and woman (Yeni Şafak 2023b). In contrast to these anti-gender statements and ambiguous and strategic pro-LGBTI+ discourse of the Nation Alliance partners, the People’s Democracy Party (Halkların Demokrasi Partisi; HDP), a party not included in the Nation Alliance but a significant force in opposition politics, has for a long time unambiguously and openly declared support for LGBTI+ rights. Its party program places a strong emphasis on anti-discrimination protections and social policies for LGBTI+ people but the party made no election promise for legalizing same-sex marriage.

In a nutshell, the framing of the main opposition bloc as “LGBT” ignores the heterogeneity among the opposition actors with regard to the support for LGBTI+ rights. Drawing on post-truth epistemology, it fabricates a crisis narrative where people are urged to seek action and resolution through their electoral behavior to escape the threats associated with the so-called pro-LGBT agenda of the opposition. As Kinnvall and Svensson (2022) argue, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories flourish in situations of societal distress. Thanks to this post-truth epistemology, the AKP was able to categorically label the opposition actors as “LGBT” regardless of their support for LGBTI+ rights and turned politics into a zero-sum game between “good and evil.” In an election rally in the northern Black Sea region, Erdoğan stated: “We will make our choice either among those who support the family institution or among those who will make LGBT people haunt us” (Kaos GL 2023).

Normalizing scapegoating, post-truth epistemology, and crisis-driven imaginaries, this antagonistic performance of gendered populist logic conveys the message that only the AKP can alleviate the fears and anxieties triggered by “gender ideology” and its actors.

Institutionalization of anti-LGBTI+ discourse through legal action

In illiberal contexts, processes of stigmatization and political manipulation of LGBTI+ issues are rarely limited to the discursive realm. They are often coupled with political attempts to reproduce and reinforce political homophobia at policy level and by law (Nuñez-Mietz and Fernando 2019; Suchland 2018; Zuk and Zuk 2021). During the 2023 elections, crackdown on LGBTI+ rights in policy and the legal realm have featured as a prominent election promise in the rhetoric of the People's Alliance. In March 2023, the AKP formed political coalitions with two Islamist fundamentalist parties, the New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah Partisi; YRP) and the Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi; HÜDA-PAR) that adopt hardline anti-gender positions, specifically demanding the closing down of all LGBTI+ associations along with other anti-gender demands such as the annulment of Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and Combating Domestic Violence and women's right to alimony. In initiating these coalitions, the AKP aimed to mobilize the interconnections, linkages, and resonances between distinct forms of anti-gender political forces around the goal to expand political homophobia and anti-gender politics.

Discourse coalitions, i.e. a group of actors who mobilize around a particular set of discursive tools and argumentative schemes in a certain policy area, display a shared political will to enact policymaking especially about a problematized policy issue that allegedly requires urgent intervention (Hajer 1993). These coalitions prepare the ground for a discourse to resonate in the policy realm and pave the way towards discourse institutionalization, i.e. legal and policy action through which hegemonic discourses can be tied to specific institutions. Hajer (1993, 48) states that discourse institutionalization will occur if it meets two conditions: certain positions, practices and the conceptual machinery (storylines, metaphors, argumentative schemes, etc.) related to a discourse dominate the discursive space and central actors are forced to accept the rhetorical power of a new discourse; and the ideas of a given discourse infiltrate into the institutional practices of the political domain. In this sense, discourse coalitions can be regarded as a crucial step for anti-gender actors to translate the discursive production of reality into policy practices and legislation (Edenborg 2023). Along these lines, the AKP's newly forged political alliances with homophobic Islamist parties indicate an important political maneuver aimed at a comprehensive discourse institutionalization that is expected to introduce significant changes in the civil law, law of associations, and the constitution.

The AKP's election promise to introduce anti-LGBTI+ constitutional amendments constitutes a significant part of its efforts to institutionalize anti-LGBTI+ discourse. This promise can be dated back to the party's antagonistic counter-move in the fall of 2022 enacted in response to the CHP's proposal to secure women's right to veil through legal arrangements (Hürriyet Daily News 2022). The CHP's draft law proposal was strategically intended to express the claim that the party was moving away from extreme secularism, historically embodied in its negative approach to Islamic veiling, towards more inclusive policies beyond the secular-pious dichotomy. To counteract this strategic move, the AKP denied the problem space that the CHP aimed to create around Islamic veiling and argued that the AKP is the guardian of women's right to veil, and Islamic veiling represents no more a problematic policy area in Turkey. Reframing the contours of the antagonistic contention with the CHP, the AKP instead

hinted at “LGBT” as the “real” problem space that threatens the welfare of the Turkish nation and proposed a more expansive constitutional amendment that would also secure the institution of the heterosexual family.

At the time of the writing, this proposal was accepted in the parliamentary constitutional commission, but it had not yet been discussed in the general assembly of the parliament. Although it has not yet been codified, it is kept on the agenda with the possibility of utilizing it as a means of political currency at a contentious political moment. Thus, we cannot deny that it is already creating new forms of power to implement *de facto* socio-political changes and present the discursive construction of the so-called “LGBT” problem as a metanarrative. As such, it operates both as an institutionalist policy perspective and a form of discursive governance that enacts “normative mechanisms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation” without necessarily introducing major policy changes (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016, 2). Both modalities of power profoundly shape public deliberations on gender and sexual orientation in Turkey, enacting a strategic, intentional, and ideological moral panic around “LGBT” to normalize its stigmatization and othering.

Simply put, this draft proposal aims to change Article 41 of the constitution on the protection of the family and children’s rights, expanding its scope in such a way as to also include the protection of the marriage union. The current article defines marriage union with a gender-neutral terminology as an institution based on equality between spouses. After the amendment, this clause will be changed with the addition of the provision “marriage union can only be established between a man and a woman” (Gazete Duvar English 2023a). The proposal text presented to the parliament legitimizes this amendment by resorting to a crisis narrative that is alarmed about the alleged dangers and threats targeting the heterosexual family and calls on the state to take action on this issue: “It is the primary duty of the state to protect the family structure, which is the basis of Turkish society, and to take precautions against all kinds of danger, threat, attack, corruption and perversion against the family” (Diken 2022a).

In a parliamentary speech during the election campaign, Erdoğan made clear that the alarmist tone of the anti-LGBTI+ draft legislation was central to the party’s goal to further trigger the “us versus them” logic in the polarized election context:

We submitted our constitutional amendment proposal to the discretion of our Assembly with the aim to protect the institution of the family from deviant currents . . . While we are protecting the family in all its sanctity, those of you who are at this Table of Six, come out and say openly and manfully who defends LGBT and who does not . . . I believe that no member of parliament . . . will say “no” to the constitutional amendment . . . Neither our nation nor our women nor history will forgive those who behave in the opposite direction. (TCCB 2023b)

Erdoğan suggests that parliamentary discussions in the general parliamentary assembly will serve as a “litmus test” to differentiate between the “inner enemies” betraying the nation and putting the “national will” at risk, and the saviors of the people “who are in favor of the expansion of the freedoms” (TCCB 2023b).

However, the AKP's draft proposal and Erdoğan's reference to the strategic importance of this proposal cannot only be seen as a distorted feature of the party's election strategy. It should also be understood as a sign that the AKP shall attempt to reinforce its discursive governance of gender and sexuality in its new term by institutionalizing homophobic discourse with emergency legislation that eradicates the political space for democratic public deliberation and political responsiveness. Moffitt (2015, 201) argues that in illiberal populist contexts, "the 'slow politics' of consensus and negotiation are presented as ineffectual, while strong and decisive political action, unencumbered by procedural checks and balances, are seen as desirable." Emphasizing that the party's draft proposal is a move to eliminate slow politics, an anonymous AKP official speaking to an online news outlet stated:

Actually, closing down LGBTI+ associations would have been possible with an amendment to the law on associations. However, they would apply to the high courts, and we cannot know the decisions that will come out of there. *We need to quickly get rid of the organized form of this spreading perversion.* (Diken 2023) (emphasis added)

At the current juncture, the AKP's proliferation, normalization, and mainstreaming of political homophobia operates in tandem with the "crisisification of public policy making," which involves making changes to collective policy-making processes in line with a crisis-oriented thinking, a sense of urgency and exceptionality, and sets a political agenda to act upon securitized policy areas and prioritize speed in decision-making (Rhinard 2019). It renders concerns about insecurity and crisis the norm, rather than an exception to normal ways of thinking and acting in politics. In this sense, the party's plans to enact anti-LGBTI+ legislation along with its discursive governance of gender and sexuality work towards restructuring politics as crisis management against gendered threats, and perpetuates the storylines, argumentative schemes, and symbolic politics that are integral to its authoritarian regime.

Conclusion

This article explored the discursive modalities of the AKP's 2023 election propaganda that aimed to construct ontological insecurities around gender and sexuality and disseminate the projection of an "impending doom" which cannot be reversed if left to the mechanisms of "politics as usual" (Moffitt 2016, 123). Fabricated threat perceptions, crisis situations, and emergency political action directed against "gender ideology" have been among the AKP's key *modus operandi* in the recent era. This article highlighted the discursive politics of a particular political moment in the trajectory of the AKP's illiberal political transformation where we can clearly witness the transformation of the key registers of the party's populist logic to a strikingly gendered engineering of the "enemy" with a recourse to an anti-gender political lexicon. It discussed how a gendered performance of crisis fabricated around "LGBT" during the 2023 elections provided the AKP a moral ground to normalize a Manichean political logic while avoiding blame and boosting its savior role and guardianship over Muslim belonging and cultural authenticity. As polarization in society and politics escalated with aggressive and hateful language, political homophobia has become an

effective strategy for the AKP to mobilize voters through the exploitation of vernacular societal conservatism and divert the public attention from rising inequalities and attacks on democracy towards a populist “us versus them” logic. In this sense, the party’s strategic utilization of political homophobia for political gains emerged as an acute symptom of its dramatic assaults on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Although the utilization of political homophobia and the manipulation of topics related to sexual orientation proved to be a useful election strategy for the AKP to perpetuate its antagonistic agendas, the effects and repercussions of this political maneuver are longstanding and thus are not limited to election times. Homophobic imaginaries, strategies of rationalization, and policy perspectives are not just tools in the hands of illiberal political leaders to augment and normalize Manichean politics and achieve political gains, but they have long-lasting, adverse consequences on real people’s lives. The hateful rhetoric of political homophobia targets and significantly harms LGBTI+ people in every aspect of their lives through discursive governance.

Moreover, in contexts where political homophobia is integrated into the state agenda, we witness that it rarely remains confined to the discursive level. To underscore this, this article stressed that at the current political juncture in Turkey, processes of stigmatization and political manipulation of LGBTI+ issues are coupled with attempts to institutionalize political homophobia at policy level and by law. This discourse institutionalization not only consolidates hegemonic discourses by tying them to specific institutions, but also legitimizes emergency political action by presenting problematized policy areas as signs of impending doom and normalizes crisisification of policy making. As a result, this article concludes that to unravel the operating modalities of the enduring hegemony of the AKP’s authoritarian rule, it is crucial to investigate the ways in which the party’s populist logic constructs gendered crisis situations by tapping into fear and hatred and depicts the present as a decisive stage in an unfolding crisis.

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