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The Erdoğan Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Performance and Actuality in an Authoritarian Context

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Abstract
This article analyses the Erdoğan government's policy response to the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the abundant use of moral antagonisms in his discourse, Erdoğan did not attempt to politicize the pandemic, instead framing it as a global health crisis and presenting the government's public health policies as expert-driven and competent. However, this expert-driven approach was largely a performance. Without a system of democratic oversight or a free media to scrutinize government policies, the Erdoğan government could systematically undercount COVID-19 cases and disregard its own public health restrictions, all the while spreading its narrative of competence and success. Competitive policymaking by opposition-controlled municipalities and criticism from a strong doctors' association had relatively limited ability to discredit the government. The public opinion data we present reveal broad-based support for the government's COVID policies. Our article highlights how authoritarian institutions allow governments to sustain a gap between performance and actuality, granting their leaders greater possibilities to claim policy success.

As most of the rich Western countries were suddenly struck by the coronavirus pandemic and seemed shockingly helpless with rising death tolls and stories of overwhelmed hospitals, Turkey was often mentioned in international comparisons as a success story due to having a relatively low number of deaths attributed to the coronavirus (for example, see Bryza 2020, Guerin 2020). Even though official statistics were contested by domestic experts and international observers, and even granting that the death toll may in fact be twice as high as the government announced, Turkey appeared to have outperformed expectations in the spring of 2020.

Whatever the real severity of Turkey's first COVID-19 wave and, if it was relatively mild, whatever the real reasons for that – the youth of the population, the lack

of nursing homes and the relative abundance of intensive-care units (ICUs) were among the potential structural reasons suggested, alongside the implementation of strict restrictions – the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of Turkey, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was taking the credit. Their claims to success were somewhat believable. The government did take important lockdown measures meant to reduce social contact, and previous AKP governments had built a universal healthcare system capable of reaching a great majority of the population where they live, as well as new hospitals – a consequence of the construction-based accumulation regime. These perceptions were also reflected in the immediate boost Erdoğan enjoyed in his approval ratings during the first COVID wave (see Figure 1), despite the highly polarized environment of Turkish politics. Yet the narrative of successful management would take a blow in autumn 2020, when a second, more severe, wave of contagion stretched the healthcare system to its limits and the government confessed that it was systematically undercounting the number of COVID cases. Things appeared even worse in spring 2021, when a third wave of infections made Turkey the country with the highest number of infections worldwide in terms of daily new cases per capita (*New York Times* 2021).

How should we understand Turkey's response to the pandemic? We answer the three guiding questions posed by the editors of this special issue for the case of Turkey: how has the Erdoğan government responded to the pandemic, how has it framed the politics of the pandemic, and how did the pandemic affect the popularity of the Erdoğan government? In this way we aim to shed light on the political logic and consequences of the Erdoğan government's response to the pandemic. Using journalistic sources, the literature on Turkey's experience with the pandemic and some primary sources, such as politicians' speeches, we reconstruct in chronological sequence the main elements of the government's pandemic policies and communication strategy. Since the context is important to understand the effects of these policies, we also highlight critical political events and processes that marked the period under study. Finally, we use data from two public opinion surveys to analyse voters' perceptions.

First we show that, constrained by an already threatening economic crisis, Erdoğan initially chose to appear 'hands off' in his response to the pandemic, seemingly delegating many critical decisions to the health ministry and even to regional authorities (Kemahlıoğlu and Yeğen 2021). Authorities have, sooner or later, implemented major public health measures such as lockdowns, mask mandates and travel restrictions. Although these were not publicly challenged by Erdoğan, their consistency and efficacy were constrained by Erdoğan's need to maintain economic activity, patronage and mobilization in order to sustain his political support.

In terms of the framing of the crisis, the AKP government diverged from the infamous examples of some populist leaders, such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro. The government did not politicize the pandemic – neither at the onset, nor later on. In his speeches, Erdoğan did not link the coronavirus pandemic to populist narratives – that is, the pandemic or policies used to address it were not portrayed as stemming from or creating a conflict between the 'real people' and their 'enemies'. Instead, the pandemic was framed as a global health crisis: 'the biggest crisis humankind faced with in modern times' in Erdoğan's words (2021a). Even as the first wave subsided and Erdoğan gradually returned to his usual
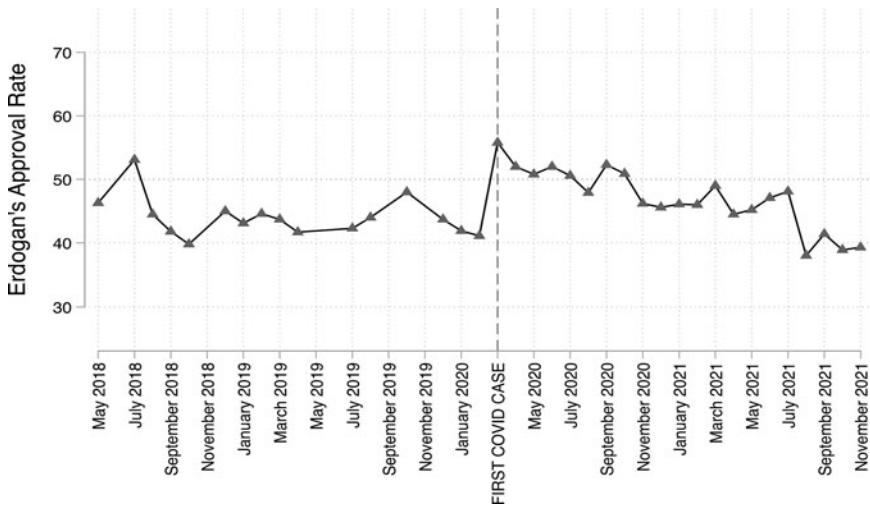
Figure 1. Erdoğan's Job Approval Rate (%) since May 2018
Source: MetroPoll, Turkey's Pulse Surveys.
Note: Surveys were conducted face-to-face until the onset of the pandemic, and via phone from March 2020 onwards.

prominence and visibility, the government tried to maintain the appearance that the crisis was managed by experts and bureaucrats, rather than by Erdoğan. However, whenever opposition actors and professional organizations cast serious doubt on the truthfulness of the government's claim that the pandemic was managed professionally and adequately, they were met with accusations and threats by regime actors (Kisa 2021), indicating that the government's 'deference to expertise' was largely a performance, one rendered possible by Turkey's authoritarian institutions. We suggest that Erdoğan's absolute power in the political system is key to understanding his policies and rhetoric during this period: Erdoğan could continue paying lip-service to the discourse of 'expertise' and support some of the radical preventive measures only because he was not constrained by oversight institutions or by a free press and usually was in a position to block policies and information flows that would threaten his political interests.

In terms of public support, the government's strategy was successful, especially during the first year. Our data suggest that the technocratic framing of the response and the official narrative of success convinced most of the public, including some in the opposition, that the government was doing a good job of handling the crisis. A jump in Erdoğan's approval ratings was registered immediately after the beginning of the crisis. Again, in order to understand the government's success in shaping public opinion during the crisis, we need to take into account how authoritarian institutions facilitate certain government behaviours. In addition to the lack of transparency in the production of COVID statistics, control over the mainstream media environment allowed the government to spread a narrative of 'Turkish success versus Western failures' during the COVID crisis, and appeal to the nationalist sentiments of its base (Gülseven 2021). In time, and probably as the government's

inconsistent and essentially self-interested handling of the crisis became more visible, the approval rates of Erdoğan slid back towards their pre-pandemic levels. Yet, even by the end of 2021, the majority of Turkish people evaluated the government's COVID policies as successful.

This article contributes to the growing literature on Turkey's COVID response by analysing a longer temporal period, by pointing out how authoritarian institutions might have played a role in the Erdoğan government's policy choices, and by using two public opinion surveys to evaluate the success of these policies. Our discussion of the Erdoğan government's response to the pandemic also adds to the broader debate on the policy choices of populists. First, it demonstrates that populist leaders are selective and strategic in the ways they form their political narratives. Second, by emphasizing the gap between rhetoric and reality in the Erdoğan government's policy response, we draw attention to the importance of institutional and political constraints (or the lack thereof) in shaping the *political* consequences of pandemic policies. The political costs and benefits of a set of policies that look similar may in reality be quite different, not only because the policies implemented are in fact *not* so similar, but also because the institutional context mediates how the public experiences and perceives policy.

The next section introduces the AKP's ideological position and provides background information on Turkey's political and institutional context at the onset of the pandemic. We then provide a chronological account of the pandemic response, discussing government policies during the three waves of infections Turkey had experienced at the time of writing, as well as the ways in which the government framed the response. The subsequent section analyses the public's reaction using data from two public opinion studies. After this, we summarize our finding that neither Erdoğan's discourse concerning the pandemic nor the policies adopted to address it had a strong populist character, and we discuss how Turkey's authoritarian institutional framework might have played a role in bringing about this outcome.

Background: the AKP, Erdoğan and Turkey before the pandemic

To make sense of Turkey's experience with the pandemic we first highlight some important aspects of Erdoğan's and his party's political ideology, as well as the political and institutional context in Turkey before the pandemic began.

Ideology

The AKP, a party emerging from Turkey's Islamist movement, first won elections in 2002. Its leader Erdoğan has been in power since 2003, first as prime minister and then, since 2014, as president. The intensive use of populist antagonism has been a defining aspect of Erdoğan's political discourse throughout most of his time in power, but has arguably lost relevance since Erdoğan's takeover of the state was completed. In particular during the years of his struggle with Turkey's political establishment (roughly from 2003 to 2013), Erdoğan identified his political movement (and himself) with 'the people', constructed as a morally superior and homogenous group to whom Turkey truly belongs. His political opponents, on the other

hand, were presented as a separate and internally homogenous group that is composed of the 'usurpers' of the national will (Elçi 2019). The authoritarian tendency of Erdoğan's government was visible from its early years (see, for example, Yeşil 2018). His policies steadily became more openly hostile to power-sharing institutions and checks and balances: he dismantled those gradually over the years in a long power-grab that culminated in a constitutional referendum in 2017, discussed further below. As this authoritarian transformation proceeded and after Erdoğan forged a coalition with Turkey's long-standing nationalist party in 2015, statism and nationalism became more prominent in Erdoğan's discourse (Gürhanlı 2020). Going beyond populist demonization, he now resorted more widely to the authoritarian strategy of criminalizing opponents, increasingly presenting opposition politicians and activists as terrorists or as being associated with terrorists. In line with this, Evren Balta et al. (2021) demonstrate that, compared to other voters in Turkey, AKP voters are less likely to hold populist sentiments but are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories about 'malign foreign forces'.

The ideology shaping the political project of Erdoğan and his core supporters can be described as a combination of Turkish nationalism with Islamism, centred around Ottoman nostalgia and Sunni Muslim identity (White 2012). They subscribe to an ethnocentric and exclusionary form of nationalism that is especially suspicious and repressive towards the Alevi and Kurdish minorities in Turkey (Bozan 2021; O'Connor and Baser 2018) but also envisage the nation as part of an international (Sunni) Islamic community. This commitment to Islamism as both a domestic revolutionary project and a supra-national identity has been consequential, including in the decision to welcome millions of Syrian refugees in the country and in the AKP voters' greater propensity to accept the refugees compared to other parties' voters (Getmansky et al. 2018).

This description suggests that while Erdoğan and his party have ideological features in common with radical right populists, originally defined by Cas Mudde (2007) as a European party family whose members embrace populism, authoritarian values and nativism, there are also important differences. Bart Bonikowski's (2017) framework, theorizing the populist radical right as the confluence of the broader ideological frames of populism, exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism, which he defines as anti-pluralism and a preference for unconstrained executive power, is a better fit for describing Erdoğan's ideology – with the caveat that the boundaries between 'the people' and its 'others' in Erdoğan's Turkey are drawn not only by ethno-nationalism but also by religious (Islamist) fundamentalism.

Institutional and political context

The breakdown of the democratic regime in Turkey is another source of divergence between Turkey and most other countries with populist governments. If we took a snapshot of Turkey's regime at the onset of the pandemic, we might describe it as an electoral, personalist authoritarian regime that enjoys strong and organized public support but also faces resistance from a firm opposition – an authoritarian regime ruling over a deeply polarized society (Laebens and Öztürk 2021). President Erdoğan controls (or at least must approve of) every policymaking process of any importance. Ministers are entirely dependent on Erdoğan, as they are

appointed by him and in practice accountable only to him. The unlimited executive powers Erdoğan obtained with the constitutional amendments approved in 2017 (Cilliler 2021: 7–9), in conjunction with his extensive de facto control over the judiciary and a weakened legislature where the regime has the majority of seats, mean that the rule of law, democratic contestation and accountability have disappeared. The opposition – including elected politicians, journalists, civil society activists and citizens who criticize the government publicly – are attacked (including physically), persecuted judicially (often on terrorism charges), sometimes suspended from office (members of the Kurdish movement in particular), exiled and jailed. Erdoğan also wields tremendous influence over civil society and public discourse thanks to his near-total control over the mainstream media (Balamir Coşkun 2020), his vast political party structures and the promotion (or direct creation) of government-friendly NGOs and associations (Yabanci 2016). Despite these, opposition actors have gained ground over the last years. Most importantly, opposition parties achieved an unprecedented victory in the 2019 local elections, taking over the governments of Istanbul and Ankara, thereby obtaining valuable political resources as well as significant electoral momentum.

An economic crisis has been gradually unfolding in Turkey since 2018, reflected especially in the decreasing value of the Turkish lira, increasing inflation and high levels of unemployment. The government had been using expansionary policies and central bank reserves extensively long before the pandemic began and therefore had relatively little ability to give strong support to the economy with such policies after the pandemic hit (Voyvoda and Yeldan 2020: 3). Despite such expansionary policies, economic discontent appeared to be pushing Erdoğan's approval ratings below 45% when the pandemic hit (see Figure 1). As we discuss below, these constraints led the government to avoid or delay measures that would severely restrict economic activity (such as closing shopping centres or restaurants) and favouring instead the closure of schools and the use of partial curfews.

The structure of the Turkish healthcare system and Turkey's demographic structure, in contrast, are likely to have alleviated the challenges brought by COVID. Access to the healthcare system was improved with reforms during the early years of AKP rule, though the government's healthcare expenditure has been decreasing since then (Balta and Özel 2020). While the number of doctors and nurses per capita remains very low in Turkey compared to OECD averages (OECD 2017: 151, 159), the number of ICU units per capita is above the figures for some Western countries, a fact that the government frequently boasted of at the beginning of the pandemic. The limited number of care homes for older people possibly saved Turkey from the heavy losses other countries saw in such settings during the early days of the pandemic. Finally, Turkey has a younger population than many European countries.

The pandemic in Turkey: the government's policy response and framing of its policies

In what follows, we present a detailed account of the public health measures the Erdoğan government took to address the pandemic, as well as the ways in which that response was framed.

The first wave (March–August 2020): a show of professionalism

Turkey officially announced its first domestic coronavirus case on 11 March, but the announcement was hardly credible – an analysis of excess deaths by the *New York Times* shows that the anomalies in the data began earlier (Gall 2020). In fact, the government had banned private and public laboratories and hospitals from conducting PCR tests for COVID, except for one laboratory in Ankara (Elbek 2021: 93). Only in March did the government permit more laboratories to run tests and start policies to secure protective equipment, medication and ventilators (TÜSPE 2020: 34–37), although these moves could not prevent serious shortages of masks in the first weeks. Heavy-handed domestic measures aiming to curb transmission were soon also implemented. School and prayers in mosques were suspended; public events and domestic and international travel were restricted. Those aged above 65 or below 20 and people with chronic conditions were completely banned from going out of their homes. These curfews, relaxed to cover only six days of the week after the first month, would stay in place for almost two months.

Turkey's restrictions on individual mobility during the first wave were strict but ultimately partial: a full lockdown bringing economic activity to a halt was never implemented due to fears about the economy (Cagaptay and Yuksel 2020). Instead, severe restrictions were imposed on the young and on older adults – economically inactive populations. Without restricting the contacts and mobility of most of the workforce, blanket weekend curfews were implemented regularly until the beginning of June in selected provinces covering major cities. Soner Cagaptay and Deniz Yuksel (2020) also note that these short lockdowns came rather belatedly, in response to calls for a national lockdown by opposition politicians.

Naturally, the government took some economic measures to limit the negative impact of the pandemic on livelihoods, but these were nowhere near Western Europe's furlough schemes in their ability to soften the blow for citizens. The measures directly affecting households were mostly limited to postponing firms' social security and tax payments, a ban on firing employees, and a pre-existing unemployment insurance scheme limited to three months – there were no other direct payments to workers (*Hürriyet* 2020). The immediate pressure on households was addressed by extending cheap credit opportunities. In June, the government announced that public banks would offer mortgage and car credits with extremely low interest rates, as well as consumer credits (*Sabah* 2020). There was considerable uptake: the total volume of consumer credit increased by around 26% from May (before the low rates came into effect) to December 2020, while the volume of mortgages rose by 32% in that same period (BDDK 2021). Increasing the debt burden on households has been an essential part of AKP's economic response.

Erdoğan practically admitted his government's inability to bear the financial costs of the pandemic when he announced a donation campaign to gather funds for the COVID response. The campaign was also a direct attempt to thwart and overshadow the Istanbul and Ankara municipalities' successful public donation and solidarity campaigns, which the central government criminalized as attempts

to undermine the state (Atıcı 2020). The opposition cities' campaigns were swiftly banned and the funds they gathered were frozen.

It is against this delicate political context that the government's management of the crisis must be analysed. Erdoğan appears to have chosen to take a step back during the first wave, reducing his visibility, supporting public health measures and restrictions, and claiming to follow the advice given by the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board in making public health policies (Evrensel 2020a). The public was presented with a picture where critical decisions (including lockdown measures) seemed to be taken by public health experts or by local authorities. Instead of the daily Erdoğan speeches made at this or that event that the Turkish public was accustomed to, the public would follow daily appearances by the health minister Fahrettin Koca, who would present new data, reassure the public by explaining how the crisis was being addressed (through testing, care, contact tracing, securing equipment, observing restrictions etc.) and emphasize the importance of abiding by the measures and recommendations, such as staying at home. He would also situate the government's coronavirus policy above and beyond daily politics, arguing that they followed science instead of politics. Although Erdoğan did go back to becoming more visible towards the end of the first lockdown and would not assume such a low profile again during the second wave, he continued to make the claim that authority over public health restrictions primarily belonged to the experts and regional public health authorities (T24 2020).

On 5 May 2020, Erdoğan announced Turkey's gradual 'return to normality' starting in the beginning of June. This opening up was hoped to bring some activity to the tourism sector, an essential source of income for Turkey. Conveniently, from May until late August Turkey's official coronavirus case counts were very stable and low – new daily cases were announced as being around 1,000–1,200. Officially, the number of daily deaths from coronavirus never went above 30 from the end of May to the last days of August. This allowed Turkey to avoid some targeted travel restrictions by Western countries, such as the UK and many EU countries, practically until the end of the summer. An independent study now suggests that excess deaths were in fact climbing steadily throughout the summer (McKernan 2021; Yaman 2021), and there is also evidence that data were manipulated (Adiguzel et al. 2020). At the time, however, the world and the country took the regime to its word – until September, when the second wave became too big to conceal.

Political favouritism in the implementation of COVID restrictions was visible from the beginning of the crisis. For example, while the government was reluctant to suspend religious gatherings and activities to avoid drawing criticisms from its base (Altınordu 2021), social distancing regulations were strictly enforced for the opposition and the wider population. In summer 2020, Erdoğan started making major and very visible exceptions to the social distancing measures in order to mobilize his supporters. In July 2020, following the (orchestrated) conclusion of a judicial process that had started in 2016, Erdoğan announced that the Hagia Sophia – the great Byzantine church built in the 6th century, which was converted to a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1452 and to a museum by a decision of the Turkish government in 1934 – would be converted to a mosque. On 24 July, a massive Friday prayer was organized in Hagia Sofia, with the participation of Erdoğan and others in the leadership of the regime, as well as thousands filling

the vast public square at the centre of Istanbul's old town, around Hagia Sofia and the Blue Mosque.

The second wave (September–December 2020): political and economic constraints

By August 2020, opposition parties and the Turkish Doctors' Association (TTB) were pointing to serious increases in numbers of patients and deaths that were not reflected in the official statistics, which were still showing the number of deaths to be around 30 people per day. Relying on their own local data sources, these organizations and officials challenged the veracity of the official COVID statistics and the government narrative that the pandemic was under control (Demirdas 2020; Sansur 2020). By the end of the summer, the government's attitude also started to change, as the increase in deaths was now visible in official numbers as well. On 8 September the Ministry of Interior made it compulsory to wear masks in public spaces across the entire country (Karadag 2021).

In the battle over the numbers, a crucial turning point came when the Ministry of Health confessed that since the summer their official daily new cases statistics had been limited to patients with symptoms, excluding asymptomatic patients from the count (Evrensel 2020b). This counting method, which was against the World Health Organization (WHO) definitions, was undercounting the case numbers in Turkey. Shockingly, this counting method was news even to some members of the Scientific Advisory Board, who were allegedly playing a leading role in forming the policy response (BBC Türkçe 2020a). The confession only came after the 'patient number' announced every day by the Ministry of Health was fervently contested by healthcare professionals and the opposition, showing that even in Turkey's authoritarian system, the opposition's control of large cities and civil society's professional resources could produce enough pressure to reveal that 'expert' management of the pandemic was at that point largely a performance, and to force a partial corrective.

In line with the rising official numbers, the government further increased measures in November and December. On 17 November Erdoğan announced a partial curfew effective across the country at the weekends at night. On 1 December, in a speech that was filled with demonizing rhetoric against the opposition, Erdoğan announced that the curfews were now extended to cover nights during the week and the entire weekends (Bianet 2020).

The speech on 1 December is a good example of how Erdoğan's coronavirus response stayed separate from his common use of populist rhetoric. He started his speech by listing serious measures that would be taken to control the coronavirus. He praised the Turkish healthcare system's success in comparison to advanced counties. He attacked opposition parties for trying to cast doubt on and stain this success. Then he shifted the focus to an opposition politician's comment regarding the government's sale of an arms factory to a foreign company. After that point, he further increased the tone of his insults to the opposition, presenting a populist performance for the audience. He accused the opposition, grouped together as 'them', of being against the people and sullying the nation. Thus, his speech announcing serious measures against the coronavirus was performed together with his populist diatribe against the opposition on a matter that was completely unrelated to the coronavirus crisis.

It was also during this period that the economic crisis in Turkey deepened, leading Erdoğan to adopt the radical measure of parting ways with his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, who had served as the minister of treasury and finance for the last two years. After a period of relative calm during the summer, the Turkish lira had started losing its value again. Between August and November 2020, its value declined by more than 20%. In an attempt to stop the free fall of the currency, Erdoğan appointed a new head to the Central Bank, who defended prioritizing 'price stability' at the risk of increasing the interest rates and aggravating the economic slowdown. But Erdoğan could tolerate the orthodox monetary policies of the new head of the Central Bank for five months only, sacking him in late March and further deepening the economic crisis.

2021 and beyond: the 'fall' of coronavirus in Turkey

Curfews adopted in December had been helpful to curtail the second wave of infections, but restrictions were lifted suddenly and prematurely in February 2021, when cases had already started to increase again, and only around 10% of the population had received the vaccine. By the end of March, Turkey recorded its highest ever official number of new daily cases since the beginning of the pandemic, and by mid-April Turkey topped world rankings in the number of new coronavirus cases. The government was forced to announce a 'full lockdown' on 29 April, but it was too late to avoid a new wave. In May 2021, Turkey became the only country in Europe and Middle East to be included in the UK's red list, the category with the strictest travel restrictions, and it was kept in this list until October. Two prestigious international sports events, the UEFA Champions League Final and the Formula 1 Istanbul Grand Prix, were cancelled by international organizers, along with holiday tours for European tourists, further increasing the economic costs of the pandemic for Turkey.

In addition to the decision for a premature opening, Erdoğan and the AKP government were also responsible for encouraging violations of coronavirus restrictions for their partisan interests throughout this period (Güven 2020). In February and March, the AKP held its provincial congresses in person in sports halls packed with AKP supporters. Erdoğan personally attended some of these congresses, praised his supporters for attending them and spread misinformation regarding the current risks of the crisis. For example, on 15 February 2021, in the provincial party congress in his hometown Rize, he said, 'Our people have always been with us, they have always supported us. We are now holding a congress in the period of the pandemic and the hall is jam-packed in Rize.' Similarly, when the AKP supporters gathered for the national AKP congress in Ankara, Erdoğan told the crowd of supporters, 'I am saluting you from my heart as the snowfall cleans all microbes' (Kozok 2021), referring to the folk belief in Turkey that some microbes cannot survive cold weather.

Turkey lifted all restrictions in the summer of 2021 and did not impose them again despite the growth in the official numbers of deaths in the autumn. The health minister claimed that the increase in case numbers was mainly because of young patients, and as a result they did not put an additional burden on the healthcare system (*Sözcü* 2021). Instead, he emphasized personal measures: masks, social

distancing and vaccines. From Erdoğan's perspective, the coronavirus was no longer an issue for Turkey. For example, in his speech following the cabinet meeting on 22 November – a carefully staged event broadcast live on all major news channels – he spent less than 5% of his time discussing the pandemic, and he used this time to boast about the government's success (Erdoğan 2021b). The rest of his talk was focused on economic issues. Economic problems, largely unrelated to the pandemic, were at the centre of opposition parties' agenda too. On 4 December the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) held a large rally in Mersin focusing on this issue. In sum, with the worsening economic crisis over the course of 2021 and the decision to not impose any further restrictions after the summer of 2021, the pandemic fell from public prominence. However, as of mid-December 2021 the country was still reporting an average daily figure of official COVID deaths per capita about 30% higher than that of the UK, where measures to curb infections were at the time again being introduced.[1]

Vaccination was the primary means through which countries sought to fight the pandemic during 2021. Vaccination became widely available in Turkey in the first half of 2021. Until spring 2021, Turkey's vaccination campaign had relied mostly on CoronaVac, produced by the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech, the effectiveness of which has been debated due to concerns over transparency. In May, however, the government could procure large stocks of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Delivering vaccines relatively quickly is an achievement Erdoğan frequently boasts of. Turkey's established health infrastructure was certainly helpful in this regard. By December 2021, about 60% of the Turkish population was fully vaccinated against COVID, while this proportion was 45% around the world and 68% in the European Union (Ritchie et al. 2020). Although government officials encouraged people to be vaccinated, they neither made this a central policy issue, nor considered introducing incentives or obligations to encourage it. With Erdoğan's base comprising the leaders of Turkey's anti-vaxxer movement and a disproportionate share of people inclined to believe conspiracy theories (Balta et al. 2021), we can speculate that not mandating vaccines is the result of a political calculation. This is another example where government rhetoric is based on scientific principles (and supports vaccines) but political considerations take precedence in policy implementation.

Public opinion in Turkey during the coronavirus pandemic

In order to analyse public opinion in Turkey during the pandemic, we use two different sources: monthly presidential approval ratings measured by MetroPoll, a reputable social research company, and a comprehensive public opinion survey conducted by Kadir Has University.

Figure 1 shows MetroPoll's estimates of Erdoğan's approval ratings since he won the presidential election in June 2018.[2] A key finding here is that the AKP government's apparent professionalism proved to be a successful strategy for Erdoğan in the early days of the pandemic. His popularity received a boost, with approval ratings climbing above 50% – the highest level since the presidential election in June 2018. However, this popularity surge slowly dissipated throughout 2020 and 2021. Erdoğan's approval fell below 50% in November 2020, as Turkey was experienced

Table 1. Percentage of Responses to 'Turkey's Most Important Issue' Question, by Party Vote in 2018 General Elections

	AKP	CHP	MHP	HDP	IYI	Total
Economy + cost of living	29.7	34.1	38.3	25.7	38.7	33.0
Coronavirus pandemic	33.2	16.4	22.3	11.9	20.4	23.5
Rights + democracy + judiciary	9.5	26.8	7.4	34.7	7.5	16.0
Fight against terrorism	10.8	6.8	7.4	1.0	9.7	8.0
Refugees	5.1	4.5	10.6	5.9	7.5	6.0
Kurdish question	3.0	2.7	1.1	6.9	1.1	3.0
Corruption	0.3	2.3	3.2	3.0	5.4	2.3
Presidential system	0.8	3.6	0.0	5.0	3.2	2.1

Source: Kadir Has University Turkey Trends Survey (Aydin et al. 2020).
Note: We grouped together responses to an open-ended question. The table does not show the least frequent responses, so the numbers do not add up to 100. AKP = Justice and Development Party; CHP = Republican People's Party; MHP = Nationalist Action Party; HDP = People's Democratic Party; IYI = Good Party.

the peak of the second wave, and since then has stayed under this threshold, similar to where it was before the pandemic.

Public opinion data collected by the Kadir Has University in December 2020 (Aydin et al. 2020) allow us to have a deeper look into political evaluations of Turkish voters during this period. This survey, while it is not nationally representative, includes respondents from 26 urban centres across the country, proportionally representing each of NUTS-2 statistical regions of Turkey.[3] The data are especially useful to contextualize opinions on the pandemic using opinions on other issues as a benchmark.

In Table 1, we tabulate answers to the question 'Which of the following do you consider to be Turkey's most important issue at present?' by party vote choice in the 2018 legislative election. For this analysis we have grouped together answers pertaining to the economy (unemployment and inflation) and answers pertaining to democracy and the rule of law (democracy, rights, the judiciary) in one category each. In line with our qualitative description above, Table 1 shows that economic problems, rather than the coronavirus pandemic, were seen as the most important issues for voters of all parties except the ruling AKP. In fact, for voters of the main opposition party CHP andt voters of the left-wing Kurdish opposition party HDP, the share of respondents citing the pandemic as the most important issue was smaller than both the total share of those choosing economic problems, and the total share of those choosing problems pertaining to democracy and the rule of law.

Despite these important partisan differences in the perceived salience of the pandemic as a problem for the country, evaluations of the government's pandemic policies are less differentiated along partisan lines than might have been expected in the Turkish context, where partisan identities usually play a decisive role in shaping voter's perceptions of politics (Laebens and Öztürk 2021). As Table 2 demonstrates, across both government and opposition parties, the proportion of voters who found the government's COVID policies successful is higher than the proportion of voters

Table 2. Percentage of Voters Finding the Government Successful in the Relevant Policy Area, by Party Vote in 2018 General Elections

	AKP	CHP	MHP	HDP	IYI	Total
Coronavirus	81.1	28.2	70.2	22.8	30.1	52.6
Health policies	72.4	25.9	66	21.8	27.8	48.1
Foreign policy	77	20	69.2	13.9	24.7	46.5
Economy policies	61.6	15.4	53.2	11.9	17.2	38.1

Source: Kadir Has University Turkey Trends Survey (Aydin et al. 2020).
Note: These proportions are the sum of respondents who find government 'very successful' and 'successful'. The other three options were 'neither successful nor unsuccessful', 'unsuccessful' and 'very unsuccessful'. AKP = Justice and Development Party; CHP = Republican People's Party; MHP = Nationalist Action Party; HDP = People's Democratic Party; IYI = Good Party.

who found healthcare policies, economic policies or foreign policy successful. The survey found that while about 53% of all respondents approve of the government's pandemic policies, only 38% approve of its economic policies. Among the 15 different policy areas respondents were asked about in this question, the handling of the coronavirus pandemic is seen as the most successful, while 'healthcare policies in general' takes the second place. Economic policy, on the other hand, has the lowest approval of all.

We argue that to interpret the relative success of the AKP government in creating this positive perception of its coronavirus policies, the pre-existing authoritarian structures limiting public contestation and data transparency should be taken into account. Mainstream media (print and TV) is largely government-controlled in Turkey. Most national private media companies are owned by allies of the government and follow the official line, while journalists or outlets that dissent are harassed, restricted and criminalized (Balamir Coşkun 2020). In the context of the pandemic, having control over the media landscape allowed the government to obfuscate the data and spread its narrative of success, as we have explained above. Especially during the first wave, at every opportunity pro-government media and AKP leaders underlined how badly the West was doing. The comparison with the US in particular made Turkey's crisis management look successful. In addition to underlining the severity of the crisis in richer countries, Turkish officials also sought to reinforce the perception of superior crisis management by sending personal protection equipment (PPE) and even some ventilators to a number of Western countries including Italy, Spain, the UK and the US. In late April, authorities claimed aid had been sent to 44 countries (BBC Türkçe 2020b). In a bizarre display of superiority, the Turkish state even sent a plane to Sweden in March, to bring back a Turkish citizen who had been diagnosed with COVID and had been refused hospital treatment there (Çelikbaş 2020). Irrespective of the relevance and appropriateness of these gestures, they probably worked to support the public image of good crisis management, especially in the early period. The general lack of transparency of public institutions helped sustain this narrative, as it reduced civil society's ability to check and publicly contest government claims.

Discussion and conclusions

In Turkey, Erdoğan opted to project competence in his management of the COVID crisis, rather than politicizing the crisis and framing it through a populist dichotomy of the 'people' versus its detractors in the elite. Unlike Trump or Bolsonaro, Erdoğan did not seek to lay the blame for the pandemic on domestic or international opponents, nor did his government reject the seriousness of the pandemic and the importance of taking measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in public statements. However, the government's deeds did not always match its words. Especially after the first months of the pandemic, during which Erdoğan appears to have genuinely ceded some decision-making power to the health ministry and the Scientific Advisory Board, his political interests took precedence over the lives and livelihoods of Turkey's citizens in the design and implementation of policies. Erdoğan continued his rallies even under lockdown conditions, official COVID data were purposefully obfuscated, and lockdown measures generally exempted economically active populations and were prematurely lifted with disastrous consequences.

Erdoğan's leaving of the centre of political attention to be occupied by others for almost two months was perhaps the most surprising aspect of the management of the pandemic in the first wave, considering that Turkey's presidential regime is extremely centralized, and Erdoğan is the only decision-making authority on policies across the board. Caner Bakir (2020: 425) argues that because this novel crisis was unknown and because it required technical expertise, the health bureaucracy and the Scientific Advisory Board temporarily found a space where they had 'discretionary autonomy and authority' allowing them to adopt 'effective policy design and implementation which would [have] otherwise not occurred under president-led policy network in ordinary times'. Cagaptay and Yuksel (2020) offer a different reading, claiming that Erdoğan's choice to remain in the background was intended to deflect blame, and that serious policies to address the pandemic were largely adopted following opposition pressures.

The fact that the policymaking process went back to normal a few months into the pandemic, with Erdoğan taking the reins again, suggests that novelty and uncertainty were indeed important in bringing about this temporary divergence. Erdoğan's public approval had soared in the first months of the crisis, as even some opposition voters appeared convinced by the government's serious approach to the crisis and relatively competent management. Perhaps, having observed the positive reaction of the public to this relatively depoliticized, professional-looking policy response, Erdoğan found it wise to continue this show despite increasing politicization of pandemic measures thereafter (exemplified by the massive prayer held for the conversion of Hagia Sophia and the selective application of bans on gatherings). While some opposition voters were likely disenchanted with the government response by the second wave, when the government admitted it had been manipulating the case data, the survey data we present show that at the end of 2020 an unexpectedly large share of opposition voters still evaluated the pandemic response positively.

We argue that a focus on the authoritarian nature of the political regime in Turkey helps explain Erdoğan's choices during this period as well as the 'success' of his COVID policies. Even when he was in the background, Erdoğan could be

comforted by his authoritarian control over the state, civil society and the media. Publicly embracing policies supported by most public health experts worldwide to address the pandemic was less costly for Erdoğan. His government's policies could not be scrutinized to the extent they would be in a democracy, things could be made to look better than they actually were and, most importantly, measures would still be in his control and could be adjusted so as not to harm his political interests too much. For example, such gross misrepresentation of the case and death counts as we have described above – presenting the count of patients with symptoms as though it were the total case count – would hardly have been possible for months in a democratic state. Applying social-distancing measures selectively was also possible for Erdoğan. Hence, without resorting to populist antagonisms or even much blame-shifting, he managed to maintain the support of a wide share of the public for his government's pandemic policies. Precisely because of the government's ability to pretend, it is likely that, had opposition mayors and the doctors' association not pressured the government through competitive policy-making and by contesting official information, government policy would have been even less transparent and less effective. Unlike in Iran, for example, where pandemic policies have been found to be less successful (San et al. 2021), the government in Turkey faces serious competitive pressures.

Our findings contribute to understanding 'how populist radical right forces have been adapting and changing their agenda to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic' (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022. The Turkish case shows that leaders who routinely use populist rhetoric do not necessarily frame a crisis of these proportions using those same tools. The pandemic response reminds us that the language of statesmanship and good governance is not intrinsically antithetical to populist or authoritarian discourse. We also argue that a reading of contemporary Turkish politics – and hence of the pandemic response – primarily through the lens of populism would be misguided. In recent years, Turkey has been covered extensively in comparative politics research under two topics: democratic backsliding and populism. These two phenomena were tightly related: right-wing populism is essentially anti-pluralist as well as hostile to the notion of constraints on executive power. Yet whether and how populism plays a role in the current authoritarian regime of Turkey is less clear, as populism has become both less available and less beneficial to the regime. In office for almost two decades and having obtained near-absolute power over most of the state apparatus as well as hegemony over civil society, Erdoğan has become the establishment. As discussed above, the completion of the takeover of the state, the exhaustion of the economic model, increasing distance between the people and regime elites, whose corruption grows more visible, as well as the changes Erdoğan has been forced to make in his coalition had led, already before the pandemic, to a weakening of populist language and policies, and to their replacement with religious, statist and nationalist ones. The state – rather than the 'people' – is increasingly dominant in official discourse and presented as the prime entity to be protected and strengthened. Throughout the period analysed here, the value and legitimation system Erdoğan used to reproduce his power relied much more on plain nationalist content than on populist tropes, which would ultimately require *some* claim to deepen or realize democracy. Even the flimsiest of such claims is hardly credible today.

We have shown that Turkey's government used its political control over the state and the media to present a rosier picture of Turkey's success in the face of the pandemic. In the absence of reliable official data, it is difficult to assess what the human cost of the pandemic has actually been in Turkey, let alone comparatively assess complex outcomes such as physical, economic, educational and other consequences of lockdowns. What is certain is that with Turkey now facing a major economic meltdown, it will not be possible for the country to address the negative legacies of the pandemic in the short term.

Notes

1 Author's calculation based on data from Our World in Data. As of 9 December 2021 the rolling seven-day average of daily deaths was 196 in Turkey and 123 in the UK, with daily deaths being relatively stable in both.
2 While MetroPoll surveys normally use the same methodology, the pandemic forced a change from face-to-face surveys to surveys conducted over the phone. Because all surveys since March 2020 were conducted over the phone, this change does not pose a threat to the comparability of the estimates after that date.
3 The sample ($N = 1,000$) is a quota sample of the adult population in the largest provincial capital (*il merkezi*) in each of the 26 NUTS-2 regions in Turkey. The survey was conducted face-to-face in November–December 2020.

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