

TURKEY



A foreign policy litmus test: How the war in Ukraine has fuelled populist rhetoric in Erdoğan's Turkey

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine is a defining historical moment that demonstrates the limitations of contemporary politics. Even the most pessimistic scholars did not conceive of a direct military conflict in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Moreover, this conflict has exposed the limitations of populism in foreign policy. Despite rare instances of rhetorical cooperation with Russia, the populist politicians of Europe remained committed to Atlanticist foreign policies. Turkey, a textbook example of populist governance, offers a superb illustration of how the international zeitgeist constrains populist politicians' goals. The "balanced" approach of Turkey's foreign policy, which is dictated by its asymmetrical interdependence with Russia, aims to strengthen Turkey's role as a regional force through mediation. In the meantime, the pressure of upcoming presidential elections and the country's economic position are additional obstacles. An examination of Erdoğan's speeches over the past year reveals that he has replicated this balanced approach in his discourse as the leader of Turkey.

Keywords: *Turkey; Ukraine–Russia war; foreign policy; populism.*

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine has become a litmus test for European politicians. The unexpected conflict in Europe has prompted a reevaluation of the capabilities of nation-states and international organizations. The same war has also served as a stage on which political leaders from several nations can perform for various audiences, domestic and international. Contrary to expectations, the Russians did not conquer Kyiv in a few days, and Ukraine's resistance to unprovoked aggression has become a model for the world. The swift and decisive response of NATO and the European Union (EU) was equally unexpected, transforming the situation into a battle of attrition.

Among the numerous unanswered questions the war has brought to the fore, the responses of populist leaders' have received significant attention. First, the working assumption has been that all populist leaders at least sympathized with Putin's regime, if not directly under Russian influence. Second, the war has been framed and presented as a conflict between autocracy and democracy and between East and West, forcing us to consider which camp populists would favour. Third, the war generated an influx of refugees into parts of Europe that have exhibited fiercely anti-immigrant sentiments for some time. The question has thus been whether populist leaders would take advantage of this opportunity to garner support. Lastly, it is unknown whether the economic challenges caused by rising energy costs and the disruption to global trade will favour populist parties at the polls. A series of crucial elections in 2023 will shed light on these unanswered questions and the effects of the Ukraine conflict as it enters its second year.

Turkey, like Ukraine, a Black Sea country, now enters its second decade with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the helm. Erdoğan—a textbook example of a twenty-first-century populist politician—has been characterized as Russia's "Trojan Horse" in NATO. Turkey's leadership has strong authoritarian tendencies, and the country hosts more than 4 million refugees, contributing to social tension. In addition, the Ukraine conflict erupted as Turkey confronts two roiling crises — a war against militants along its long border with Syria and an ongoing economic crisis. As a NATO member, Turkey is central to the Western response to the war.

In this report, I will detail the reaction of Turkey's populist leadership to the crisis, beginning with a brief review of populist foreign policy and concluding with a summary of Turkish foreign policy throughout the war. I will conclude by

discussing Erdoğan's speeches about the war and demonstrating how he has leveraged the conflict to reinforce his position as a strong leader.

Populist foreign policy

The global rise of populist leaders attracted the attention of experts to policy differences. Although there is no consensus on the definition of populism, Mudde's minimalist definition is the most widely accepted. According to Mudde (2004), populism is

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the “*volonté Générale*” (general will) of the people. (p. 543)

Another group of scholars define populism as a style that includes “an appeal to ‘the people’ as both the audience and the subject embodied; a resort to ‘bad manners’ and coarsened political rhetoric; and a representation and performance of crisis, breakdown, and threat” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). Populism has also been perceived as a strategy, a set of methods or instruments mobilized by politicians in political competition. Weyland defines this strategy as “direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). A newly developed synthesis presents populism in an ideational form integrating ideological and discursive approaches and excluding strategy or tactics. This approach's essential set of ideas or beliefs is defined as the belief in the sovereignty and the moral superiority of people, presented as a homogenous unit.

All of these definitions share similarities that provide hints about the foreign policy populists pursue when they attain power. Nonetheless, I must emphasize that the influence of populists on foreign policy may be limited. If a nation's foreign policy is institutionalized and based on the consensus of several societal actors, the influence of politicians may be somewhat constrained. Foreign policy provides politicians with less space for flexibility than other policy sectors. Ideology is another aspect that influences the foreign policy practices of populist parties in government. Several studies demonstrated that the standing of populist political parties is determined by whether they are right- or left-wing (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Finally, we must consider the structural aspects of a country that influence the foreign policy practices of populists, such as geography, economic development, and established commitments or alliances (Destradi et al., 2021).



Due to populists' Manichean worldview, which sets the people and elite at opposite ends of the spectrum, their foreign policy preferences are expected, in the first instance, to reflect their anti-elite orientation. This elite may be identified at the national level as capitalists, bankers, and bureaucrats, while foreign elites, such as international organizations and bureaucrats, may serve as useful scapegoats. Consequently, we expect populist leaders to be opposed to international institutions and counter-majoritarian entities (such as courts) at home or abroad.

Second, the notion of the "pure people" may influence populist international policies. A homogenous "us" is always positioned against "them" in populist discourse. Consistent with the nationalist perspective, the nation is the primary component of "us". In the context of foreign policy, however, "the people" may encompass or draw on transnational elements such as religion, race, ethnicity, and social class. Populists thus define "the Other" automatically in contradistinction to the "pure people".

As populist leaders position themselves as the authentic representation of the will of the people, this strategy will contribute to the concentration of governance in the hands of the populist leader. In conjunction with an antipathy to national elites, populist politicians favour de-institutionalizing and politicizing foreign policy. The ontological grounds of populist policies are incompatible with the notion that foreign policy is a technocratic arena ideally administered by a rational bureaucracy. Thus, a desire to displace foreign policy bureaucracies and personalize foreign policy decisions under populist governance is foreseeable (Destradi et al., 2021).

Scholars have posited that the individual characteristics of populist leaders may influence their foreign policy orientations in office. For example, it is often pointed out that populist leaders exhibit a very direct style of communication, eagerly assuming the role of "drunken dinner guest" in global forums and "agent provocateur" when confronting the distant policy prescriptions of international bureaucrats. Certainly, quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated that populists have distinct personality traits. However, it remains difficult to connect these traits directly to the foreign policies of countries led by populists (Nai & Martnez i Coma, 2019; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020).

In sum, researchers have concluded that the foreign policies of populist leaders are characterized by anti-elitism, the supremacy of the "pure people", and the de-institutionalization and personalization of foreign policy-making. In addition,

the discourse of populist politicians tends to emphasize victimization and nostalgia for an imagined glorious national past (Elçi, 2022).

Turkish foreign policy during the Ukraine war

During the Ukraine–Russia war, Turkey has adopted a “balanced” foreign policy approach to the conflict. In a broader context, this can be interpreted as a turning point in Turkey’s shifting foreign policy priorities. Since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed office in 2002, Turkey has favoured a “transactional”, “active”, and “assertive” foreign policy, eschewing the more cautious approach of earlier eras (Mankoff, 2022). The country’s urgent need for export markets and energy dependence pushed the government to establish close ties with the Arab and Turkic worlds. Meanwhile, the ruling elite’s ideological orientation fostered a desire to take a leading role in the Muslim world and serve as a bridge between East and West. This “assertive” policy’s short-term success ended with the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

According to observers, 2016 marks a turning point in the Turkish government’s foreign policy. After the departure of Ahmet Davudođlu, the architect of the new foreign policy, and the government’s growing security worries, the ruling class embraced more realistic foreign policy objectives. The soft power strategy that aimed to engage Arab societies in the region has been cancelled. Instead, the government envisioned an autonomous foreign policy based on the country’s military capabilities. Prior to the epidemic, Turkey supported the rebels in Syria’s civil war, while relations with Egypt and Israel were nearly frozen due to support for Hamas and the Muslim Brothers. Tensions remained with Greece over disputes in the Aegean Sea.

These shifts split the Arab world nearly in two. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were unequivocally opposed to Turkey’s aggressive participation in the domestic affairs of Arab countries and its aspirations for leadership. Turkey’s close relations with Qatar were insufficient to compensate for sour relations with the other Arab powers. In the meantime, Turkey and the United States were at odds due to Ankara’s conflict with the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG), the United States’ closest partner in the region (Keating, 2022; Pierini, 2022; Tapia, 2022).

However, after the epidemic, Turkey followed a more “realistic” approach due to the changing international situation. First, the Biden administration was less tolerant of Ankara’s foreign policy adventurism in the Middle East. Second, the



economic and political challenges in Turkey compelled the government to seek international backing and increase financial inflows. Turkey reached out to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, initiated discussions with Armenia and restored diplomatic relations with Israel. Third, Ankara's preoccupation was keeping the Kurdish insurgent PKK and ISIS at bay and constructing a secure oil pipeline to offset rising energy expenses. Fourth, the approaching presidential elections have heightened economic and trade policy, not least the significance of Europe as Turkey's principal export market (Tapia, 2022; Pierini, 2022).

The Ukraine–Russia war coincided with this “U-turn” in Turkey's foreign policy, and Turkey sought to execute a “hedging” strategy navigating between Russia and the United States. Throughout history, Turkey's ties with Russia have fluctuated between *frigid antagonism* (as in the Cold War), *rivalry* (mostly in Central Asia and the Caucasus), as well as *indirect confrontation* and *forced cooperation* (as in Syria since 2013). After 2016, Turkey was compelled to keep Moscow on side, as Ankara's role in the conflict in Syria deepened and reliance on Russian energy (and tourism) grew. Despite being on the opposite side to Russia in crises in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh (not to mention being a NATO member for seven decades), the Turkish government has not hesitated in playing the role of back channel to Moscow (Lesage et al., 2022).

On the other hand, relations between Turkey and Ukraine have traditionally been very close. After Russia seized Crimea in 2014, Turkey supported Kyiv and called on Moscow to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. Turkey and Ukraine inked a strategic partnership agreement in 2020 and established free trade arrangements in 2021. Turkey has also provided Bayraktar TB2 drones (used by Ukraine's armed forces against several high-profile targets since the invasion) and established solid military ties with Ukraine while signalling its support for Ukraine's eventual NATO membership. At the same time, Erdoğan has slow-walked approving the Finnish and Swedish applications to join the alliance in order to extract political concessions in the lead-up to elections in May. Despite Russia's reservations, Turkey continues to send Ukraine military assistance, including the Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have become an emblem of resistance. As these drones are manufactured by the company owned by President Erdoğan's son-in-law, this circumstance has caught the attention of experts and become a highly contentious subject in Turkey.

Ankara's unique positioning “between” NATO and Russia and its middle power foreign policy aspirations have driven the Turkish government's desire to act as a

mediator (Üstün, 2022). At the beginning of the war, Turkey urged both sides to find a peaceful resolution and attempted to act as a regional peace broker by utilizing its links to both sides. Ankara initiated indirect communication between Ukraine and Russia and planned formal talks with relevant parties in Antalya and Istanbul in March 2022. President Erdoğan has also dispatched special envoys to facilitate a peaceful resolution. Notably, Turkey voted in favour of the UN Security Council condemning the invasion while choosing not to join sanctions against Russia, which caused some trepidation among Western allies.

Turkey has also provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and accepted refugees while accepting thousands of Russian nationals fleeing to Turkey after the Kremlin cracked down on media and dissent after February 2022 and sought to call up reserves to fight in Ukraine. Erdoğan also brokered the deal permitting Ukraine to export grain via the Black Sea under the supervision of the United Nations in July 2020. Ankara pushed several times to prevent Russia from renegeing on the agreement. Turkey is one of the arrangement's most significant beneficiaries of the deal. The Montreux Convention of 1936 handed Turkey control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which connect the Mediterranean and Black Seas. This allows Turkey to limit the passage of naval warships and seal the straits to foreign warships during warfare or when threatened. Except for a few instances, Turkey has restricted the passage of all foreign warships since the war broke out.

Erdoğan's rhetoric about the war

The aforementioned survey of Turkey's recent foreign policy should not be read as a rationally planned sequence of actions aimed at leveraging the war's gains and utilizing foreign policy to strengthen Erdoğan's political fortunes. The most pressing challenge for Erdoğan is to win the upcoming elections, and his foreign policy of late reflects this imperative. He is an expert in winning tight elections against significant opposition, but his electoral "Midas touch" may no longer suffice against the backdrop of a deteriorating economy. The government has increasingly turned to populist boondoggles and "cash splashes" to stimulate economic growth, but it is unclear how these programmes will be supported. According to official estimates, inflation is running at 83% annually, and rising prices threaten Erdoğan's chances of being elected because of the government's unwillingness to hike interest rates. This is only exacerbated by rising energy costs during the war (Erlanger, 2022).

These concerns have a substantial international component, and it is impossible



to distinguish clearly between domestic and international drivers when it comes to policy responses. Still, it is possible to analyse Erdoğan's views regarding the war in Ukraine through the lens of his public pronouncements and discursive strategies. In order to do so, I have examined his speeches from January to December 2022, published on the Turkish presidency's website and in various media reports across this period. I have calculated that in 123 of 224 public speeches during this period, Erdoğan discussed the war in Ukraine, although some references were brief and did not elaborate on the conflict in any great detail.

It is crucial to note that Erdoğan has a distinctive outlook on global politics and Turkey's place in the world, which he sees as full of danger and knotty challenges. He has, paradoxically, long subscribed to the Turkish sense of "encirclement", which sees Turkey as surrounded by hostile forces, whether it is Greece, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), the United States, Kurdish separatists, or neighbouring states in the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, Erdoğan places stock in ensuring the Turkish government is sufficiently strong in military and economic terms to meet these threats (Euronews, 2022).

In Erdoğan's discourse, clear divisions between "us" and "them" are manifest. This can be the "us" of Turkey set against corrupt "global elites" (he often criticizes the "Big Five" countries that control the United Nations and render it ineffectual; "the globe is more than five" is a frequent refrain). At other times, his discourse employs an "us versus them" dichotomy regarding the Muslim ummah versus the Islamophobic rest. And on occasion, Erdoğan foregrounds Turkey as a champion of the world's "forgotten" peoples and the need for solidarity among the "silent majority" of poor and downtrodden nations (Batrawy, 2022).

President Erdoğan's discourse vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine has typically reflected his general outlook. First, in the early days of the war, Erdoğan emphasized the legitimacy of Ukraine and reiterated Turkey's support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He framed the Ukrainian struggle as an issue of honour and independence. Over time, Erdoğan stopped repeating the same point in his presentations and adopted a more balanced stance.

Erdoğan has stated numerous times that peace is the final solution. However, the fighting parties were not to blame for the failure. The United Nations and the West hypocritically prevented the reestablishment of peace between the two countries, first due to their inability and secondly because there were actors who did not desire

peace between them. In this speech, Erdoğan criticized the UN Security Council and repeated his slogan. Using this paradigm, Erdoğan pitted the West, the United Nations, and the permanent United Nations Security Council members against the world's populace and legitimized his anti-establishment rhetoric (Batrawy, 2022).

As the West and big countries were hypocritical, Erdoğan argued that Turkey might be a facilitator (he emphasized that he did not prefer the term “mediator” for Turkey's role). According to him, Turkey had deep historical ties with both nations, and his close relationships with their respective governments might help foster peace. He reiterated multiple times that he had direct conversations with President Zelenskyy or Vladimir Putin, as well as personal contacts. Using this story, Erdoğan portrayed himself as a world leader capable of resolving a significant catastrophe. In addition, he believed that the world's leaders admired his efforts. Following the historical ties and his personal connections, Erdoğan emphasized Turkey's diplomatic capacity and projected it as a regional force and the only nation capable of adopting a balanced approach (A-News, 2022).

Erdoğan emphasized his accomplishment in negotiating the grain deal. He argued that the balanced approach and friendly relations with Turkey made this agreement feasible, while Turkey's presence fostered a climate of trust between the two parties. He represented the underprivileged by stating they had an immediate need for the food produced in Ukraine and Russia. He positioned himself as the ally of the impoverished Africans. Moreover, he emphasized that the General Secretary of the United Nations has praised this action (Batrawy, 2022).

Public opinion polls reflected Erdoğan's balanced stance. In the early days of the conflict, surveys indicated that the Turkish public strongly supported Ukraine, with two-thirds of respondents deeming Russia's action unjust and 78% favouring a neutral stance during the conflict. The majority of participants were concerned about the harmful effects of the war (Tahiroğlu, 2022). Some 44% of respondents supported Turkey's role as a mediator in the war, while only 13% favoured an active engagement in the conflict. The remaining 40% of respondents favoured keeping neutral (Ünlühisarcıklı et al., 2022). Furthermore, 61% of Turkish residents were satisfied with the government's response to the war in Ukraine, according to a study done in the summer of 2022; however, just 40% of respondents were satisfied with Brussels' response, compared to the EU average of 57%. (European Commission, 2022). Transatlantic Trends of the German Marshall Fund revealed that just 43% of respondents supported sanctioning Russia, 30% advocated prohibiting gas and



oil imports from Russia, and only 33% supported Ukraine's NATO membership (Weber et al., 2022). In a study performed in the autumn of 2022, respondents expressed opposition to the sanctions against Russia (Henley, 2022).

Given the government's low popularity, these numbers indicate that the Turkish public supported Erdoğan's "balanced approach" to the Ukraine conflict. Of course, there may be cultural reasons for this favourable view of Russia, such as its historical legacy. Nonetheless, it appears that Turkish citizens are more pragmatic and that asymmetrical reliance benefits Russia. However, whether Erdoğan can convert this acceptance into electoral support is questionable, as economic hardships weigh more than foreign policy opinions.

Conclusion

The experience of Turkey during the war in Ukraine provides insight into populist politicians' freedom for manoeuvre. The conflict has coincided with a U-turn after a period of "aggressive" foreign policy positioning and has given Erdoğan a chance to play the role of "bridge" and "mediator" once again. As a country with strong economic, political, and historical ties to both the West and Russia, Turkey nominated itself as a mediator in the conflict, aiming for a speedy restoration of peace in the region. To establish a back channel of communication between the warring parties and NATO, balanced activism of the Turkish government was needed. These efforts have been rewarded by praise from Western friends who have been increasingly dissatisfied with its democratic track record. Thus, Turkey strengthened its status as a bridge between East and West.

In the meantime, as presidential elections draw near, Erdoğan has not hesitated to utilize this changing role in the region. A seasoned politician, he has characterized the war as a result of the current global order. He has also preferred to place himself and Turkey in opposition to the West as the advocate and champion of impoverished non-Western countries. He has also used the opportunity to emphasize Turkey's military, diplomatic, economic, and political strengths. For Erdoğan, Turkey's success in maintaining a balance between the conflicting sides has been a distinguishing trait closely tied to his vision of the country's role in the world.

Turkey's experience demonstrated that populists in power have some leeway for flexibility in foreign policy but not enough to act as they like. However, these limits do not inhibit their determination to maximize the war's opportunities.

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