

Foreign Policy as Performance: Contesting Europe in Turkey's 2017 Referendum

Performatif Dış Politika: Türkiye'nin 2017 Referandumunda Avrupa'nın Söylemsel İnşası Üzerine Bir İnceleme

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

In what ways does foreign policy contestation contribute to regime consolidation under populist rule? Using Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum as a case study, this article examines how the Justice and Development Party (AKP) mobilised contestatory framing directed at European states during the campaign for constitutional reform. The empirical analysis draws on elite framing across three communicative arenas between January and April 2017: public speeches by President Erdoğan and senior AKP officials; opinion columns authored by government figures and aligned intellectuals; and coverage in pro-government media. The article identifies three recurring frames through which European actors were constructed as antagonists: a hypocrisy frame exposing alleged double standards in European democratic norms; a threat frame portraying European interference as a security risk to Turkish sovereignty; and a resentment frame recasting external criticism as evidence of Turkey's rising international standing. These frames internalised external conflict by associating domestic opposition actors with hostile foreign governments and terrorist organisations, while mobilising domestic and diaspora constituencies by presenting constitutional reform as an assertion of national sovereignty against European infringement. The article contributes to debates on populist foreign policy by demonstrating how contestation directed at Europe became embedded in AKP's domestic political strategy. More broadly, it shows that foreign policy contestation constitutes a distinctive and underexplored dimension of populist rule through which leaders perform sovereign defiance, delegitimise domestic opposition, and advance authoritarian consolidation.

Keywords: Contestatory framing, Populist foreign policy, Contestation, Populism, AKP, Turkey

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, çekişmeci dış politika pratiklerinin rejim konsolidasyonuna nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu Türkiye'nin 2017 anayasa referandumunu üzerinden ele almaktadır. İç siyasi rekabetin keskinleştiği bu dönemde iktidar bloğu, Avrupa ile ilişkileri sistematik biçimde siyasallaştıran bir çerçeveleme stratejisine başvurmuştur. Miting konuşmaları, resmî açıklamalar ve hükümete yakın medya organlarındaki söylemlerin analizi, bu stratejinin *çifte standart, medeniyetsel karşıtlık* ve *tarihsel mağduriyet* çerçeveleri üzerinden işlediğini göstermektedir. Avrupa'nın diaspora kampanyalarına getirdiği kısıtlamalar, bu çerçeveler aracılığıyla egemenliğe yönelik kasıtlı bir saldırı olarak yeniden kodlanmış; Avrupa ise Türkiye'nin siyasi dönüşümünü engellemeye çalışan düşmanca bir aktör olarak kurgulanmıştır. Bu söylem, anayasa değişikliğine karşı çıkmayı yabancı müdahaleyle özdeşleştirmiş ve muhalefetin güvenleştirmeye sürecinin nesnesine dönüşmesinin zeminini hazırlamıştır. Sonuç olarak makale, dış aktörlere yönelen bu karşıtlığın yalnızca söylemsel bir araç olmadığını; siyasi anlam üreten, toplumsal sınırları yeniden çizen ve muhalefeti marjinalleştiren performatif bir mekanizma olarak işlev gördüğünü ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çekişmeci çerçeveleme, Popülist dış politika, Meydan okuma, Popülizm, AKP, Türkiye

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades, International Relations scholarship has witnessed a growing recognition of the mutual constitution of domestic political processes and foreign policy. This shift has driven foreign policy analysis toward examining how political elites negotiate domestic constraints alongside international engagement (Alden, 2017; Alden and Aran, 2012). A key contribution within this tradition is Robert Putnam's (1988) formulation of foreign policy as a "two-level game". By conceptualising foreign policy decision-making as unfolding simultaneously across domestic and international arenas, Putnam (1988) paved the way for the understanding that foreign policy outcomes are shaped not only by interstate bargaining but also by political leaders' efforts to secure support from domestic constituencies while reconciling domestic and international pressures. His framework was instrumental in foregrounding the domestic foundations of foreign policy and in demonstrating how international negotiations are shaped by, and in turn reshape, internal political processes.

Interpretivist approaches have broadened the field's horizons by directing attention to the discursive processes through which domestic politics and foreign policy are interlinked (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Wajner, 2022). Drawing from constructivist theories, this scholarship foregrounds the constitutive role of ideas, norms, and shared understandings in shaping how political actors define interests (Hansen, 2006; Wendt, 1999). From this standpoint, foreign policy is understood as a socially constructed practice in which the perceptions of political elites serve as the primary medium through which domestic and international factors acquire political significance (Kaarbo, 2015: 191). Through framing strategies and discursive practices, elites shape how institutional and political contexts are interpreted, producing the foreign policy choices that emerge from any given political conjuncture. Within this process, contestation can emerge as a central component of a state's foreign policy, as elites actively challenge, delegitimise, and reframe the authority of external actors in ways that serve their political agendas.

Furthermore, the importance of contestatory foreign policy practices is particularly pronounced within populist politics. Populism introduces a distinctive political logic characterised by antagonism, claims to exclusive representation (Moffitt, 2016), and the construction of enemies both within and beyond the state (Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019: 13). This logic can blur the boundaries between domestic and international politics, where foreign actors are viewed as threats to sovereignty and internal opposition is discredited for aligning with external enemies. From this perspective, the international arena is no longer treated primarily as a domain of

cooperation or problem-solving, as assumed in liberal internationalist accounts, but is instead reinterpreted as a space of confrontation through which domestic political struggles are projected (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). Contestation in foreign policy, therefore, can acquire a clear function, enabling populist leaders to dramatise sovereignty, assign blame, and draw sharp moral boundaries between “the people” and their adversaries (Taş, 2022).

Over the past two decades, the constructivist turn has prompted a more detailed examination of how disputes over international norms, authority, and legitimacy shape foreign policy practices (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020; Boscarino, 2016; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Sundaram, 2025). A growing body of scholarship has examined various forms of contestation that populist governments bring to foreign policy. Using case studies from the Global North and South, this literature has increasingly examined how states challenge multilateral institutions and diplomatic norms concerning democracy, human rights, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). Notably, this research agenda has shown that contestation extends beyond policy disagreements to encompass broader struggles over legitimacy and the definition of international order (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020). However, it has been largely shaped by a focus on major powers such as China and Russia, with less attention to how domestic political agendas and international relations intersect.

This study builds on this scholarship by shifting attention away from global powers and towards the domestic political uses of foreign policy contestation under populist rule. It focuses on how foreign policy elites in Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), employed contestatory framing of European states during the 2017 constitutional referendum campaign, a critical juncture that proposed a transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Specifically, the article asks: in what ways did contestatory foreign policy framing towards European states contribute to the consolidation of executive power during the constitutional referendum? The article is organised into four sections. The first proposes a framework that views populist foreign policy as a distinct, conflict-oriented mode of international engagement. The second section outlines a framing approach that analyses how foreign policy narratives are constructed and disseminated through media and political speeches, treating them as performative acts. The third section provides the historical and political background of the Turkish case, following shifts in foreign policy orientation and EU–Turkey relations from the reform-driven EU accession efforts to the confrontational post-Gezi period. The final section examines the 2017 referendum, illustrating how diplomatic conflicts with European countries were framed through contestatory narratives centred on hypocrisy, security threat, civilisational

antagonism, and resentment, transforming foreign policy disputes into tools for domestic political authority.

2. *Contestation, Populism, and Foreign Policy*

Foreign policy is commonly understood as the goals, priorities, and courses of action pursued by political authorities beyond national borders (Stern, 1995: 108). Rather than emanating from a single, coherent national interest, foreign policy is shaped by the interaction of multiple actors within the state, which is internally fragmented and composed of competing institutions, political elites, and social forces (Alden and Aran, 2012; Hill, 2003). In some political systems, particular actors, such as the military, may exercise disproportionate influence over foreign policy decision-making, while regime vulnerability and elite competition further shape its direction. Foreign policy should therefore not be understood as a uniform domain, but as one in which governing actors and their opponents advance rival visions and narratives that inform its discourse and practice (Hill, 2003).

Reflecting this complexity, foreign policy analysis has increasingly moved beyond a narrow focus on policy outcomes towards closer attention to the processes through which foreign policy is formulated, justified, and recalibrated over time (Alden and Aran, 2012: 93). From a process-oriented perspective, foreign policy decision-making is shaped by changing institutional contexts, political constraints, and normative commitments. It emerges from the interplay between structural factors and political agency, as decision-makers interpret and respond to shifting domestic and international environments (Alden and Aran, 2012). Rather than being fixed or internally coherent, foreign policy therefore takes the form of evolving patterns of action that may be sustained, adjusted, or abandoned in response to changing political circumstances.

Over the past decade, attention to populist foreign policy has expanded in response to what has been termed the global democratic recession, during which populist actors have increasingly reshaped political institutions, norms, and foreign policy practices (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2018). This literature has placed particular emphasis on personalised leadership, examining how figures such as Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Donald Trump have exercised outsized influence over diplomatic decisions and shifted their international positioning (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019). Yet despite growing attention to populism's domestic consequences, the ways in which populist actors actively mobilise foreign policy as a site of political performance remain

comparatively underexplored. Existing studies have tended to focus on foreign policy outcomes, strategic alignment, or institutional change, rather than on how foreign policy discourse itself functions as a practice of constructing domestic political authority².

Under populist rule, foreign policy becomes closely interwoven with domestic political struggle. International engagements are not treated solely as instruments of external strategy but are selectively framed to advance internal legitimation, reinforce moral boundaries, and consolidate political authority at home (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019). Confrontational rhetoric, symbolic breaches of diplomatic norms, and the deliberate staging of international disputes function as mechanisms through which incumbents assert authenticity and sovereignty while sustaining polarising political narratives. In this way, foreign policy practices actively shape domestic political competition, structuring who is included within the moral community of “the people” and who is cast as its internal or external opponents (Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019, 5). These foreign policy practices also have distributive and political effects within the state. Strategic alignments and international partnerships can strengthen incumbents by providing diplomatic cover, material resources, and symbolic validation (Wajner, 2022), while simultaneously constraining opposition actors and narrowing domestic political opportunity structures. As foreign policy becomes embedded in processes of internal mobilisation and authority-building, it can facilitate not only polarisation but also the gradual entrenchment of authoritarian governance, contributing to broader dynamics of democratic backsliding.

Contestatory framing serves as a key strategy within this framework. Contestation involves practices through which actors challenge the validity, legitimacy, or relevance of established norms and authorities (Wiener, 2014), encompassing both discursive disputes over normative frameworks and material challenges to institutional structures (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Bettiza and Lewis, 2020). Crucially, contestation differs from non-compliance: it specifically refers to intentional efforts to undermine opponents’ factual claims, policy ideas, or moral credibility (Boscarino, 2016). As Aydın-Düzgit (2023, 2323) argues, contestation is fundamentally relational, involving strategic self-positioning of the challenger relative to the contested party. Within populist politics, contestation becomes particularly vital as authority is constructed through antagonism and ongoing challenges to norms, elites, and institutions. Contestatory

² There are few exceptions that explicitly focus on this dimension (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019; Wajner, 2022).

frames thus function to question and delegitimise dominant normative assertions by portraying them as hypocritical, biased, or politically driven (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020).

In the current political context, contestation has become a defining feature of international politics, in which states challenge liberal norms to advance domestic political objectives (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020). China has consistently disputed Western interpretations of human rights, emphasising sovereignty and non-interference, thereby challenging the normative authority of liberal democracies (Weiss and Wallace, 2021). Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine represent direct challenges to the norms of territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter, with Russia invoking sovereignty claims and the protection of Russian-speaking populations as justification (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020: 567). Similarly, the Trump administration's withdrawal of funding from international organisations exemplifies contestation of multilateral governance structures (Alcaro, 2018). Through such contestation, populist actors reinforce nationalist narratives, portray external elites as adversaries, and legitimise concentrated executive authority. Foreign policy contestation thus operates on two levels: externally, it questions established international norms and promotes alternative visions of the global order; domestically, it enables populist leaders to mobilise support, deflect criticism, and align resistance to liberal internationalism with claims of authentic representation of popular sovereignty (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020).

3. Methodological Approach: Frame Analysis to Understand Populist Foreign Policy

This article employs frame analysis to examine how AKP elites deployed contestatory foreign policy practices towards European actors during Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum. Framing, understood as the process through which actors selectively define problems, attribute blame, and advance normative claims (Snow, 2004; Boscarino, 2016), provides the means through which elites mobilise support and construct political authority. This framework is particularly well-suited to the study of populist foreign policy, as it captures not only the substantive content of discourse but also the strategic and performative processes through which political antagonisms are articulated, and external political conflict is internalised onto domestic actors.

Following Aiolfi (2025) and Moffitt (2016), the article conceptualises populism as a political style performed across communicative arenas, with foreign policy serving as a key site for enacting and legitimising populist authority. By foregrounding repertoires of embodied and symbolically mediated performance (Moffitt, 2016: 38), this approach draws attention to

shifting claims to represent “the people,” recognising that the category of the people is always contingent and open to contestation (Moffitt, 2016: 28). Within this stylistic framework, political and media elites can strategically deploy nationalist narratives and crisis discourse to mobilise public sentiment and consolidate authority, transforming contingent political events into opportunities for performing sovereign identity (Nakou, 2025: 91). Crucially, leaders may adopt a more or less populist style depending on how consistently and intensely they mobilise these performative repertoires at different moments (Moffitt, 2016: 45). The political style approach, therefore, can demonstrate how contestatory foreign policy can vary in intensity according to domestic political imperatives and shifting international conjunctures.

Within this variation, contestatory framing serves as a central performative tool. Understood as the active challenging and delegitimising of opponents’ claims, values, or authority (Boscarino, 2016; Wiener, 2014; Bettiza and Lewis, 2020), it extends beyond the articulation of policy disagreement. In populist politics, contestatory framing stages visible confrontation in ways that emphasise authenticity and determination before domestic audiences. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the formation and mobilisation of contestatory frames directed at European states during Turkey’s 2017 constitutional referendum campaign. European states provide a crucial case, given the increasing tendency of Turkish policymakers to adopt confrontational rhetoric towards them during periods of heightened domestic political competition (Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019).

The empirical analysis examines elite framing across three communicative arenas during the referendum campaign from late January to April 2017: public speeches by President Erdoğan and senior AKP officials; opinion columns by government figures and aligned intellectuals; and government-aligned media coverage. The frame analysis draws on a comprehensive review of pro-government media, Daily Sabah, Yeni Şafak, Anadolu Agency, and TRT World throughout this four-month period, alongside a close examination of political elite speeches, to trace how contestatory narratives circulated across these interconnected arenas. The study identifies three distinct frames through which European political elites were systematically constructed as antagonists: a hypocrisy frame exposing alleged double standards; a threat frame portraying European actions as security concerns; and a resentment frame inverting criticism into evidence of Turkey's rising power. The analysis demonstrates how these frames internalised external conflict, delegitimated opposition by associating dissent with hostile foreign actors, and undermined the legitimacy of European criticism, illustrating how foreign policy contestation functioned as a performative strategy of domestic regime consolidation.

4. Turkish Foreign Policy Change and Europe

A pivotal moment in Turkey's contemporary political history was the AKP's electoral victory in 2002. The party drew on extensive social and political mobilisation rooted in earlier Islamist movements, most notably the Welfare Party, particularly through municipal governance in key urban centres such as Istanbul and Ankara (Tuğal, 2016). Although the AKP rapidly ascended to national power, it remained politically vulnerable during its first decade in office. This fragility stemmed from the continued dominance of Kemalist bureaucratic elites, especially within the military and the judiciary, whom the AKP regarded as potential veto players capable of constraining or reversing its authority (Zorlu, 2022). During this early period, the party confronted substantial institutional resistance, including party closure cases, sustained tensions with the judiciary, and the persistent threat of military intervention. As these institutional constraints were gradually weakened, particularly after 2010, the AKP began to shift towards a strategy of executive takeover (Zorlu, 2022).

Although the AKP displayed populist characteristics from its foundation, including anti-elitist mobilisation and appeals to popular sovereignty, its early period in office was marked by inclusionary governance strategies rather than overtly exclusionary or authoritarian practices (Zorlu, 2022). At the same time, shifts in the internal balance of power were reinforced through populist redistribution mechanisms, including partial welfarism, designed to moderate the effects of neoliberal restructuring while consolidating support among lower-income households (Akçay, 2018). As institutional constraints were progressively eroded, particularly after 2010, this phase gave way to a more openly antagonistic mode of governance. This strategy operated at two interconnected levels: first, the consolidation of institutional control through repeated electoral victories and constitutional referendums; and second, the discursive delegitimation of political opposition, which was increasingly portrayed as undemocratic, elitist, or aligned with hostile external forces (Zorlu, 2022).

These broader transformations in Turkey's political landscape were accompanied by a reconfiguration of relations with Europe. During its initial period in office, the AKP presented EU membership as a central pillar of its foreign policy agenda. The party's 2002 election manifesto described EU accession as its "priority target" and framed EU conditionality as compatible with Turkey's modernisation process (AK Parti, 2002: 33). This stance marked a departure from the explicitly anti-Western orientation of its Islamist predecessor and enabled the AKP to broaden its appeal beyond its core constituency. EU conditionality also provided a

set of incentives and constraints that the party could strategically mobilise to advance domestic political reforms and consolidate power (Zorlu, 2022).

During this initial phase, relations with the EU appeared to progress steadily. The European Council's 2005 decision to open accession negotiations generated optimism regarding Turkey's membership prospects, but this momentum soon stalled. The unresolved Cyprus issue, alongside growing political opposition within several European governments, increasingly obstructed the accession process. Although there was some convergence between the AKP and the EU on domestic reforms and Cyprus-related initiatives, the EU lacked a comprehensive and credible pre-accession framework comparable to that extended to Eastern European states (Patton, 2007). Political resistance hardened further as the French government moved to block key negotiation chapters on cultural and civilisational grounds (Parker and Thornhill, 2007), while centre-right parties across Europe increasingly portrayed Turkey as an actor culturally external to Europe on account of its Muslim identity (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021: 1097). These developments reinforced perceptions in Turkey that EU accession was unattainable, regardless of the depth of domestic reforms, producing a structural deadlock in the AKP's early Europe strategy.

Following its electoral success in 2007, the AKP articulated a broader reorientation of foreign policy away from Western institutional integration and towards diversification and engagement with non-Western actors. Under Ahmet Davutoğlu's leadership, Turkey was reimagined as a "central country" with autonomous regional influence rather than a bridge between East and West (Kıvanç, 2014), a shift that combined economic considerations with civilisational narratives drawing on Turkey's Ottoman past and regional ties (Öztañ, 2015). From 2010 onwards, this reorientation deepened as Turkey expanded its diplomatic presence in Africa, strengthened ties with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League, and adopted a more assertive stance in Middle Eastern politics (Kıvanç, 2014). Foreign policy discourse increasingly portrayed Turkey as a defender of the "oppressed", a narrative that gained particular resonance during the Arab uprisings (Zorlu, 2022).

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis accelerated this trajectory along two interconnected dimensions. At the international level, Kutlay and Öniş (2021, 1086) argue that the crisis marked a critical juncture within a broader, longer-term structural transformation of the international order, as power was increasingly seen to be moving away from the West and material power transitions involving the emergence of new power centres had profound impacts on the perceptions of governments in the Global South about the possibilities of a more

proactive foreign policy approach. At the domestic level, the effects were equally consequential. As Akçay (2018) demonstrates, the sustainability of the AKP's neoliberal populist model, built throughout the 2000s on a combination of welfare expansion, financial inclusion through household credit, and labour market deregulation, depended on the continuation of strong economic growth. From 2012 onwards, a significant slowdown, partly driven by capital outflows following shifts in US Federal Reserve policy, placed this model under increasing strain (Akçay, 2018: 19).

Relations with Western partners deteriorated in parallel. Following the Gezi protests of 2013, government officials increasingly adopted a conspiratorial framing, attributing domestic unrest to foreign media and external actors and portraying Western criticism as politically motivated interference in Turkey's internal affairs (Tuğal, 2016). This discursive shift coincided with the progressive erosion of EU accession conditionality and a broader transition from normative to transactional engagement, to which the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement on migration gave institutional expression, as Turkey committed to preventing irregular migration to Europe in exchange for financial assistance, prospects of visa liberalisation, and renewed EU engagement (Ekim and Kirişci, 2017). While this arrangement positioned Turkey as an indispensable partner in managing the refugee flows, it simultaneously expanded Turkey's leverage over the EU. Turkey was increasingly perceived as a buffer state, valued for its capacity to shield Europe from refugee flows (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021: 1097). This combination of weakened normative constraints and enhanced leverage created conditions in which foreign policy confrontation with European states could be publicly staged. Yet, given the substantial economic costs associated with institutional rupture, particularly those linked to the EU-Turkey customs union, disengagement from the Western alliance also remained structurally constrained (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021: 1097).

The 2017 constitutional referendum thus unfolded against a backdrop in which Europe had become a particularly salient external referent within the AKP's foreign policy discourse. Long-standing tensions, the erosion of accession-based engagement, and the consolidation of an antagonistic mode of populist governance at home had together transformed relations with Europe into a site of intensified contention. The referendum campaign did not introduce antagonism with Europe but rather activated and amplified an emerging discursive pattern, enabling foreign policy to function as a performative arena through which domestic political authority could be asserted.

5. The 2017 Referendum and Contestatory Frames

The 2017 constitutional referendum was a nationwide vote on a series of amendments aimed at fundamentally restructuring Turkey's governance system. It represented a critical juncture, as the proposed changes would irreversibly transform Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one, weakening legislative oversight and judicial independence³ (Gökmenoğlu, 2022). The campaign took place amid deep polarisation following the failed July 2016 coup attempt and the ongoing state of emergency, during which executive power was exercised through extraordinary measures. The "Yes" campaign, led by the ruling AKP and President Erdoğan, presented the amendments as necessary for stability and effective governance (Esen and Gümüşcü, 2017: 307). Conversely, the "No" campaign, comprising opposition groups, raised concerns that the reforms would undermine the separation of powers and concentrate power in the president's hands (Esen and Gümüşcü, 2017; Ekim and Kirişci, 2017). International concern was also expressed, with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission cautioning that the proposed amendments represented a serious democratic regression (Euronews, 2017).

In this context, the large Turkish diaspora abroad, especially in Germany, became a crucial target for the government's electoral outreach. AKP-affiliated groups and party officials aimed to campaign in European cities to mobilise external voters. However, some of these efforts faced opposition from European authorities. In early 2017, local German authorities cancelled multiple visits by senior Turkish officials, including Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ and Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci, citing security and administrative issues (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017b). In March, the Netherlands cancelled a scheduled meeting with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and denied him flight permission, while Family and Social Policies Minister Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya was declared *persona non grata* and expelled during a campaign visit (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017a; Esen and Gümüşcü, 2017: 308). These developments sparked strong reactions from AKP elites and Erdoğan, who accused Germany and the Netherlands of employing Nazi practices, causing diplomatic tensions between Turkey and several European countries in the weeks before the referendum (Pierini, 2017). The decision led to protests by Turkish demonstrators, which were met with repressive actions by Dutch police, escalating the diplomatic conflict. Erdoğan also called on international organisations to consider sanctions against the Netherlands (TRT World, 2017). In this period of contention, Turkey also asked the

³ For a detailed review of the constitutional changes, see Esen and Gumuscu (2017).

Dutch ambassador, who was out of the country at the time, to refrain from returning to his post (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017b).

During this highly contentious period, AKP elites advanced multiple contestatory frames, with a central emphasis on exposing what was presented as European hypocrisy. They portrayed the restrictions imposed on Turkish officials as violations of democratic norms and as proof of European double standards, a narrative amplified through pro-government media and public rallies (Solmaz, 2017; Daily Sabah, 2017b). In response to the cancellations, İbrahim Kalın (2017), the president's chief adviser and spokesperson, argued in a column that these measures were not isolated diplomatic incidents but indicative of deeper contradictions between Europe's professed values and its conduct. He framed the episode as symptomatic of entrenched Islamophobia and xenophobic populism in Europe, thereby deploying a hypocrisy frame that challenged Europe's claim to moral and democratic authority. In a public speech, Erdoğan extended this narrative through civilisational rhetoric. Citing a European Court of Justice ruling that permitted workplace bans on religious symbols, he depicted "Christian Europe" as a threat to religious freedom and presented the decision as evidence of European hypocrisy and illiberalism, casting Europe as exclusionary and regressive (Tisdall, 2017). Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu likewise reinforced the hypocrisy frame by contesting Europe's moral authority, questioning its claim to "give lessons" to Turkey on democracy and freedom of speech, and arguing that in practice Turkey was treated as a "second-class country" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017c). By linking the campaign restrictions to broader concerns about democratic decline in Europe, AKP elites consistently recast European states as marked by inconsistency and illiberalism, thereby seeking to neutralise European normative influence.

Alongside the hypocrisy frame, AKP elites also advanced a threat frame grounded in securitising logic. This framing was articulated most explicitly by Erdoğan. Speaking in Istanbul in March 2017, he accused Germany of "aiding and abetting terrorism" (Connolly, 2017), while pro-government media amplified similar claims by alleging that European governments provided political and logistical space to organisations designated as terrorist groups by Turkey, most notably the PKK and the YPG (Solmaz, 2017). Having constructed Europe as aligned with terrorism, Erdoğan intensified this threat narrative by adopting explicitly coercive language on the alleged relationship, warning that "whoever comes right under our nose and collaborates with terrorist organisations to divide our country" would face consequences (DW, 2017). This framing did more than challenge Europe's normative standing;

it performed state capacity, projecting Turkey as a sovereign power willing and able to defend itself against both terrorist actors and their external sponsors.

During the final weeks of the referendum campaign, Erdoğan frequently addressed large rallies across Turkey, portraying external opposition as evidence of the need for constitutional change and foregrounding the resentment frame as a central campaign theme. One notable speech was delivered at a mass rally in İzmir, a traditional opposition stronghold, where Erdoğan openly contested Europe's intentions. By asserting that European actors had "seen" what the constitutional changes would bring to Turkey (Euronews, 2017), he recast opposition to the reforms as evidence of fear and resentment of Turkey's success, rather than genuine concern over democratic norms. This resentment framing was echoed across AKP leadership. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu employed the same logic, arguing that European opposition stemmed not from democratic concerns but because "they do not want Turkey to grow, develop and be independent" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017c).

Through the resentment frame, AKP elites inverted the normative significance of European criticism, reframing opposition not as concern over democratic backsliding but as anxiety over Turkey's rising power and autonomy. At the same time, a "Yes" vote was constructed as synonymous with political stability, national security, and economic resilience (Habertürk, 2017). This framing is illustrated by Erdoğan's remarks in a speech in Ankara, where he invoked the long-standing trope of Turkey as the "sick man" of Europe: "Those who once called this country the 'sick man' have never been able to bury it, put a tombstone over it, and be done with it. Now, having to witness this country's rebirth is, of course, something that weighs heavily on them" (Yeni Şafak, 2017a). By reversing a historically derogatory label, Erdoğan recast European hostility as evidence of Turkey's revival and resilience. In this narrative, external antagonism became a marker of success and defiance, one that could be affirmed domestically through a vote in favour of constitutional change.

Crucially, these contestatory frames performed a central domestic function beyond challenging European normative authority. AKP elites constructed a framework in which domestic dissent was portrayed as part of a coordinated international campaign against Turkey. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, for instance, claimed that German authorities were actively supporting the "No" campaign and seeking to prevent Turkey's strengthening (Middle East Eye, 2017). The hypocrisy, threat and resentment frames directed at Europe thus operated performatively: they simultaneously contested European normative claims while establishing foreign actors as interfering in Turkey's internal affairs, thereby providing the discursive resources through

which internal opposition could be delegitimised as collaboration with hostile external forces. Pro-government media reinforced this by portraying the “No” campaign as orchestrated by both terrorist organisations and their foreign sponsors. Exemplifying this framing strategy, a Daily Sabah columnist asserted that terrorist groups were coordinating opposition to the reforms and claimed that actors abroad sought to use these groups to undermine the government, while arguing that the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) had aligned itself with these terrorist organisations (Daily Sabah, 2017). Through this discursive move, domestic opposition, terrorist organisations, and foreign powers were grouped into a single coordinated threat to Turkish sovereignty.

Table 1

Summary of Contestatory Frames Against Europe

Frame Type	Core Dimension	Strategic Function
Hypocrisy Frame	Contesting moral authority by exposing selective application of norms	Undermined Europe's normative authority by exposing alleged double standards
Threat Frame	Contesting diplomatic legitimacy by recasting relations as security concerns	Reframed bilateral relations from diplomatic disagreement to security concerns
Resentment Frame	Contesting the validity of criticism by reframing opposition as evidence of success	Presented constitutional reform as threatening to Europe, confirming Turkey's growing autonomy and strength

Furthermore, the contestatory framing of Europe translated into performative acts of defiance that reinforced claims of sovereign autonomy. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu invoked Turkey's leverage through the refugee agreement to assert that Turkey, not Europe, held the commanding position in the relationship (Tisdall, 2017), symbolically inverting hierarchies of power and framing European criticism as contingent upon Turkish cooperation. The government's threat to suspend the EU–Turkey migration agreement illustrated this performative defiance: by using

a policy tool crucial to European interests, the AKP turned interdependence into an assertion of executive authority (Henley, 2017).

Finally, the contestatory framing of Europe was deployed to mobilise the Turkish diaspora as a collective force resisting European interference. AKP elites recast participation in the referendum as an act of defiance. AKP MP Metin Külünk argued that constitutional reform would strengthen Turkey internationally and, in turn, enhance the standing of Turkish citizens abroad, enabling them to defend their interests within European societies and withstand pressures of assimilation (Yeni Şafak, 2017b). According to Külünk, bans on campaign events by Turkish ministers confirmed the existence of threats emanating from Europe. He urged Turkish citizens in Europe to “overturn the plot” through their votes (Yeni Şafak, 2017b), portraying administrative restrictions as evidence of a coordinated effort to obstruct Turkey's political transformation. The “Yes” vote was thus positioned not simply as support for executive presidentialism but as an act of resistance against external enemies. This framing served a dual purpose, reinforcing the domestic narrative of a Turkey under siege while galvanising diaspora turnout by casting electoral participation as an expression of patriotic defence.

6. Conclusion

A growing body of research has examined how populists challenge the liberal international order through contestatory practices, often focusing on disruptive actions against international institutions and the normative frameworks that underpin them (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020). However, the domestic dimension of such contestation, specifically how foreign policy confrontation is mobilised as an instrument of internal legitimisation and opposition marginalisation, has been comparatively neglected. This article has addressed this gap by examining the domestic uses of foreign policy contestation through the case of Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, a critical juncture characterised by increasing democratic backsliding. The article demonstrated that contestatory framing against Europe became a recurring and strategically deployed element throughout the referendum campaign, functioning not merely as an expression of international positioning but as a strategy through which populist authority was constructed and performed. Across multiple communicative arenas, AKP elites deployed three interconnected frames of hypocrisy, threat, and resentment that together constructed Europe as a coherent antagonist against whom constitutional reform could be presented as an act of national defence. State-aligned media outlets systematically reproduced and circulated these frames through digital platforms, creating a reinforcing narrative environment.

The analysis revealed how contestatory framing against Europe was employed to undermine domestic political opponents. Opposition to the constitutional amendments was depicted not as legitimate democratic disagreement but as evidence of foreign interference, with “No” voters portrayed as aligned with terrorist organisations and hostile external actors. Through this narrative, foreign policy rhetoric was redirected inward, serving to delegitimise opposition and reinforce executive authority. At the same time, AKP elites sought to mobilise the Turkish diaspora in Europe by framing referendum participation as a collective act of resistance against European interference in Turkey’s sovereignty rather than simply an exercise of democratic rights.

Yet the referendum process also revealed the limits of contestatory framing as a self-sufficient strategy of regime consolidation. The narrow victory margin of less than three percentage points, achieved despite significant structural advantages and sustained antagonistic mobilisation, indicates that populist performance alone was insufficient to secure the breadth of consent required for durable consolidation. This outcome points to a further issue that warrants closer attention. While contestatory framing can energise core supporters and externalise political conflict, it may simultaneously intensify polarisation in ways that constrain rather than broaden the governing coalition. Populist framing and institutional capture, therefore, are best understood not as sequential strategies but as mutually reinforcing modes of action. Investigating how these strategies interact, the conditions under which regimes rely more heavily on one or the other, and the role each plays in sustaining authoritarian governance remains an important task for future research on populist rule and democratic backsliding.

Finally, it is important to underline that confrontational rhetoric did not culminate in a rupture with Europe. Over time, Turkey preserved its strategic partnerships, including cooperation under the EU–Turkey migration agreement and its continued membership of NATO, indicating that contestatory framing remained bounded by material considerations. AKP’s foreign policy shows a level of strategic flexibility. Confrontation is intensified when it benefits domestic political returns, while cooperation continues when economic and security interests constrain escalation. This dynamic highlights a distinctive feature of populist foreign policy, namely its ability to instrumentalise the international arena for domestic legitimation without fundamentally unsettling the structural bases of strategic alignment. The Turkish case, therefore, illustrates how contestatory framing can operate as a resource for regime consolidation while leaving intact the very relationships it publicly challenges.

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