

# Turkey Under Erdoğan: Investigating the Relationship Between Populism and Governance Quality Since 2013

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, Turkish society and politics seem to have witnessed a populist turn. Events such as the suppression of the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2016 failed coup, the 2017 constitutional amendments that expanded presidential powers, the extensive influence over the judiciary, the deepened political polarization, the weakened mechanisms of political representation and mediation, the strengthening of plebiscitary relations, and the overall shift toward personalist rule have led numerous analysts of populism, as well as prominent media outlets like *The Guardian*, *Bloomberg*, *The New York Times*, and *Foreign Policy*, to label Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party as “populists.” Accordingly, Turkey’s society and political system, particularly over the past decade, seems to have experienced a significant erosion of democratic values, norms, and institutions. Populist policies have challenged the quality of governance in the country. The main objective of this research, therefore, is to investigate the relationship between Erdoğan’s populist policies and governance quality from 2013 to 2023, utilizing critical approaches to populism and a combination of quality of governance indicators and “quality of democracy” dimensions. Statistical data is extracted from databases such as the World Governance Indicators, Varieties of Democracy Project, Freedom House, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as The Legatum Prosperity Index. The research findings show that Erdoğan’s policies have had an adverse impact on the quality of governance and democratic values in the country during his second term in office since 2013, compared to the early years of coming to power.

## Keywords

democratic backsliding; Erdoğan; populism; quality of governance; Turkey

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rise and spread of populism seem to have posed a significant threat to democratic values and norms worldwide. It could be said that Turkey stands out as one of the countries where the level of democracy has consistently declined since 2013. Notably, after the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey earned the label of “the world’s biggest jailer of journalists” (Amnesty International, 2017). Consequently, experts and analysts of Turkish affairs have recently been involved in intense discussions and debates over how to classify the current regime regarding the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Terms like “competitive authoritarianism,” “authoritarian neoliberalism,” “neoliberal populism,” and “crony capitalism” have all been employed to describe this regime. However, it seems that what such reports generally agree on is Turkey’s gradual authoritarian shift (Smith Reynolds, 2023, p. 2). According to the Global Populism Database and a 2019 *Guardian* report, Erdoğan was ranked between 1.5 to 2 on the “extremely populist” index from 2014 to 2018 (McKernan, 2019). Additionally, the Legatum Institute (2023) placed Turkey’s government 128th globally in terms of governance quality, with Turkey’s overall governance score declining from 52.8 in 2013 to 36.9 in 2023 (Legatum Institute, 2023).

The AKP ascended to power in the wake of Turkey’s major economic crisis in 2001, articulating its political discourse around the idea of a “new Turkey” in opposition to the secular, Westernized elites, and their military and bureaucratic strongholds, which Erdoğan referred to as the “old Turkey.” The AKP’s new discourse emerged as a Turkish–Islamic synthesis, in such a way that some analysts categorize “the ideological foundation and type of populism in Turkey as right-wing” (Aytaç & Öniş, 2014, p. 43) with Islamist and authoritarian tendencies (Baykan, 2018). After winning two electoral victories (in 2002 and 2007) and the constitutional referenda of 2010 and 2012, Erdoğan consolidated his position as Turkey’s charismatic political leader. However, by 2013, Turkish society and politics seemed to experience a form of democratic reversal. The suppression of the Istanbul Gezi Park protests in 2013, the July 2016 coup attempt, and the brutal crackdowns that followed, culminating in the 2017 constitutional amendments that significantly expanded presidential powers, marked a gradual authoritarian turn. The 2016 coup attempt was used to justify the transition to a presidential system and consolidate Erdoğan’s rule, with the executive branch becoming the largest anti-democratic actor in such a way that liberal democratic and reformist actors in Turkey lack the capacity to reverse the authoritarian trends of Erdoğan and the AKP. Following the theoretical framework of this study, the relationship between Erdoğan’s populist policies and governance quality will be analyzed based on five key indicators, introduced in the next section.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Populism is an ambiguous and contested term, having been examined from diverse ontological perspectives. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on populism, the term still lacks a clear conceptual definition, and scholars continue to disagree on its classification, labels, and boundaries. The ambiguity surrounding the concept arises from its multifaceted nature. Populism is usually understood “as an ideology” (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008), “a political strategy” (Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2001), “a discursive logic of articulation” (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005), or “a performative style” (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy et al., 2021). In a general sense, populism can be defined as a form of mass politics based on claims to represent or act on behalf of “the people,” particularly the common or majority population, in opposition to the elites, privileged groups, or established power structures (Collier, 2001).

There is an extensive body of literature on the impact of populism on the quality of governance and democratic values. However, there is ongoing debate in the academic literature regarding how the rise of populist forces affects the quality of democratic governance. Broadly speaking, two theoretical approaches to the relationship between populism and democracy can be identified. From a practical point of view, some scholars have an optimistic view of populism. In other words, they argue that populism, by supporting democracy and the sovereignty of the people, represents the purest and most genuine form of democracy, thus having the potential to enhance the quality of democratic governance (Canovan, 1999; Dahl, 1998; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Moffitt, 2017; Mouffe, 2005).

However, another group of scholars, focusing on the consequences of populists coming to power, examines the impact of populist leaders and parties coming to power on the quality of democracy. This group has a pessimistic and critical approach to populism, viewing populism as a serious challenge to democracy. They argue that populism disregards the liberal democratic features of checks and balances on political power, the competition of ideas, the rule of law, and pluralism (Albertazzi & Müller, 2013; Batory, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Plattner, 2010; Spittler, 2018). Critics contend that “while a form of democracy persists in populist regimes through elections, populists undermine institutions of democracy and challenge the very ‘practice’ of democracy” (Daly & Jones, 2020, p. 526). As Alston (2017, pp. 1–15) remarks: “In many instances, populist leaders advocate for direct representation, bypassing intermediary institutions, such as public media, civil society, parliaments and courts, that ensure accountability and power distribution.” In this regard, Urbinati (2019, p. 9) argues that “while populism’s core ideas are not inherently anti-democratic, they could be exploited to undermine democracy and pave the way for authoritarian leaders to rise.” Pasquino (2008) views populism as antithetical to democracy, suggesting that in a populist democracy, access to power is more direct and bypasses intermediary institutions. Sartori (2009), criticizing the Berlusconi government, similarly sees populism as naturally opposed to liberal democracy, leading to societal “polarization” and undermining democratic coexistence. Müller (2016, p. 101) argues that populism’s illiberal tendencies pose a threat to democracy and pluralism, as populists often disregard the rights of those not considered part of “the people” and bypass mechanisms of state oversight, which they perceive as stifling the “will of the people.” Levitsky and Loxton (2013) further argue that populist leaders in power provoke “constitutional crises” and, through tactics like mass rallies and referenda, seek to change fundamental laws, ultimately leading to the entrenchment of competitive authoritarianism. If they win, they can seize unrestricted power over institutions by implementing drastic constitutional reforms, carrying out widespread purges, and appointing loyalists to critical public positions. This consolidation of control over the state powers enables populists to foster the rise of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013).

As opposed to liberal democracy, populist democracy rejects multiple cleavages in society. Instead, it acts as if there is only one single cleavage: the pure people vs. the corrupt elites. Populists are also against deliberation, negotiation, and compromise. Populists have nothing to debate with the corrupt elites because any compromise will eventually be harmful to the people’s will (Pappas, 2019). In this context, democratic erosion refers to the gradual decline of democratic institutions and values, resulting in reduced accountability, transparency, and the protection of human rights (Krygier, 2024). Therefore, particularly when populists are in power, a significant decline could be seen in the democratic levels of countries.

As a result, pessimistic and critical approaches to populism have emphasized the negative and destructive effects of populism on the quality of governance, as well as the erosion of democratic values and institutions.

Assuming a connection between the type of political regime and governance quality, this study adopts a critical approach to populism to evaluate the effects of Erdoğan's populist policies on governance quality and democratic functioning in Turkey from 2013 to 2023.

Methodologically, two other concepts need to be explained here; the "quality of governance" and the "quality of democracy." The most common definition of "quality of governance," is based on the World Bank's concept of governance. It is broadly described as the traditions and institutions through which authority is exercised within a country. This includes: (a) the processes through which the governments are selected, held accountable, and replaced; (b) the government's ability to set and implement effective policies; and (c) the mutual respect between citizens and state for the institutions that regulate economic and social interactions (Kaufmann et al., 1999). Based on the previous definition, Kaufmann et al. (1999) developed a set of indicators to measure the governance quality of the countries. These indicators were grouped into six categories: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.

As for the "quality of democracy," this study uses the definition of Diamond and Morlino (2004, pp. 20–31), who contended that:

While there is no absolutely objective way of laying out a single framework for gauging democratic quality, there are eight dimensions on which democracies vary in quality: freedom, the rule of law, vertical accountability, responsiveness, equality, participation, competition, and horizontal accountability. These dimensions are closely linked and tend to move together, either toward democratic improvement and deepening or toward decay.

Due to the overlap between Diamond and Morlino's dimensions of the quality of democracy and Kaufman and the World Bank's indicators of the quality of governance, we have used a combination of the above indicators for measurement. To do so, the current study gathered data from databases such as the Worldwide Governance Indicators, Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), Legatum, and Freedom House, based on the following indicators: rule of law, voice and accountability, respect for civil rights and freedoms, government effectiveness, and control of corruption. These composite indicators provide a model for measuring and explaining the quality of Erdoğan's populist governance, as well as the extent to which his government has adhered to the quality of democracy during the years under study.

### 3. Rule of Law

One of the defining characteristics of populist regimes is their tendency to monopolize and centralize power, often sidelining established democratic and bureaucratic institutions. According to Kirişci and Sloat (2019, p. 1) "in Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party, initial promises of democratic reform have been replaced by authoritarian policies and practices that undermine the rule of law." As Gumuscu (2023, p. 136) states:

While Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party initially came to power in 2002 as a conservative democratic party with a reformist agenda focusing on EU accession, democratic consolidation, and economic growth, it enacted only limited liberal reforms in its early years.

However, since 2013, Erdoğan's governance has faced significant internal and external challenges, prompting him to adopt a populist strategy to maintain power and secure mass political support. Before this period, between 2002 and 2013, the AKP enjoyed continuous electoral success, allowing Erdoğan to rule without needing populist tactics to consolidate political authority (Samiee Esfahani & Farahmand, 2023, p. 174). Turkey's turn towards "illiberal democracy" became evident following the election of Sarkozy as France's president in 2007, which dispelled any lingering hopes of EU membership. In fact, changes in the political climate, especially the July 15, 2016 coup, were a turning point in Turkey's domestic and foreign relations. The declaration of a state of emergency and the implementation of a political system that concentrated power in the president led to tensions and accusations between Turkey and the EU, with the EU accusing Turkey of democratic backsliding. After that, Erdoğan's stance towards the West became more harsh and populist themes became more prominent in his foreign policy discourses (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2021; Rogenhofer, 2018).

By the June 2015 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan could still claim popular support, but after losing the parliamentary majority, he embarked on a more aggressive path to retain control (Bayart, 2017). Following the 2016 failed coup in Turkey, the country witnessed a significant erosion of the rule of law. The coup attempt, which was reportedly orchestrated by the Gülen movement, accelerated Turkey's shift toward authoritarianism, resulting in the widespread repression of regime opponents and the purging of tens of thousands of public sector workers, including police officers, teachers, and academics. The controversial 2017 constitutional referendum approved Erdoğan's desired changes, establishing a presidential system and marking the end of Turkey's long-standing parliamentary democracy. In 2018, Erdoğan was elected as Turkey's first president under this new presidential system (Bertelsmann Stiftung [BTI], 2024, p. 5; Narin, 2019, p. 87). This referendum expanded the power of the president and eliminated the office of the prime minister, thus giving the president the role of head of state. The amendments also greatly increased the president's influence over the judiciary and judicial appointments (Lecce, 2022, p. 11). Since then, authoritarian tendencies have taken deep root in Erdoğan's "new Turkey." By holding the roles of both the head of state and government, as well as the leader of the ruling party, which some researchers refer to as the one-man government of the AKP (Taş, 2015), or "one-man rule" (Kuru, 2015, pp. 97–115) filled with populist rhetoric and polemical style, President Erdoğan remains unaccountable to the parliament.

As noted in the theoretical discussion, populist leaders frequently centralize authority within the executive, bypassing democratic institutions that are meant to ensure checks and balances. This centralization enables them to push forward policies with limited oversight or accountability. In Turkey, after 2017:

The transition to a presidential system through a series of decrees—namely emergency and presidential decrees—bypassed the legislative process required by constitutional law. The lack of essential legal mechanisms governing administrative procedures, which would provide greater legal certainty for citizens and businesses, has exacerbated administrative arbitrariness and further entrenched the regime's autocracy. (Schulz et al., 2021, p. 35)

Thus, "the current Turkish regime under AKP hegemony rests primarily on personal rule, the criminalization of opposition, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and the erosion of the rule of law and judicial independence" (Smith Reynolds, 2023, p. 3). Given such developments, Freedom House, in its 2018 report, classified Turkey as "not free" for the first time since the series began in 1999 (Freedom House, 2018). Also,

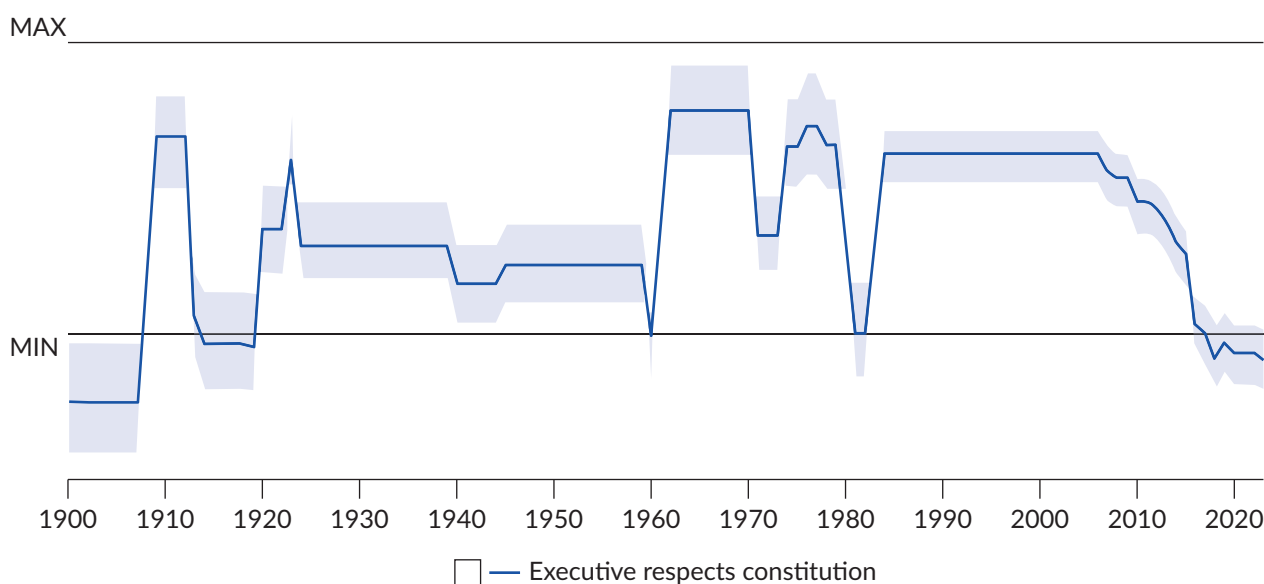
according to the World Bank (n.d.), Turkey's rule of law index fell from 54.46% in 2013 to 32.55% in 2023 (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Worldwide governance indicators: rule of law.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (–2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Rule of law	Turkey	2013	16	0	54.46	0.14
		2018	11	–0.39	38.10	0.16
		2023	10	–0.51	32.55	0.17

Notes: The World Bank Group's worldwide governance indicators are reported in two ways: (a) in their standard normal units, ranging from approximately –2.5 to 2.5; (b) in percentile rank terms from 0 to 100, with higher values corresponding to better outcomes. Source: World Bank (n.d.).

Similarly, the Legatum Institute's 2023 report reveals a decline in Turkey's rule of law index from a score of 42.8 and a global ranking of 89 in 2013 to a score of 30.9 and a rank of 145 in 2023. The index on constraints on executive power also dropped from a score of 30.3 to 21.3, with Turkey's global rank falling from 141 to 162 (Legatum Institute, 2023). Also, according to the V-Dem database, the index of "executive respects constitution" in Turkey has dropped from 0.02 in 2013 to –1.84 in 2023 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** V-Dem executive respects the constitution. Source: V-Dem (n.d.).

In short, while Turkey experienced significant democratic reforms and a relatively liberal political atmosphere during Erdoğan's first decade in power, domestic unrest and crises in foreign relations ultimately led the AKP to abandon its inclusive and conciliatory policies in favour of authoritarianism.

#### 4. Voice and Accountability

While the AKP was initially credited with some democratic advancements, growing concerns over democratic backsliding emerged during Erdoğan's second term (Taş, 2015). Erdoğan's majoritarian interpretation of

democracy and his efforts to establish personal ties through successive referenda and controlled elections have been a crucial mechanism for neutralizing and weakening accountable democratic institutions.

By dividing society into two opposing camps, Erdoğan and the AKP have consistently portrayed themselves as the genuine voice and true representatives of the people's will against corrupt elites. One of the party's early slogans was, "Enough! It's Time for the People to Speak!" positioning the AKP as the voice of the silenced masses against the powerful state elites (Fisher Onar, 2011). As Erdoğan in Directorate of Communications (2019) stated: "Ballot boxes are impassable, unshakeable and indestructible strongholds of national will. Ballot boxes are very important gains that our people acquired by paying prices and waging struggles, so they are our honor." For this reason, AKP leaders have often resorted to referendums to bolster popular participation and have consistently defended their use. Whenever the party was unable to secure the necessary parliamentary majority for constitutional amendments, it called for referendums (Gumuscu, 2023, pp. 134–136). Therefore, as Özbudun (2014) rightly points out, Erdoğan's accountability during his second term in power, is dependent on the ballot box (vertical accountability) "as the only instrument of accountability and the only source of democratic legitimacy" (Özbudun, 2014, p. 163).

However, despite this populist rhetoric, "according to a survey by Istanbul-based Yöneylem Social Research Center in 2022, 66% of Turkish citizens preferred a parliamentary system over a presidential one, with only 28.5% supporting the continuation of the current system" (Turkish Minute, 2022). This reflects a growing mistrust of the presidential system and its "unaccountable" nature among Turkish citizens. A prior survey revealed that by December 2020, fewer than 35% of Turks backed the presidential system, down from 56.5% in 2017 and 44.1% in 2018. While just 35% believed Turkey should maintain its existing system, 58% supported a shift back to the parliamentary system (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 17). Surveys conducted by Kadir Has University in January 2022 also showed the lowest levels of public trust in institutions largely dominated by the executive, including the Central Bank (46.6%), Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu (46.2%), and the media (42.6%). The lowest level of institutional trust, at 40.6%, was found in opposition parties (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 17).

According to the Legatum Institute's 2023 report, Turkey's government accountability and institutional responsibility index dropped from a score of 76.4 in 2013 to 37.1 in 2023, with its global rank falling from 62 to 132. Furthermore, during the same period, the overall score for institutional trust dropped from 50.5 to 42.3, and Turkey's global rank fell from 72 to 117. The World Bank's (n.d.) report also shows a decline in Turkey's voice and accountability index from 40.85 in 2013 to 25 in 2023 (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Worldwide governance indicators: voice and accountability.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (–2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Voice and accountability	Turkey	2013	16	–0.25	40.85	0.11
		2018	12	–0.85	24.76	0.13
		2023	10	–0.86	25	0.13

Source: World Bank (n.d.).

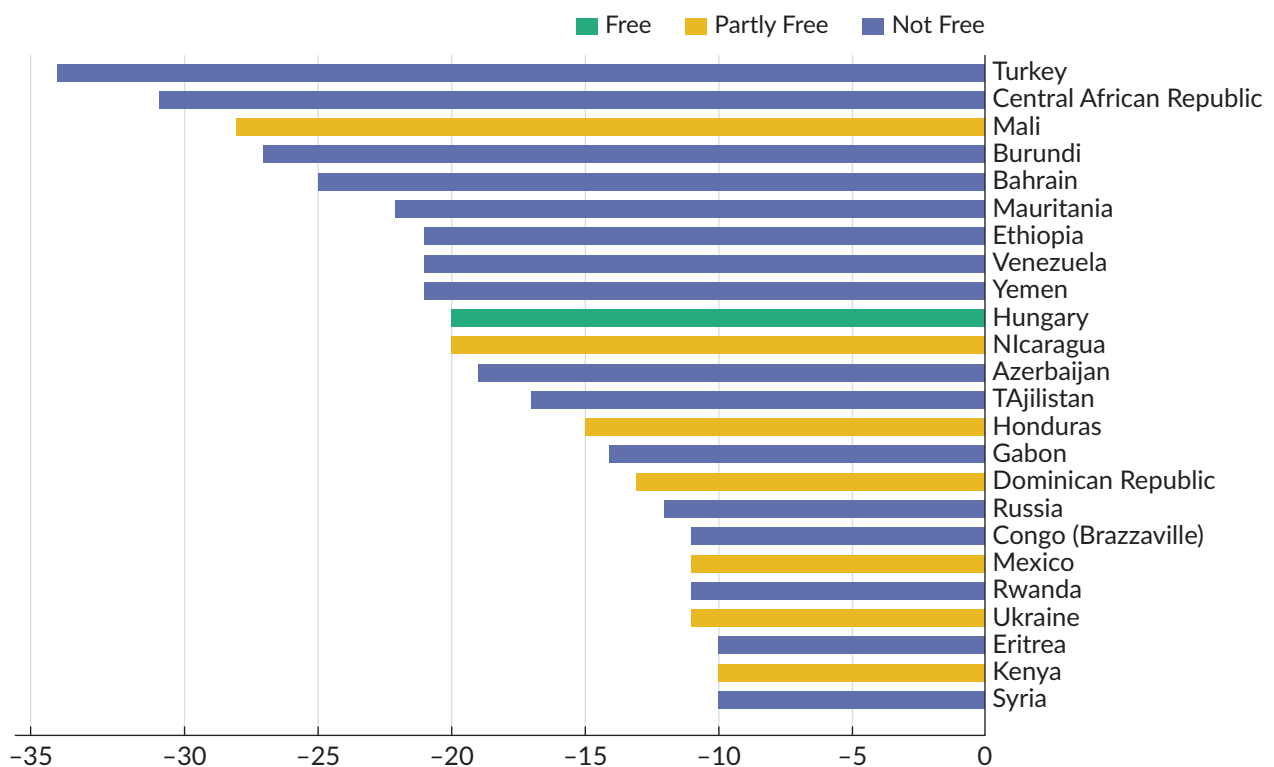
Therefore, under Erdoğan's populist governance since 2013, the interpretation of democracy as a mechanism of "vertical accountability" through elections and referenda, combined with the elimination of checks on executive power, restructuring of the judiciary, reliance on executive decrees, and unchecked



bureaucratic appointments, has paradoxically facilitated the weakening of “horizontal accountability” institutions and, in general, the decline of democratic processes.

## 5. Respect for Civil Rights and Freedoms

Many analysts believe that alongside anti-elite positions, which were a key feature of Erdoğan’s appeal during his two presidential terms, his anti-pluralist tendencies, which emerged after 2007, gradually intensified and became a defining feature of his populist policies (Çinar & Sayin, 2014). Generally, for the government and the AKP, protests and civic activities are seen as anti-democratic actions, and the only legitimate space for political expression is through elections (Gumuscu, 2023, p. 144). In this sense, the process of weakening the quality of governance and democratic regression is evident in Turkey’s declining scores reported by the Freedom House and the V-Dem. Following the AKP’s rise to power in 2002, there was a short period of progress in political rights and civil liberties, but both indicators have consistently worsened over time. In 2018, Freedom House downgraded Turkey from “partly free” to “not free,” arguing that the country no longer qualifies as a democracy (Freedom House, 2018, p. 102; see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Freedom House global decline of freedoms and civil rights. Source: Freedom House (2018).

V-Dem shows a similar trajectory, tracing Turkey’s democratic decline to 2006, with both its liberal democracy and electoral democracy scores worsening over the past 14 years (Gumuscu, 2023, pp. 134–139). According to the V-Dem database, the civil liberties index in Turkey has dropped from 54% in 2013 to 39% in 2023 (V-Dem, n.d.).



Although Turkey's accession process to the EU in 1999 created new momentum for the development of Turkish civil society, the Gezi Park protests later emerged as a turning point, signalling a sharp decline in the country's democratic backsliding. Especially after the July 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan lost his restraint. The mass purges targeted the police, military, judiciary, universities, and opposition parties, condemning tens of thousands of individuals and their families to "social death," depriving them of their official papers and jobs (Bayart, 2017). The 52,000 public employees were arbitrarily dismissed in the aftermath of the attempted coup and were permanently prohibited from working in the public sector, leaving them subject to lasting social and professional stigmatization (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 14). In June 2021, the Constitutional Court agreed to hear a case seeking the dissolution of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) based on the allegation of the party's ties to terrorism. Notably, the People's Democratic Party represents the second-largest opposition force in Turkish politics (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, Amnesty International (2019) reported that, during that year, hundreds of people—including journalists, social media users, and demonstrators—were detained for voicing criticism against Turkey's military offensive in Syria.

The situation of minorities has also worsened over the past decade under the AKP's rule. Despite the legal framework in Turkey upholding the principle of equal treatment, women as well as ethnic and religious minority groups continue to encounter different forms of discrimination. For instance, Alevis and non-Muslims are reportedly disadvantaged in employment opportunities, especially when it comes to securing high-ranking positions within the public sector, while gender-based disparities in the workplace remain widespread. Civic and cultural rights of linguistic minorities, especially the Kurds, are also restricted, including legal limitations on the use of Kurdish in primary and secondary education, while public services are provided solely in Turkish. The renewed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has served as a pretext for heightened repression targeting Kurdish political parties, media platforms, and civil society organizations—a trend that has deepened under the state of emergency. Beyond widespread arrests, dismissals, and closures, appointed state authorities have in some cases dismantled initiatives introduced by Kurdish municipal authorities amid at promoting Kurdish language and culture identities. Refugees also face unfavourable conditions in the country. According to official figures, 3.7 million Syrian refugees are under "temporary protection" status and are barred from acquiring Turkish citizenship. While the government has made efforts to offer basic services to refugees, a significant portion of refugee children remain excluded from the education system, and only a limited number of adults are able to secure formal employment. According to the International Crisis Group (2018), intercommunal violence escalated in 2017, resulting in the deaths of at least 35 individuals amid rising local hostility towards Syrians (International Crisis Group, 2018). Trust and tolerance towards LGBTIQ+ groups, ethnic minorities, and non-Muslims have declined. According to the European Commission's 2022 report, there is increasing concern over the rise in hate speech and hate crimes targeting LGBTIQ+ individuals, Syrian refugees, Armenians, and other non-Muslim ethnic communities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, pp. 7–18).

In addition, Erdoğan and the AKP have consistently used the state's media monopoly as a tool in the existential battle between "the people" and their internal and external "enemies." According to the European Commission, as of September 2022, 69 journalists and media personnel were imprisoned. According to Twitter's transparency report, Turkey leads in censoring social media. The 2021 Free Web Türkiye annual report reveals that at least 11,050 URLs were blocked in Turkey that year. Turkey's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index has shifted from 154 out of 180 countries in 2020 to 153 in 2021 and 148 in 2022.

The 2022 Civicus Monitor continues to classify Turkey's civil society as "repressed" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, pp. 7–18).

According to Freedom House's 2023 report, over the past decade, the Turkish government has imposed significant restrictions on social media platforms and internet domains. For example, a Turkish court has restricted access to a 2021 report on internet censorship in Turkey, published by the Freedom of Expression Association's EngelliWeb initiative. The report disclosed that in 2021 Turkish courts blocked access to more than 107,000 websites and domains, predominantly over alleged violations of personal rights involving government officials, including President Erdoğan, his son, and members of the ruling party ("Internet freedom in Turkey," 2023). Therefore, based on these limitations and other obstacles, Freedom House, by evaluating the three indicators of "access barriers," "content restrictions," and "user rights violations," gives the country a score of 32 out of 100 (0 least free, 100 most free), placing it in the "not free" category (Freedom House, 2023).

As a result, the personalization and centralization of power in the presidency, polarisation of the political space, and Erdoğan's anti-pluralist approach based on his populist governance style are among the most important reasons for the democratic backsliding and the decline of citizens' constitutional rights and freedoms.

## 6. Government Effectiveness

Once in power, populist parties and leaders often fail to transform their radical pledges into coherent and efficient public policies. Some argue that these parties lack the sort of skills and knowledge associated with political professionalism, which negatively reflects on the quality of governance (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Canovan, 1999). In the same way, Erdoğan's populist style of governance over the past decade has had detrimental effects on the effectiveness and efficiency of government policymaking. According to the World Bank report, the governance effectiveness index of Turkey fell from 65.88 in 2013 to 41.51 in 2023 (as shown in Table 3; World Bank, n.d.).

**Table 3.** Worldwide governance indicators: government effectiveness.

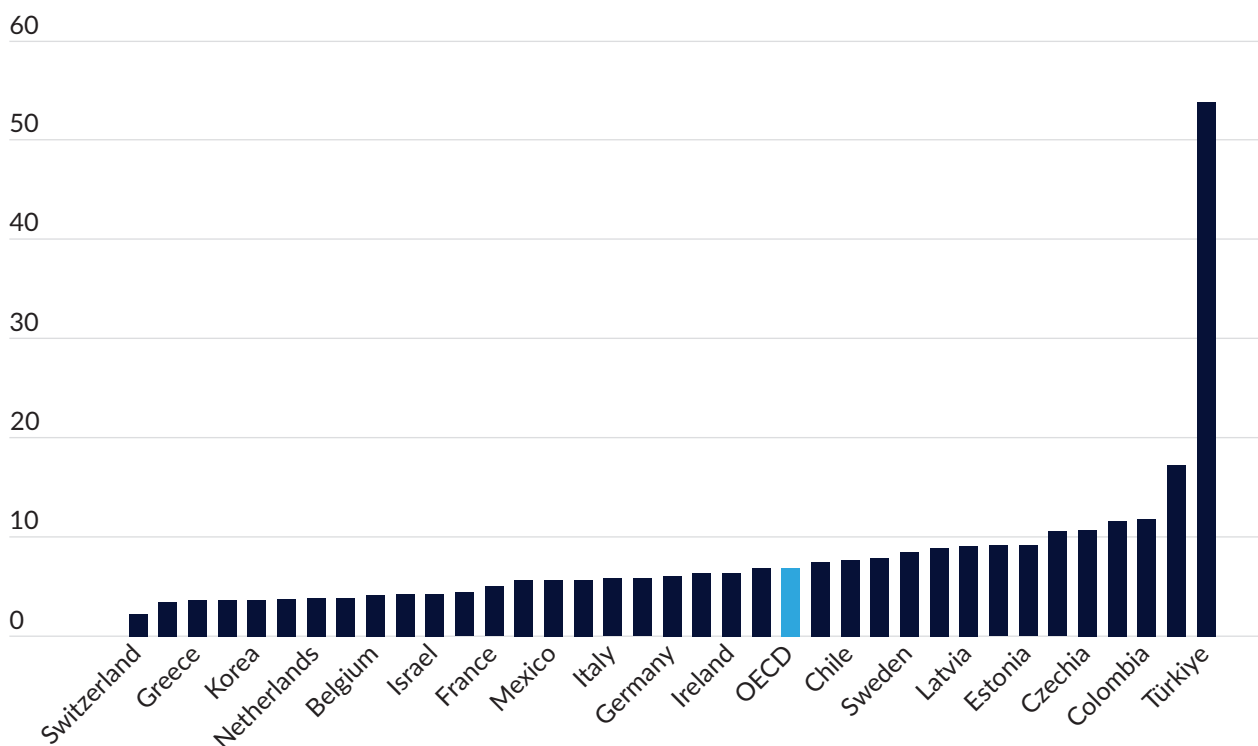
Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (–2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Government effectiveness	Turkey	2013	10	0.40	65.88	0.20
		2018	8	–0.07	49.52	0.22
		2023	7	–0.25	41.51	0.26

Source: World Bank (n.d.).

The Legatum Institute (2023) also reports that Turkey's government effectiveness Index dropped from 66.4 in 2013 to 46, with the country's global ranking declining from 39th to 78th. The Legatum report on inflation volatility, which is closely related to government effectiveness, indicates that inflation rose from 1.7% in 2013 to 3.4% in 2023, with Turkey's global ranking plunging from 63rd to 146th. (Legatum Institute, 2023). Over the past decade, the Turkish lira has depreciated by approximately 75% compared to the US dollar. World Bank statistics reveal that due to the lira's depreciation, Turkey's per capita GDP dropped from \$12,600 in 2013 to \$9,100 in 2019 (Samiee Esfahani & Farahmand, 2023, p. 178). In response to the economic crisis, Erdoğan has frequently labelled interest rates as "evil" through polarizing policies, arguing that lowering interest rates

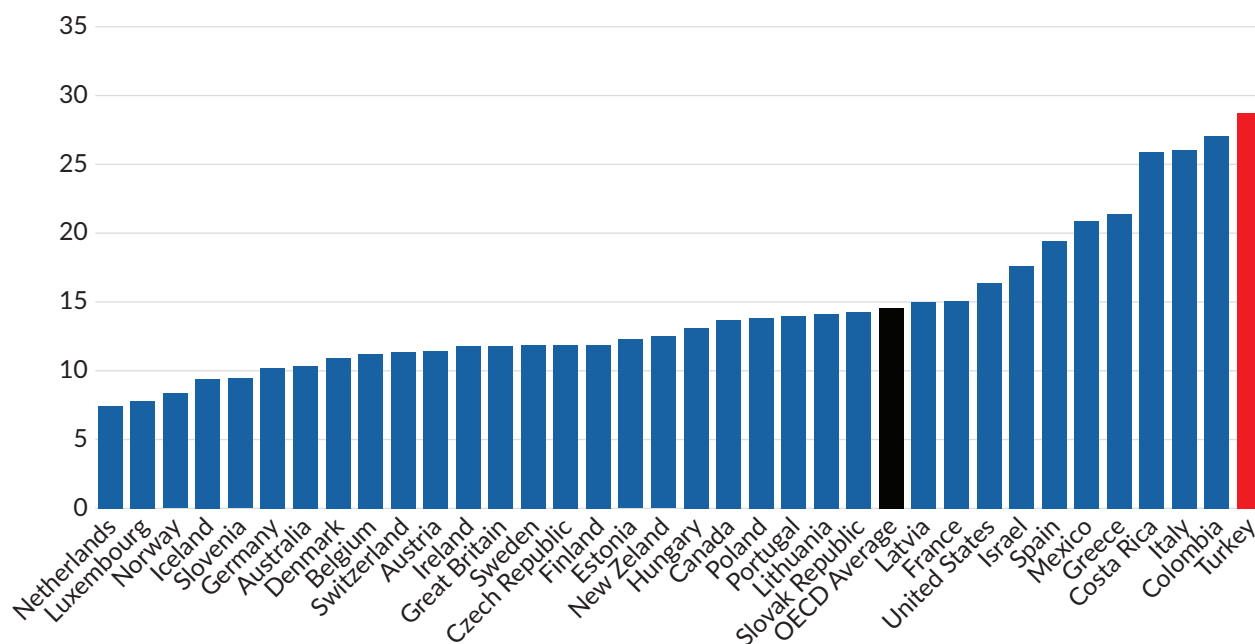
will reduce inflation. This perspective has led to frequent changes in the Turkey's Central Bank leadership, negatively impacting the institution's performance and effectiveness.

Rising inflation levels have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of Turkey's most disadvantaged populations. The *Global Inequality Report* (Chancel et al., 2022) highlights that income and wealth inequality, regional disparities, and gender inequalities in the labour force have all worsened over the past 15 years in Turkey. According to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024, p. 19), the wealthiest 10% of the population earn 23 times more than the bottom 50%. A report by the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey and the Public Services Workers Union in August 2021 revealed that Turkey has the largest income gap between the wealthiest and poorest quintiles of the population in all of Europe (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 19). As of March 2023, Turkey recorded the highest annual inflation growth rate among world countries, reaching 50.5% as shown in Figure 3 (OECD, 2023).



**Figure 3.** Total annual inflation growth rate as of March 2023. Note: Consumer price index in %. Source: OECD (2023).

Throughout the 2010s, Turkey's unemployment rate followed a rising trend, peaking at 13.7% in 2019—marking the highest rate under the AKP rule. The OECD 2021 data shows that the percentage of Turkish youth not in employment, education, or training stands at 28.69%, the highest among OECD countries, compared to the OECD average of 14.38% (see Figure 4; OECD, 2023). Over the last three years, the unemployment rate has been declining slightly, reaching its peak of 13.73% in 2019 to 9.41% by 2023 (Statista, 2024).



**Figure 4.** Youth not in employment, education, or training as of 2021. Note: 15–29-year-olds in %. Source: OECD (2023).

One of the main reasons for this economic crisis is directly related to the inefficient administrative system, which over the past decade has become highly personalized and marginalized in the decision-making and policy-making system due to the government's populist tendencies. Over the past decade, bureaucracy in Turkey has grown increasingly cumbersome and inefficient. Between 2003 and 2018, the ratio of public employees increased from 2.7 to 4.2 per 100 people. By June 2020, the number of individuals working in public service had reached 4,767,286 in Turkey. However, despite this significant growth in the public sector workforce, government administration appears paralyzed for various reasons (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 17). Unexpected events such as the two major earthquakes in February 2023, which affected 11 cities and millions of people, further exposed the decay and inefficiency of government institutions under the current governance model, leading to a significant destruction of both human and urban resources. The earthquakes revealed that the highly centralized and personalized system of power had weakened state institutions and undermined their capacity to respond effectively. The earthquakes also revealed the extent of political and institutional decline in Turkey. One aspect of this weakening state capacity is the neglect of merit-based appointments, as assigning bureaucratic positions based on political loyalty has become increasingly common. While partisanship has undermined the effectiveness of state institutions, the introduction of the presidential system in 2018 further rendered them dysfunctional (Aksoy & Çevik, 2023, pp. 1–6).

## 7. Control of Corruption

One of the key indicators of good governance and ethical governance is the absence of corruption and the integrity of government institutions. Some scholars have argued that populists oppose and attack all state institutions (Canovan, 1999). Therefore, one characteristic of populist governments has been to promote mass patronage policies as a means of capturing government and civil service systems. In this vein, the report of Transparency International's anti-corruption helpdesk, which examines the effects of populist

leaders coming into power on anti-corruption policies concludes that populism and corruption are inherently interlinked (Kossow, 2019).

Following Turkey's transition to a presidential system in 2017 and the emergence of Erdoğan and AKP's populist tendencies, arbitrary rule has become an embedded characteristic of the system, marked by a lack of transparency and weakened legal and administrative supervision. According to the World Bank report, Turkey's corruption control index dropped from 60.66% in 2013 to 34.91% in 2023 (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Worldwide governance indicators: control of corruption.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (–2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Control of corruption	Turkey	2013	14	0.09	60.66	0.14
		2018	11	–0.35	42.86	0.14
		2023	9	–0.50	34.91	0.17

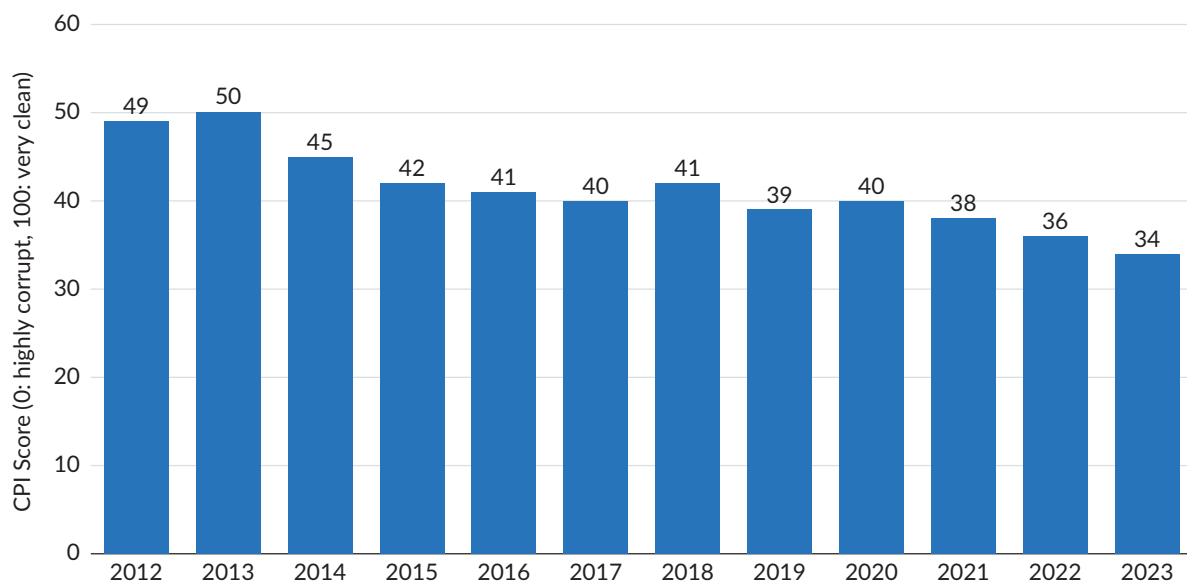
Source: World Bank (n.d.).

In response to criticism from opposition parties regarding corruption in government institutions, Erdoğan has employed populist rhetoric, consistently portraying his supporters and the AKP as virtuous, upright, and devout, while framing the affluent and financial elites, both domestic and international, as immoral, corrupt, and greedy. Erdoğan often asserts: “If they have dollars, we have our people, justice, and our God...the interest rate lobby cannot crush this nation” (Vitale & Girard, 2022, p. 563). This Rousseau-like populist rhetoric implies that the “general will” of the people is incorruptible, unchanging, and pure, in contrast to the will of the elite. However, over the past decade, Turkey has shown a reverse trend, with corruption emerging as a major issue in the “new Turkey,” affecting the efficiency and quality of government operations.

In this vein, according to the Statista (2024) database, Turkey's corruption perception index (CPI) score decreased from 49 in 2012 to 34 in 2023, indicating a rise in perceived corruption. The index itself is a composite indicator that includes data on the perception of corruption in areas such as bribery of public officials, kickbacks in public procurement, embezzlement of state funds, and effectiveness of government anti-corruption efforts. The report ranks Turkey 115th out of 180 countries worldwide (Statista, 2024; see Figure 5).

According to the mentioned reports, one of the most prominent and obvious forms of corruption in populist regimes is “clientelism” or social engineering through “inclusionary policies.” Over the past two decades, many people have benefitted economically from the AKP government, with the main beneficiaries being segments of the new bourgeoisie closely aligned with the party. This dynamic has facilitated the implementation of various redistribution mechanisms and social welfare programs, helping to build a cross-class coalition in support of electoral campaigns (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2023, pp. 80–93).

At the social level, the AKP government has utilized redistribution policies to maintain the loyalty of its voters. Supporters were appeased through “the provision of public welfare as ‘charitable patronage,’ redistribution of public resources, and access to public jobs, health services, and public housing” (Kirdiş & Drhimeur, 2016, pp. 599–617). In this way, the party used welfare as part of its clientelist network in which “providers are patrons and beneficiaries are clients”; thus, loyalty to the party is rewarded while distrust and criticism are punished (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018, p. 1819).



**Figure 5.** Corruption perception index score of Turkey from 2012 to 2023. Source: Statista (2024).

The allocation of funds, the financing of local administrations, and especially land management and procurement processes have shown significant vulnerability to corruption. Awarding major public contracts to affiliates of Erdoğan's has become a widespread practice, often at the expense of public welfare. A notable example is the 2020 Isparta incident, where a snowstorm led to prolonged power outages, resulting in numerous fatalities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 14). None of the top political figures responsible for this corrupt system have been held accountable.

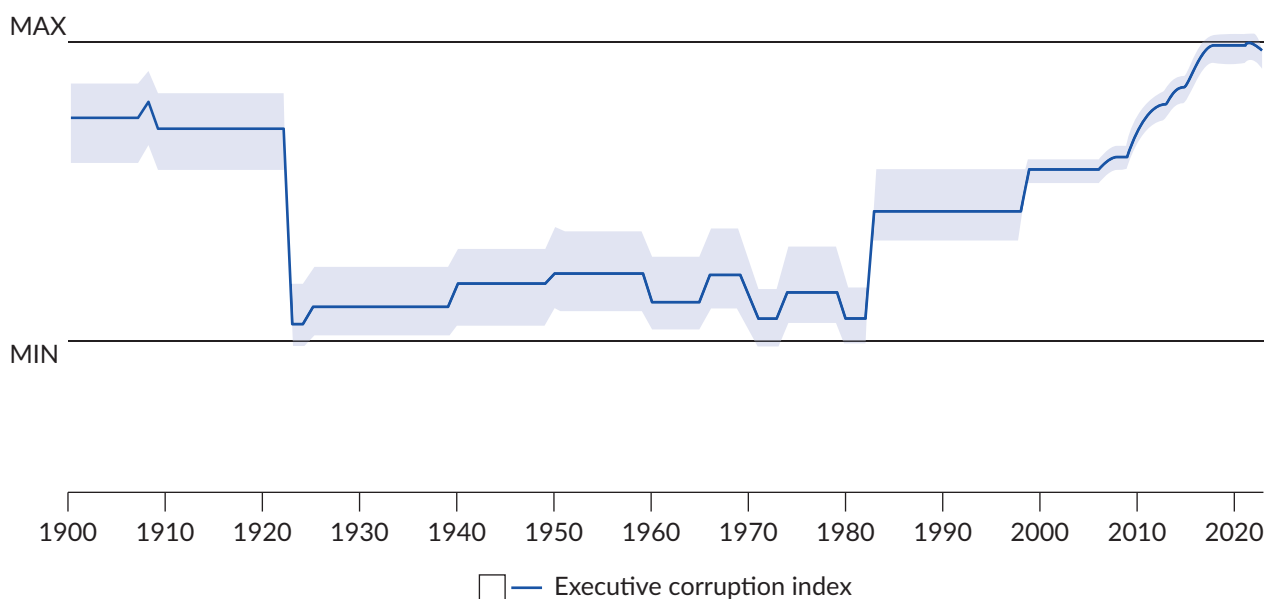
In addition, there are numerous examples of institutional deterioration, particularly concerning the lack of objectivity and political neutrality, from the highest levels of government down to local administrations. A prime example is the Turkish Wealth Fund. In September 2018, President Erdoğan appointed himself as the head of the Fund's executive board through a presidential decree and appointed his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as his deputy. Albayrak resigned on November 27, 2020. Managing resources valued at approximately US\$33.5 billion—roughly 40% of the national budget—the Fund has effectively evolved into a political and financial instrument under the president's authority, allowing him and, until recently, his family, discretionary control over state-owned economic resources (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 18).

In December 2013, a group of 47 individuals, including businessmen, government officials, and the sons of AKP ministers, were arrested by the police on charges of financial corruption. This revealed the extensive network of cronyism and the awarding of lucrative construction contracts to AKP supporters. Dozens of officials were forced to resign (Türk, 2018, p. 161). Since Erdoğan embodies the nation, any accusation against him is then an assault against the nation:

Referring to the corruption probe targeting Erdoğan's close circle, he retorted "Turkey has never been subjected to such an immoral attack," and he portrayed the investigation as one against the nation as a whole. In this reckoning the faith of the country depends on Erdoğan's political success. Accordingly, if Erdoğan falls, Turkey will fall. (Taş, 2015, p. 785)

Following the enactment of new legislation in 2014, Erdoğan managed to terminate the investigations, remove the Gulenists-affiliated members from the judiciary, and reestablish his control over this critical institution (Müftüler-Baç, 2016; Özbudun, 2015).

The integrity and quality of elections have also deteriorated in recent years under populist governance. In this regard, access to resources and facilities has also been unequal: “Alongside Erdoğan’s alleged misuse of public funds during recent elections, he has also reportedly utilized private resources to gain a competitive advantage over his opponents” (Castaldo, 2018, p. 14). For example, according to Turkish media monitoring, in the 2023 presidential election, Erdoğan was allotted nearly 33 hours of airtime on the main state television channel, while Kılıçdaroğlu received only 32 minutes (Klimek et al., 2023, pp. 15–16). Therefore, some researchers highlighted the emergence of a pattern termed “*familial electoral coercion*” during the 2018 Turkish general election” (Toros & Birch, 2019, p. 1–14, emphasis added). Additionally, data from the Electoral Integrity Project indicates that Turkey’s electoral integrity score experienced a significant decline, dropping from 51 in 2014 to 35 by 2018. Researchers argue that this decline stems from the populist tendencies of the ruling AKP (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Baykan, 2018; Selçuk, 2016). In general, according to the V-Dem database, the “executive corruption index” in Turkey has increased from 0.73 in 2013 to 0.87 in 2023 (as seen in Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** V-Dem executive corruption index. Source: V-Dem (n.d.).

Thus, although populists generally come to power with anti-establishment rhetoric targeting the corrupt power elite, it is not long before they use corruption as a tool and mechanism to consolidate their power and marginalize opponents. As the data and figures above show, the AKP has not been an exception to this pattern, and especially in the second decade of its rule, it has used public resources and facilities in line with the politics of inclusion/exclusion (“us” vs “them”) and strengthening authoritarianism.

## 8. Conclusion

Although populism may offer some corrective functions for democracy, evidence from a decade of country-case studies consistently indicates that populist incumbents tend to undermine the quality of



governance and also the values of liberal democracy. Our research findings also highlight that populist leaders are among the primary drivers of democratic backsliding today. Turkey, as a country that in the first decade of the 21st century had many of the criteria for a democratic system and was a candidate for joining the EU, experienced a democratic regression in the second decade of the rule of the AKP under Erdoğan and shift towards authoritarianism and populism. Therefore, examining and assessing the reasons behind this regression was the main issue of this research. In doing so, the study, using a critical approach to populism and statistical data from sources such as the worldwide governance indicators, V-Dem, The Legatum Prosperity Index, and Freedom House, concludes that nearly all political governance indicators—especially the rule of law, institutional accountability and responsibility, respect for civil rights and freedoms, government effectiveness, and corruption control—have declined under the populist rule of Erdoğan and the AKP over the past decade (since 2013). As mentioned, according to the 2023 Legatum report, the Turkish government ranks 128th globally in governance quality, with its overall governance score dropping from 52.8 in 2013 to 36.9 in 2023. The Gezi Park protests, the failure to join the EU, and particularly the 2016 coup attempt, followed by the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system, have dramatically revealed Erdoğan's populist tendencies as a strategy for maintaining and expanding power, mobilizing the masses, and suppressing opposition. Thus, the practical experience of the AKP's governance over the past decade supports the critical perspective of populism theorists, who argue that the rise of populist leaders and parties leads to the erosion and weakening of democratic values, norms, and institutions such as pluralism, checks and balances, the rule of law, and the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. It also undermines horizontal accountability institutions and intermediary bodies. This, in turn, creates fertile ground for widespread corruption, weakens government effectiveness and efficiency, and results in the overall deterioration of governance quality. Finally, the findings of this study, based on the Turkish sample, show that despite the expansion in the quantity of democracy, the level of democracy has been declining in many countries over the past few decades, and the quality of governance is facing serious challenges from authoritarian forces. Therefore, despite some limitations and obstacles in accessing up-to-date and reliable statistics and data on the performance of such regimes, addressing these challenges and determining how to deal with them seems essential in future research. Two key steps can strengthen research in this field. First, applying more precise measures of populism and expanding cross-regional comparisons can offer clearer evidence of its impact. Second, research designs that directly test competing causal explanations will advance both theoretical and empirical understanding.

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