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Legitimizing Illiberalism: The Construction of Civilizational Identity by the Justice and Development Party in Türkiye

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Abstract

Since its establishment, Türkiye has equated modernization with Westernization. However, following the second AKP victory in the June 2007 parliamentary elections, relations with the West began to deteriorate. In 2016, the illiberal turn taken by the government on the grounds that Türkiye was facing an existential threat after the failed coup attempt led to a serious rupture with Europe. The Turkish government began to counter criticism from Western actors by referring to historical antagonistic relations between the West and the East, signifying a firm estrangement from Western civilization. It highlighted Türkiye's differences from the West by making frequent references to the glorious past of the country, the collective memory of the Ottoman legacy, religious identity, and strong ties with the Islamic civilization. This study investigates AKP's increased emphasis on civilizational identity by utilizing a two-step methodological approach that combines textual analysis and critical discourse analysis applied to President Erdoğan's speeches. The time frame of the research covers the period between the June 2016 and May 2023 general elections. The study argues that AKP instrumentalizes civilizational discourse in its quest for legitimizing illiberal policies.

Keywords

civilizational identity; illiberalism; Justice and Development Party; Türkiye

1. Introduction

Against the prevailing winds in favor of liberal democracy in the 1990s, Zakaria (1997) argued that democratic systems that were critical of the fundamental principles of constitutional liberalism, such as separation of powers, rule of law, and protection of basic liberties, were on the rise, saying, "Democracy is flourishing; constitutional liberalism is not" (p. 23). In the decades that followed, leaders at odds with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy came to power through electoral victories in many countries, and we witnessed liberal democracy losing its momentum (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Urbinati, 2019; Weinman & Vormann, 2021). The use of illiberal democracy as a positive concept by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2014 also signaled that a new threshold had been crossed (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021). As a reflection of this, a large body of literature has emerged over the last two decades discussing the worldwide rise of illiberalism.

In his work that conducts a theoretical examination of the concept, Enyedi (2024) explains illiberalism as the negation of the three principles of liberal democracy, which he lists as limited power, a neutral state, and an open society, and states that there are different routes to illiberalism depending on how these three are promoted. We have also recently observed that populist and authoritarian leaders end up in illiberalism in most cases, and the literature has accordingly expanded with studies on the relationship between populism and illiberalism (Blokker, 2021; Pappas, 2019). However, since it is based on gaining and maintaining power by polarizing society into antagonistic groups and eliminating democratic compromise grounds, it has been argued that contemporary populism can be equated with democratic illiberalism, which emphasizes democracy in the sense of popular will but is critical of fundamental liberal democratic principles (Pappas, 2019).

In recent decades, populist and far-right politics in the Western world have produced a civilizational discourse that perceives other civilizations and cultures, especially Islam, as other and dangerous and has an emphasis on defending the "West" or "Christianity" (Brubaker, 2017; Cerrone, 2023). On the other hand, outside the West, incorporating religion and civilizational identities into politics, a variation of populism based on civilizational discourse has emerged (Shakil & I. Yilmaz, 2021; I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023a). The discourses of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP), which has been in power in Türkiye since 2002, and its leader Erdoğan are also frequently the subject of debate in this context.

Although the democratization steps, that can be regarded as a continuation of the steps taken by previous governments towards EU membership, taken by the AKP governments (such as progress in negotiations with the EU, openings on the Kurdish question, and steps towards saving politics from military tutelage) were partially welcomed, Erdoğan was frequently criticized after this initial period due to his drift towards authoritarianism and illiberal tendencies. The AKP and its leader responded to these criticisms from the Western world, especially the EU and the USA, with increasingly harsher tones. Immediately after the failed coup attempt by the Gülenists, a former ally of the government, in July 2016, tensions with the West reached their peak. From this point on, references to the Islamic civilization and the West as its "enemy" became more salient in the discourse of the party and Erdoğan. All these developments have created a significant body of literature focusing on democratic backsliding and authoritarianism in Türkiye during the consecutive AKP governments. However, only a few of them focused on the interaction of the AKP's civilizational discourse with the illiberal democracy it built in the country (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Çınar, 2018; Duran, 2013) and these were generally not based on empirical data. Therefore, this study aims to clarify how

civilizational and illiberal discourses interlink to foster democratic backsliding by conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on a large corpus of Erdoğan's speeches between 2016–2023. In this way, it will uncover the relationship between the party's civilizational discourse and illiberalism and thus contribute to filling the gap in the relevant literature. Examining the discourses on civilizational identity and illiberalism empirically provides critical insights into democratic backsliding by revealing how rhetoric legitimizes actions that undermine democratic values and norms. This is achieved through appeals to "cultural essentialism," "moral revival," and a romanticized "golden past," which reinforce exclusionary inter-group dynamics, undermine pluralism, and make illiberalism more compelling and resistant to accountability. Therefore, in this study, we conceptualize illiberalism as a discourse rather than solely as a set of practices or strategies, focusing on its embeddedness within the civilizational identity rhetoric. This approach allows us to uncover the rhetorical tools and mechanisms that sustain anti-democratic tendencies. The theoretical framework of civilizational identity, on the other hand, is preferred on the grounds that its ability to integrate historical, political, cultural, and ideological ethe and narratives into the study of illiberalism provides a wider framework for understanding how identity is constructed and utilized as a tool for legitimizing power and positioning political leaders' governance as part of a larger, almost existential, civilizational project.

Regarding the study's outline, the theoretical section, which draws on existing literature, examines the two central concepts—illiberalism and civilizational discourse—and discusses them in an interconnected manner. Background information on Turkish politics is given in the following section, with particular attention to the AKP's policies that changed from liberal to illiberal following the formation of the ruling party system. In the following section, the research methodology—which combines textual analysis and CDA—is explained, along with how it is used to illuminate the connection between illiberalism and civilizational discourse in the context of Türkiye. The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in depth in the last section.

2. A Theoretical Debate on the Relationship Between Civilizational Discourse and Illiberalism

The backlash against the post-Cold War triumph of liberalism and globalization triggered by multiple crises led to the decline of Western appeal and liberal democratic ethos. Accordingly, illiberal practices and actors emerged where democratically (re)elected regimes suppressed their citizens' basic freedoms and human rights by overriding their constitutional rights (Zakaria, 1997). Through his differentiation between liberal democracy—as referring to the existence of free and fair elections—and constitutional liberalism—as referring to civil liberties, i.e., the existence of the rule of law, separation of powers, and freedom of speech, Zakaria (1997) suggests that these countries present a new species of democracy where liberal democracy is flourishing while constitutional liberalism is falling behind. He asserts that while liberal democracy and constitutional liberalism feed each other in the West, democracy and civil liberties hardly overlap in the countries subject to the third wave of democratization. As a result, democracy without constitutional liberalism generates centralized regimes where civil liberties are eroded or oppressed. Moreover, political leaders in these regimes show counter-hegemonic reactions to liberal civilizational standards and reject universal norms of liberalism (Çınar, 2020) through the construction of alternative civilizational imaginaries and cultural demonization (Sparke, 2020), which in turn generates the antagonism of the "West versus the rest." Pappas (2019) proposes that characteristics of illiberal governance include adversarial politics, political polarization, majoritarianism, charismatic leadership, and restrictions on media freedom, rule of law, minority rights, and individual liberties (Pappas, 2019 as cited in Enyedi, 2024, p. 2).

It is in this context that civilizational discourse provides a ground for illiberal actors to articulate the nation-specific ethe of civilization imaginaries. These imaginaries include shared norms and values that accommodate a sense of ontological security constituting a collective identity. This, in turn, helps reject liberal civilized standards which empower alternative—non (fully) liberal—ways of governance in global politics (Bettiza et al., 2023). In this respect, civilizations are meaningful social constructs (Hale & Laruelle, 2021) that are fed from the stable holistic cultural and historical formation of common traditions, values, socio-political development, behavioral motivations, and lifestyle characteristics existing within a clear-cut geographical habitation (Volodin, 2022). Accordingly, civilizational identity discourses resonate with individuals by helping them locate the self in relation to others, make sense of the world, and establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (O'Hagan, 2007). Thus, they are employed to evaluate norms, practices, and values, thereby enhancing positive self-esteem vis-à-vis outgroups and establishing inter-group hierarchies at local, national, and global levels (O'Hagan, 2007).

In this regard, much of the critical work focuses on examining how civilizational identity is perceived, articulated, and imagined by the political elites (Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017) in different case studies (Acharya, 2020) including India (Acharya, 2020; Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Mawdsley, 2023; Srivastava, 2023), China (Acharya, 2020; Katzenstein, 2013; Zhang, 2012), Türkiye (Acharya, 2020; Çınar, 2020; Duran, 2013), and Russia (Blackburn, 2021; Hale, 2019; Hale & Laruelle, 2020; Linde, 2016; Mezhuev, 2020; Naydenova, 2016; Pantin, 2009; Raskin, 2009; Tsygankov, 2016; Werning Rivera & Bryan, 2019).

On the other hand, very limited research investigates how illiberal political actors utilize civilizational imaginaries to unleash inter-group discrimination and hostility between the West and the East (Haynes, 2021b). Examples include European right-wing parties' securitization of migration and anti-Muslim rhetoric (Kaya & Tecmen, 2021; Stübner, 2021), Trump's anti-immigration stance during his presidential election campaigns (Acharya, 2020; Haynes, 2017, 2021a), the civilizational idea used by Putin to justify intervention in Ukraine (Lewicki, 2023), and Xi Jinping's anti-Western rhetoric in constructing China as a civilizational state (Bettiza et al., 2023; Egedy, 2021). While few studies have examined the interaction between the AKP's civilizational discourse and illiberalism, they have not been based on empirical data (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Çınar, 2018; Duran, 2013). Yet the multiple ways in which political actors make sense of world politics and define their social realities in civilizational terms can only be enlightened through discourse analysis and interpretation of the meaning-making processes and strategies (Bettiza, 2014). Thus, our research conducts CDA of President Erdoğan's speeches to investigate the interplay between the AKP's civilizational discourse and illiberalism and contributes to the burgeoning literature empirically.

For our case, we specifically focus on three dimensions of the above-mentioned characteristics of illiberalism, namely, adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction on the rule of law and media freedom. This is because we argue that they are particularly salient in revealing how Erdoğan frames politics as a zero-sum conflict depicted as an existential struggle between "us" versus "others" (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2024), which closely aligns with adversarial politics. Majoritarianism, in return, further reinforces the adversarial politics by equating electoral majority with the national will, thereby dismissing the dissenting voices and providing the party a ground to legitimize its policies. Therefore, adversarial politics and majoritarianism are crucial in examining how civilizational identity is leveraged to consolidate power and delegitimize political rivals. Restriction on the rule of law and media freedom, on the other hand, complements these dimensions by allowing the government to put control over the dissemination of its

narratives, which heavily influences public perception and reinforces its civilizational rhetoric while suppressing counter-discourses. In sum, these dimensions capture the interplay between civilizational discourse and legitimization of illiberal policies, paving the way for democratic backsliding by severely decreasing the ground for pluralism and democratization, and curbing dissent.

3. Historical Background: Anti-Westernism, Illiberal Turn in Turkish Politics, and the AKP Governments

Following a period of political instability and coalition governments that characterized the 1990s, Turkish politics underwent a significant transformation in the November 2002 elections, with all parties in the previous parliament failing to meet the election threshold (Ayan Musil, 2015). The AKP, established less than a year prior to the election, secured a solitary victory with 34.28% of the vote, while the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Partisi; CHP) emerged as the sole opposition party to enter parliament with 19.39%. The AKP would subsequently maintain its dominance in every ensuing general election. These electoral outcomes predominantly reflected a cleavage in Turkish politics, specifically the conservative–secular or center–periphery divide (Mardin, 2006; Özbudun, 2013), which became evident with the transition to multi-party politics. The AKP appealed to the conservative faction of this cleavage and dominated the center-right from 2002 onwards.

The newly established political party garnered predominantly favorable reactions both domestically and internationally during its inaugural two terms, attributed to the democratization measures undertaken within the context of full EU membership, the endeavor to mitigate institutional influences over civilian governance, and the cultivation of amicable relations with neighboring states and the Western bloc, which collectively contributed to this positive atmosphere (Lord, 2018). Nonetheless, substantial challenges and a profound power struggle emerged in the context of relations with military and judicial institutions, culminating in a closure case for the party in 2008. The party's triumph in the June 2011 elections, securing 49.83% of the electorate's votes, indicated a sustained level of public support. However, this success simultaneously engendered concerns regarding Türkiye's potential transition towards a dominant-party system. In this context, the relations with the EU also experienced deterioration, and as a consequence, Erdoğan's rhetoric increasingly characterized the Union as an "unwanted intruder" interfering in Türkiye's domestic matters (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016). Specific developments have been instrumental in fostering criticism of the government concerning authoritarian tendencies and democratic regression. Arguably, the foremost of these was the government's unyielding response to the Gezi Park protests, which commenced as an environmental initiative and escalated into widespread anti-government demonstrations due to the police's harsh interventions (Öniş, 2015). Another significant event was the failure of the initiative known as the Kurdish Opening, which was initiated in 2013 to address the Kurdish issue, resulting in its collapse in the summer of 2015. Throughout these years, the conflict that initially arose with the erstwhile ally Gülenists in 2013 escalated into hostilities, and by 2015, this organization was designated as a terrorist entity by the Turkish state (Cagaptay, 2017). The Gülenist organization, which had infiltrated numerous state institutions and had been entrenched within the state apparatus, was in the process of being extricated from these bodies. In response, the Gülenists mobilized their forces within the military in July 2016 and attempted a coup d'état. This coup attempt was thwarted by the resistance demonstrated by the government, opposition, a substantial segment of the military, and the citizenry. Subsequently, Erdoğan asserted that Türkiye was engaged in a struggle for survival and proclaimed a state of emergency that conferred extraordinary powers

upon the government for a duration of three months, which was subsequently extended seven times and ultimately concluded in July 2018. The government initiated sweeping purges targeting individuals suspected of affiliations with the Gülenists within both the civilian and security bureaucracies, and the purges allegedly also targeted other oppositional groups (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). Following the failed coup attempt, the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP) ceased its oppositional political activities and discourse, subsequently extending unconditional support to the government and President Erdoğan post-July 2016 (Gerim, 2023). Consequently, as a result of the referendum conducted with this backing, modifications were implemented in the constitution, leading Türkiye to adopt a distinctive presidential system that curtailed the legislative powers of the parliament while simultaneously augmenting the authority of the ruling party-affiliated president. Shortly thereafter, the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı), primarily constituted by these two parties, was established, whereas the Good Party and CHP, which diverged from the MHP largely due to its transformative shift, united under the banner of the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı). Nevertheless, Erdoğan successfully secured victory in the June 2018 elections with 52.59% of the votes in the initial round, and in the May 2023 elections with 49.52% in the first round and 52.18% in the subsequent round, thereby perpetuating his presidency within the new system.

Erdoğan's narrative of success has faced considerable critique for ostensibly relegating democracy to a mere expression of majoritarianism while simultaneously marginalizing and criminalizing specific social groups that exist beyond this majority (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2024). Furthermore, criticisms regarding the inequity inherent in democratic competition within a dominant-party regime, the erosion of the principle of separation of powers, and the pervasive governmental oversight of media were recurrently articulated (Ayan Musil, 2024; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Conversely, it is widely acknowledged that Erdoğan has adeptly preserved the requisite support to maintain his authority by fostering societal polarization predicated upon cultural and religious values, with the Islamic undertone and anti-Western sentiments prevalent in his rhetoric playing a crucial role in this dynamic (Somer, 2019; Yabanci, 2023). Nevertheless, here it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that anti-Western sentiments and narratives have been evident in various sectors both prior to and during the tenure of the AKP government. A moderate form of Euroscepticism and anti-Western attitudes have been intermittently observed among parties situated both in the center-left and center-right of Turkish politics. The anti-Western rhetoric within these parties tends to be situational, influenced by domestic and international trends and events (Çolakoğlu, 2019; H. Yilmaz, 2011). While the center-left occasionally critiques the West on security matters, it predominantly aligns with the pro-Western Kemalist ideology. Conversely, the center-right recognizes the economic significance of Western integration while also adopting pragmatic policies and rhetoric aimed at resonating with nationalist and conservative constituents (Dikici Bilgin, 2017). More pronounced anti-Western discourse and policies are found within the nationalist faction, chiefly represented by the MHP, as well as in parties emerging from the Islamist tradition (H. Yilmaz, 2011). For nationalists, the apprehension that Western-imposed regulations, framed within a liberal context, and demands concerning minority rights may foster cultural fragmentation in the nation is paramount. For Islamists, the West is perceived as a civilization rooted in Christian values, inherently regarded as an "other" that one should not be aligned with. Nonetheless, the boundaries among these perspectives are not always clearly set. For instance, the coalition government that preceded the AKP's rise to power in November 2002 undertook significant democratization initiatives aimed at EU membership, and the MHP was one of the members of this coalition alongside the center-left Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti) and the center-right Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi; H. Yilmaz, 2011).

An additional point of significance is that, following the Cold War, there was a notable rise in criticism of Türkiye's pro-Western foreign policy from secular nationalist and Kemalist factions. These groups began to articulate an anti-Western narrative that advocated for a Eurasianist alternative to the existing orientation (Akçali & Perinçek, 2009). The decline in the relations between the AKP governments and the liberal world accompanied by an increasing suspicion towards the West reflected the Islamic tradition's perspective on the Western world. According to some, after 2011, this situation fostered a coalition, albeit partial and unofficial, among nationalist, Eurasianist, and Islamist elements in Türkiye in opposition to the West (Çolakoğlu, 2019).

4. Method and Data

We have collected the data consisting of press releases, speeches, statements, and addresses delivered by President Erdoğan between July 2016, when tensions with the West were at their peak, and May 2023, the date of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye. All data were publicly available on the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye (https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en). The total number of analyzed texts is 1,222. In our analysis, we utilized a two-step analytical process. First, we conducted a textual analysis of the collected data using MAXQDA 24 and then applied CDA to the thematically selected texts.

CDA regards discourse as a form of social action and ideological work constituting history, society, and culture (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). As Fairclough argues, there is a dialectical relation between the structure of discourse and macro-social structures through which the discursive practices are formed (Fairclough, 1992). In this respect, the meanings embedded in discourse are socially mediated and constitutive of actors' identities (Wodak, 2011). As such, each incident of language use shapes the context which in return contributes to the transformation of the culture and society. Moreover, CDA regards power relations as discursive, and it aims to reveal the transparent or hidden relations of dominance, power, and discrimination (Wodak, 2009). To this end, it mainly addresses the covert discursive tactics and focuses on political issues and social problems to analyze how discourses justify or contest power. While examining the language use and linguistic features of social and cultural processes, it primarily concentrates on the social, political, economic, and cultural settings (Fairclough, 2013). In this way, it interlinks textual and sociocultural analysis. Therefore, we prefer CDA because of its critical importance in illuminating how discursive practices convey meaning to civilizational identity discourses through both communicative action and contestation (Carta & Wodak, 2015). CDA is particularly suited for analyzing the interplay between language, power, and ideology, which makes it an effective tool for understanding how President Erdoğan frames illiberal politics in civilizational terms. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how civilizational identity is employed as a point of reference in his framing of social actions and political discourses. Unlike other text analysis methods, such as sentiment analysis or topic modeling, CDA goes beyond surface-level patterns or statistical insights by focusing on the underlying power structures and ideological constructs embedded in the discourse. This makes CDA the most appropriate framework for exploring the nuanced ways in which Erdoğan legitimizes illiberal tendencies through civilizational rhetoric.

Our analysis is based on the three fundamental characteristics of illiberal states/leaders—adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and the restriction of media freedoms (Pappas, 2019, pp. 35–37)—and how these are carried out and legitimized in association with civilizational identity. Adversarial politics refers to the strategy where leaders develop an antagonistic dichotomy between "the people" and "elites," who are perceived and

portrayed as enemies of the people. This approach leads to deep political polarization, dividing society into two opposing camps. Within this highly polarized context, opposition groups are delegitimized and/or oppressed by being depicted as illegitimate actors and existential threats to the people. On the other hand, majoritarianism provides leeway for the curtailment of the rule of law which is legitimized by being propounded as in the name of the people/the will of the people, constructing a "moralistic view" against liberal democratic values and norms leading to eventual enfeebled checks and balances and institutional legality. In this context, these illiberal practices are transmitted to the media landscape and to individual liberties, leading to their restriction (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). The generated control over media allows the domination and articulation of single-sided government discourse, thereby reinforcing the political power of the illiberal actor. Therefore, these three core characteristics of illiberal governance are chosen as points of reference in the operationalization of civilizational identity discourse and illiberalism.

The elements of the civilizational identity discourse, as the code categories, are determined by regarding the fact that political actors secure legitimacy often by othering "the civilizational other" through essentialist and culturalist labels (Bradley, 2018; Grillo, 2003). Based on the literature, we observe that the Turkish civilizational discourse is constructed predominantly through anti-Westernism, the Ottoman past, the dichotomy between the East and the West, cultural essentialism, and religious values (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Uzer, 2020). Therefore, these code categories were deductively generated. During the coding process, the overlap of codes was carefully considered. Where codes overlapped or intersected within a statement, they were coded under all applicable categories to avoid one-sided categorization. In this way, we systematically addressed overlaps and used them to ensure that the context of each statement was interpreted in a nuanced understanding of the discourse, revealing the interconnectedness of the prevalent code categories and thereby enriching the analysis. The utilized codebook along with the examples from the speeches is in Table 1.

Table 1. Utilized codes and their descriptions.

Codes	Description	Example quotes
Civilizational identity	Collective identity around shared cultural, historical, religious, traditional, and ideological elements, as well as values and behavioral motivations associated with a particular civilization	The roots of our civilization extend from the first human and first prophet, Prophet Adam (peace be upon him), to the last Prophet, the Messenger of God (peace be upon him). The roots of our civilization reach the farthest known points of our nation's glorious history, spanning thousands of years. They descend deep enough to embrace the entire legacy of humanity and, in particular, the wealth of knowledge within our geography. This party—with its organizations, members of parliament, mayors, and members—is the follower and bearer of our ancient civilizational cause, our history, and our culture. It is this cadre that serves as the builder, defender, and developer of the bridge we are striving to construct from the past to the future. (Erdoğan, 2019b)
Anti-Westernism	Opposing the Western cultural/political influence and dominance	The last few centuries of world history have been dominated by Western civilization, centered in Europe and America. This process, of course, has encompassed everything from slavery to massacres, from exploitation to abuse. (Erdoğan, 2022c)

Table 1. (Cont.) Utilized codes and their descriptions.

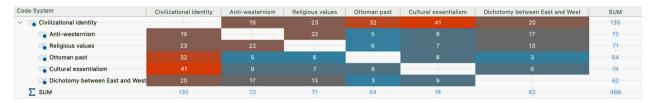| Codes	Description	Example quotes
Religious values	Moral principles and ethical guidelines derived from religious teachings and traditions	Undoubtedly, we will achieve this resurgence with the power of our faith, belief, and civilization, which draws its strength from the Holy Quran. (Erdoğan, 2023k)
Ottoman past	Historical, political, and cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire	At a time when Europe was drowning in the darkness of ignorance, our ancestors were illuminating the entire world through the madrasas and libraries they established. (Erdoğan, 2022b)
Cultural essentialism	Cultural characteristics shared by members of a particular in-group leading to binary oppositions	The responsibility that our civilization and history place upon us is undoubtedly heavy, but it is also an honor. There is no other nation in the world with an uninterrupted state tradition spanning thousands of years and a civilization as ancient as ours. (Erdoğan, 2020c)
Dichotomy between the East and West	Binary contrasts between the "East" and the "West" as opposing cultural, political, or civilizational entities	Although Western civilization refrains from acknowledging it, the foundations of modern scientific advancements were laid by Eastern civilization. (Erdoğan, 2021c)
Majoritarianism	Political principle where the majority's decisions and preferences are given primacy, often at the expense of minority rights or dissenting voices	They removed the headscarves of our children and placed them in persuasion rooms; we witnessed these injustices. This is Türkiye, where 99 percent of the people are Muslims. You did these things here, but now we are free from them. (Erdoğan, 2022a)
Adversarial politics	Political polarization and confrontation between the government and the opposition	While doing all this, we also fought against the remnants of outdated bigotries and the colonial intellectuals who mistook hostility toward their own civilization and culture for modernity. (Erdoğan, 2019a)
Restriction of rule of law and media freedom	Actions taken by governments to limit, control, or suppress the freedom of the press and media outlets	The mainstream media has always aligned itself with the forces of tutelage, coup plotters, and those holding mandates in our country. Instead of standing with the nation, we have had to struggle relentlessly against media institutions that consider it an honor to side with marginal elements. (Erdoğan, 2018a)

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the analysis revealed the high-level co-occurrence of codes. Therefore, we found out that the civilizational identity discourse employed by President Erdoğan operates through an integrative narrative, where cultural, political, historical, and religious dimensions are interdependent. In this respect, the intersected usage of code categories reflects intentional discursive choices utilized to strengthen the civilizational basis for illiberal tendencies. Thus, in our analysis, we utilize a visual illustration of the co-occurrence of different codes to offer an insight into their interconnectedness and the complexity of Erdoğan's civilizational identity discourse. Firstly, we focused on President Erdoğan's definitional stance regarding civilizational identity. Later, we examined how he interlinks this civilizational identity with illiberal ethe.

In Figure 1, we see the intersection frequency of the construction of President Erdoğan's civilizational identity discourse with the categories we have deductively determined: anti-Westernism, Ottoman past, dichotomy between East and West, cultural essentialism, and religious values (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Uzer, 2020). Each number indicates how frequently the respective codes co-occur with one another (overlaps), helping to identify patterns in the dataset. The prominent finding of Figure 1 is that civilizational identity ($n = 129$) is mostly defined through cultural essentialism ($n = 37$) and the Ottoman past ($n = 32$), followed by religious values ($n = 22$), anti-Westernism ($n = 19$), and the dichotomy between East and West ($n = 19$). The revealed high level of interconnectedness of civilizational identity–cultural essentialism–Ottoman past shows that President Erdoğan's discourses mostly rely on the cultural essentialist ethos and historical legacy of the Ottoman past in defining civilizational identity, with religious values and anti-Western rhetoric providing complementary frameworks.

Code System	Civilizational identity	Anti-westernism	Religious values	Ottoman past	Cultural essentialism	Dichotomy between East and West	SUM
∨ ● Civilizational identity		19	23	32	41	20	135
● Anti-westernism	19		22	5	9	17	72
● Religious values	23	22		6	7	13	71
● Ottoman past	32	5	6		8	3	54
● Cultural essentialism	41	9	7	8		9	74
● Dichotomy between East and West	20	17	13	3	9		62
∑ SUM	135	72	71	54	74	62	468

Figure 1. Civilizational identity code intersection matrix with its sub-codes.

His in-group construction is based on "a vision of civilization and a taste for culture and art, today as in every period of history" (Erdoğan, 2023i), and references to the Ottoman past are often utilized to legitimize political actions. This is because, for Erdoğan, these civilizational values come from the "greatness of the legacy left to the Republic by the Ottoman Empire, which was a settled civilization in the founding histories of most of our important institutions today" (Erdoğan, 2022d). Therefore, his envisagement of the civilizational identity often evokes a populist nostalgia (Elçi, 2022) referring to "civilizational values which were built by our ancestors with thousands of hours of labor" (Erdoğan, 2020d) and also:

> Cultural depth...a deep-rooted accumulation of nearly a thousand years, including nearly a quarter of a thousand years of Seljuk, more than 600 years of Ottoman and a century of the Republic...and Anatolian lands, which have been the cradle of civilizations, offer us a treasure that is unique in the world with its cultural heritage. (Erdoğan, 2023j)

Through such statements, President Erdoğan constructs an in-group identity through a civilizational rhetoric that emphasizes historical continuity ("every period of history") and cultural superiority, producing an in-group favoritism and self-enhancement by embedding appeals to cultural and artistic values while simultaneously building a temporal bridge of the in-group identity tied to the glorified past and the inheritance of a civilizational tradition.

In this vein, he frequently points out the glorious and strong days of the Ottoman Empire and legitimizes his political stance by defining it as "the responsibility imposed on us by our civilization and history" (Erdoğan, 2020c). He asserts that his government is the "bridge built from the past to the future" (Erdoğan, 2023c). He also highlights that the country is now the "New Türkiye" that has reached an era of "Resurrection once again" (Erdoğan, 2019d) with him and the AKP. He legitimizes his stance as the "journey of work and service...relying on the help of Allah and the support of our [Turkish] nation" (Erdoğan, 2023g). He underlines

that during this journey "we [Erdoğan and his party] have regarded our heritage of civilization and history as a guide that sheds light on us" (Erdoğan, 2023h). In this respect, President Erdoğan strategically utilizes religious and historical rhetoric to construct a civilizational continuity of the Ottoman legacy and. In this way, he draws an alternative identity construction to the Kemalist legacy, which is referred to as the "New Türkiye," leading to a juxtaposition between the "old" (implied to be inauthentic/Westernist) and the "new" (implied to be authentic, conservative).

Based on such vision of civilizational identity, Erdoğan generated his critical stance towards Western civilization that "invaded the world mainly through its art, culture…soft power elements" (Erdoğan, 2022c). Such construction of the anti-Westernist stance aligns well with the discourses of other illiberal leaders such as Xi Jinping, Putin, or Orban who similarly embrace a civilizational discourse drawing on their own civilizational heritage to promote an alternative to the Western liberal order and express a dissatisfaction with the dominance of the West (I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023b). These leaders emphasize civilizational heritage in a way that focuses on historical grandeur and the greatness of cultural and national identity. This way, they aim to form a legitimate basis for their governments (I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024). In addition, through such ethe, they seek international political and economic dominance as well as cultural and ideological legitimacy (I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024) within the multi-polar world order. In this respect, Erdoğan's narrative mirrors these patterns, showing his rhetoric is instrumentalized both as a quest for domestic legitimacy and as a part of the broader global trend among illiberal leaders.

Erdoğan emphasizes Western values as "imposed and exposed" (Erdoğan, 2022c) by both international and national actors, whom he portrays as "the others" against "the people" (Erdoğan, 2023h). Yet, for him:

> No power, no government, no structure that is not born out of the dynamics of our civilization and culture, whose sole purpose is not to serve the Ummah, the nation and humanity, can give us the revival we have been longing for for two centuries. A tree without strong roots, a branch that is not firmly attached to the trunk, a leaf that does not hold on to it strongly cannot survive. (Erdoğan, 2019d)

As the excerpts show, President Erdoğan utilizes an interplay between civilizational discourse, legitimacy, and national identity—the revival of this last one he embeds on the reconnection with the nation's roots neglected for "two centuries" (an implicit critique of the secularization policies of the early Republican era). Such historical framing provides a ground for his governance as the representation of this restoration process towards the historical legacy of authentic Turkish civilization.

In Figure 2, we see how the above-explained three characteristics of illiberalism, i.e., adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction of the rule of law and media freedom, are infiltrated into the civilizational discourse by President Erdoğan.

Code System	Civilizational identity	Majoritarianism	Adversarial Politics	Restriction of rule of law and media freedom	SUM
● Civilizational identity		34	58	27	119
● Majoritarianism	34		50	39	123
● Adversarial Politics	58	50		37	145
● Restriction of rule of law and media fre	27	39	37		103
∑ SUM	119	123	145	103	490

Figure 2. Code intersection matrix of civilizational identity with adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction of the rule of law and media freedom.

The prominent finding of Figure 2 is that civilizational identity is mostly utilized within President Erdoğan's narratives of adversarial politics ($n = 58$), followed by majoritarianism ($n = 34$) and the restriction of the rule of law and media freedom ($n = 27$). Accordingly, this shows that President Erdoğan utilizes the ethos of civilizational identity to marginalize his political opponents as well as "the West" and any other perceived adversaries. This discourse is further reinforced through a close intersection of adversarial politics and majoritarianism, suggesting that civilizational identity is mainly constructed in opposition to perceived "enemies" of the people, aligning closely with a majority-rule perspective. Such discursive act is embedded within his composite "repertoire" of values and cultural and ideological narratives that target various social, political, and economic issues ranging from the global domination of the West, liberal values, economic liberalism, and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

While Erdoğan antagonizes the West by describing it as "imperialists" (Erdoğan, 2021b) and "threats against our country...[that] emerged in the form of efforts to separate our nation from its civilization, history, culture and values" (Erdoğan, 2021a), he simultaneously marginalizes the opposition actors who are blamed to collaborate with the West by combining adversarial politics with the majoritarianism mantra:

> They [the opposition] joined the sanctions against Russia, the biggest economic partner of our country, and said that we will do whatever the West wants. Mr. Kemal, we do not do what the West wants, we do what Türkiye wants. What are we standing for? We will do whatever the West wants, look at the words, look at the understanding....Such a thing is never in our political book. (Erdoğan, 2023h)

To this end, he utilizes terms such as "Mr." (bay) to identify the main opposition leader with Western culture and civilization. In Turkish, the traditional address used to refer to a man with respect is "bey," which is added to the end of the first name. "Bay" has a more Western sound and is placed at the beginning of the name, as in Western languages such as French and English. Erdoğan uses the expression "Bay Kemal" instead of "Kemal Bey," associating the main opposition leader with the Western cultural sphere. Thus, the address "bay" contains implications and references such as the elite of the Republic turning its face towards the West, breaking away from the values of the country and the nation, and becoming the bearer of the values of another civilization. On the contrary, as the "national and native," Erdoğan evokes a sense of national unity between himself and the "people," "who do not prostrate ourselves [themselves] in front of the imperialists or their hitmen" (Erdoğan, 2023b).

The religious standpoint of his conception of Turkish civilization is also accommodated and employed against the opposition. As an example, after an *iftar* program at a restaurant, Kılıçdaroğlu, the then-main opposition leader of CHP, took a photo with the guests upon their request. However, in the photos, he was seen standing on a prayer rug. He then stated that he had not seen the prayer rug, that he was very sorry, and apologized to everyone he had unknowingly hurt. Nevertheless, the fact that he stepped on the prayer rug with his shoe drew reaction from conservative groups. Erdoğan, on the other hand, used this as a reference to the main opposition leader's alienation from the beliefs and religious practices of the people:

> We bow down in *ruku* only in the presence of Allah and prostrate ourselves only for Him. Mr. Kemal, remember, you walk on the prayer rug with your shoes. We know prostration, we know the prayer rug you walk on with your shoes, we know the *qibla*, we know the *Kaaba* very well. (Erdoğan, 2023b)

> Did not Mr. Kemal call the headscarf a 1-square-meter piece of cloth? What can I say to that? (Erdoğan, 2023f)

Via such referrals of religious imagery, Erdoğan embeds the concept of civilizational identity within his construction of "constituting others"—foremostly the West and the opposition, which have "no respect to beliefs, history, culture and heartaches of the people" (Erdoğan, 2020a). In this way, President Erdoğan delegitimizes the West and the opposition while legitimizing his illiberal stance of turning away from liberal values on the grounds that "we cannot build a much more advanced civilization for ourselves by simply following the dominant intellectual understanding and de facto order in the world" (Erdoğan, 2023g).

While the portrayed "authentic" civilizational essence rooted in Islamic values demonizes the opposition, it simultaneously informs and shapes the conservative social norms (e.g., restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights, conservative family policies) in return. Accordingly, Erdoğan defines the opposition who support LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to family values culminating in the othering of the LGBTQ+ community, which he describes as "the perverted movements targeting our family institution and the future of our children" (Erdoğan, 2023h). In this way, he combines the social with the political enemies, contributing to polarization:

> They [the opposition] will give way to LGBT....Is this CHP LGBTist? Are their partners People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) LGBTist? Is the IYI Party LGBTist? Are the others LGBTist? Well, can LGBT infiltrate the AKP? Can LGBT infiltrate the MHP? Can LGBT infiltrate the People's Alliance? Because we believe in the sanctity of the family, we can never dishonor our family institution....Would such things suit an Anatolian? Anatolian people are chivalrous, brave, honest, loyal, self-sacrificing, and they want to see their politicians as themselves. (Erdoğan, 2023h)

The excerpt above shows Erdoğan featuring a dichotomy between Anatolians and others. Anatolians are represented as native and national, praising the value of the family, and thus homosexuality is regarded as opposed to Turkish and/or Islamic beliefs and values. While the AKP is constructed as the representative of this authentic identity, the opposition is identified with LGBT (which implies a culture rooted outside the country and incompatible with Anatolian identity). Such a hostile portrayal of LGBT people and the opposition as an example of adversarial politics and majoritarianism serves the purpose of legitimizing Erdoğan's policies that curtail basic democratic rights and freedoms, while positioning himself on the side of the people.

This is often observed in Erdoğan's statements about the rule of law and media freedom as well. By representing the political act through the majoritarianism thesis of "the common will," he endeavors to legitimize bypassing democratic debates and criticisms: "Democracy derives its power from the people; if there are people, there is democracy; if there are no people, there is no democracy" (Erdoğan, 2018b).

Accordingly, Erdoğan reduces democracy to a simple equation hinged on the existence of the people, which reflects the majoritarian understanding of democracy as merely the exercise of the majority's will. Through such rhetoric, he sidelines and disregards key democratic pillars such as representative institutions, civil society, free speech, pluralism, constitutional law, and independent media, which are necessary elements for balancing power in a functioning democracy. Instead, he promotes the people as the sole decision-making entity, to whom "the word, the decision, and the future belong" (Erdoğan, 2023d), referring to a

populist-majoritarian standpoint that emphasizes the absolute implementation of the will of the "righteous people," who have been "pariah (*parya*) in their own homelands" (Erdoğan, 2016) and "marginalized and ignored because of their beliefs, the way they dressed, their appearance" (Erdoğan, 2023e).

By utilizing such victimhood narratives, Erdoğan brands himself as the man on a mission who "fought very hard to get and protect what is rightfully ours, to say that we exist in this country too…and transformed Türkiye from being a country of only the elites and the whites" (Erdoğan, 2023l). In this respect, he legitimizes his stance by illustrating it as reclaiming the genuine identity, religion, culture, and values of the people, laying the basis for the illiberal political agenda of the restricted democracy.

While he pursues majoritarianism, the multicultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire and religious morality limit Erdoğan's ability to marginalize certain minority groups (e.g.,non-Muslim communities), evident in his civilizational rhetoric:

> We allocated a budget for the construction of new churches. We provided the opportunity for the allocation of places of worship such as churches and synagogues under the management of the General Directorate of Foundations to minority foundations free of charge. As a result of our efforts, the Sacred Heart Church in Taksim, Istanbul, was allocated to the Syriac Catholic Church Foundation free of charge for 49 years. In addition, the Mar Yuhanna Church in Hatay was given to the Arsuz Greek Orthodox Church Foundation, also free of charge. Apart from these, we have taken many historical steps to protect the rights and laws of our non-Muslim citizens and expand their freedom of worship. Behind every regulation we make, every reform we implement, there is an effort to make people of other faiths feel and show that they are first-class citizens of this country, we never seek exploitation or hypocrisy. In this way, we actually fulfill the requirements of our own faith. Because our faith requires respecting and even supporting people of other faiths on common humanitarian grounds. It is possible to come across countless examples of this understanding in our history, from our Prophet to Hazrat Omar, from the Seljuks to the Ottomans. (Erdoğan, 2022e)

This excerpt demonstrates the inclusive discourse presented for non-Muslim citizens. Yet the basis of this inclusiveness is not a modern approach of equal citizenship, but dhimmitude in Islamic law. Dhimmis are non-Muslims who accept the sovereignty of the Islamic state. They pay a special tax (*jizya*) while the state ensures their freedom of life, property, and belief. In this respect, it represents an example of how Erdoğan connects inclusive efforts to the moral imperatives of Islam and the enduring civilizational legacy of figures like the Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Omar, and the Seljuks. This connection reinforces his identity as a leader guided by faith while aligning contemporary actions with historical precedents, framing them as part of a timeless tradition rather than mere modern political decisions. In addition, it evokes a "populist nostalgia" narrative in which Türkiye, under Islamic rule, was a beacon of justice and coexistence, thereby further strengthening Erdoğan's civilizational discourse. Therefore, the interaction between civilizational discourse and illiberalism is dialectical. Erdoğan's rhetoric both enables and limits his policy options, forcing him to navigate the expectations created by the civilizational framework he employs, which might not easily align with illiberalism in other case-study countries.

His vision of illiberalism has also targeted the free and independent media as one of the cornerstones of the liberal public sphere (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016) to generate an illiberal public sphere (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

As an extension of his above-mentioned majoritarianist-populist understanding of democracy, Erdoğan undermines the fourth estate status of independent media in liberal democracies, through statements such as "democracy is not set through the media" (Erdoğan, 2018a), underplaying the importance of media institutions as the checks on power in democratic regimes. In this line, to diminish the role of both democracy and independent press, he frequently shifts the focus from the media to the people and elaborates on this point through statements such as: "We will act not according to the headlines of the media, but according to the headlines of our nation" (Erdoğan, 2019c).

Moreover, Erdoğan draws on adversarial politics against the media by marginalizing and blaming the media institutions that "always acted together with the tutelage, coup plotters and mandate holders in our country…and stand on the side of the marginals instead of standing on the side of the nation" (Erdoğan, 2018b). Media is also presented as antagonistic to the nation and its majoritarian sentiments and civilizational identity elements by being portrayed as being a "triggerman of every attack on the values, sacredness and honor of the nation" (Erdoğan, 2020b). In this respect, Erdoğan's rhetoric strongly draws on a sense of civilizational identity and thereby constructs an "us vs. them" dichotomy between the media and the people.

In parallel with the practices of other illiberal states (Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Polyák, 2019), Erdoğan's attempt to create an illiberal public sphere is completed with the design of anti-pluralistic media as a necessity of an illiberal democracy. This is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the above-mentioned media institutions with which he calls the "Anatolian media," which "reflects the cultural richness of Türkiye," and "the representatives of millions of people whose voices have been ignored for decades" (Erdoğan, 2023e). Accordingly, Anatolian media is depicted as being closely aligned with the nation's civilizational values and cultures of the people through the populist nuances in civilizational discourse. Moreover, it is heroized against the "globalist" free press:

> The more effective and widespread the Anatolian media, the stronger our democracy will be. The louder the voice of Anatolian media, the more the demands and expectations of our nation will be heard. Anatolian media took a very clear stance in favor of national will and democracy in every critical period we experienced, from the Gezi events to the 17–25 December attempt, from terrorist attacks to the 15 July betrayal. We have personally seen and experienced the support of our native media in every move to remove the shadow of tutelage over Turkish democracy. You courageously defended our democracy while those who talk about a free press applauded the coup plotters. You have again shown how the native and national press should be in the face of the pencil pushers who unite with the focal points representing the distortions of the global system and fix politics. (Erdoğan, 2023a)

The excerpt above emphasizes "Anatolianism" constructed as an antithesis of the Westernist modernization paradigm of the early Republic, as a carrier of national and spiritual values, referring to his often-recurring declaration that "AKP came to power through an Anatolian revolution" against Westernist and secularist elites that do not belong to this civilization. Accordingly, Erdoğan combines adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and civilizational identity within his illiberal stance, granting a selective and controlled form of media support. His narrative presents that the defense of the "true" democracy and the nation's will are guarded by the Anatolian media, drawing a clear distinction between "the native" and "the globalist media"

portrayed as the foreign influence and distorted system. This exemplifies the adversarial politics constructing a sharp "us" (native and national media as the guardian of the will of the people) versus "them" (free press supporting the coup plotters) dichotomy. Drawing on such dichotomy, he utilizes discriminatory rhetoric and an antagonistic manner towards the free press, through which he discredits and delegitimizes the free/critical media outlets. This, in return, serves him as a justified basis to exclude all criticisms of public affairs within the public sphere. In this way, civilizational identity is constructed in opposition to internal others as the "enemies," while majoritarianism is used to justify undemocratic actions under the guise of defending national sovereignty and democracy.

6. Conclusion

In scholarly discourse, the concepts of illiberalism and democratic backsliding are frequently examined in tandem. Indeed, the classification of illiberal democracy as a valid variant of democracy remains a subject of significant debate, as illiberalism inherently subverts and distorts the established foundational principles of democracy in its contemporary context. Nevertheless, it is apparent that leaders who promote illiberal doctrines and strategies receive considerable public support across numerous nations. Türkiye exemplifies this trend, particularly over the last decade. As a result, this study has illuminated the rhetoric utilized by the nation's president Erdoğan to justify his illiberal policies.

Through an extensive discourse analysis, the article has delineated how Erdoğan rationalizes his majoritarian and adversarial political strategies, alongside his legislative actions that curtail rights and freedoms, by utilizing a civilizational discourse. By accentuating civilizational divergences and antagonisms, Erdoğan has dismissed the universality of liberal democracy's values and norms, associating them with the Western paradigm and challenging their obligatory character. In this manner, he has constructed a protective barrier grounded in civilizational identity to counter the critiques of democratic regression that arise from both domestic and international spheres, particularly from the West.

Moreover, this analysis suggests that civilizational identity discourse is not merely instrumental but constitutive—it shapes the range of possible actions by embedding Erdoğan's policies within a broader ideological framework. However, it also constrains him by creating expectations tied to historical, religious, and cultural narratives, which may not apply to other illiberal practices in different contexts. Therefore, these dual roles of civilizational discourse underscore the need for future research to explore how identity-based appeals both expand and limit the policy choices of illiberal leaders. In this respect, it is prudent to acknowledge that investigations concentrating on the interplay between civilizational discourse and illiberalism across diverse countries as well as specific policy areas (e.g., education, foreign policy, or economy) may unveil distinct dimensions and implications of this relationship.

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