

Reconstructing the Truth: Anti-Immigrant Discourses of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Türkiye

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Submitted: 28 June 2026 **Accepted:** 8 September 2026 **Published:** 22 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “The Demographic Imagination and European Migration Futures” edited by Gert Verschraegen (University of Antwerp) and Milena Belloni (University of Antwerp), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i556>

Abstract

This study examines the ways in which anti-immigrant right-wing populist discourse is produced in Türkiye within the framework of population politics. The discourses of the Victory Party and the Good Party were analyzed within the framework of Wodak’s (2015a) discourse-historical approach; a dataset consisting of parliamentary group speeches and press releases covering the periods of the 2023 general elections and the 2024 local elections was used. The research findings reveal that, although both parties perceive immigration as a threat, they diverge significantly in terms of political positioning, populist antagonism, and threat framing. In the context of political positioning, the Victory Party positions itself as a radical “single-issue party” focused on anti-immigration politics; the Good Party adopts an institutional and legalistic language. In terms of populist antagonism, the Victory Party deploys both horizontal and vertical antagonism, targeting immigrants, the ruling party, and the mainstream opposition alike, whereas the Good Party focuses primarily on vertical antagonism. In its threat framing, the Victory Party constructs immigration as a militaristic existential crisis, equating it with demographic collapse, cultural invasion, and security threats, whereas the Good Party develops its narrative around security, economic, and labor issues in a more institutional language.

Keywords

anti-immigrant discourse; population politics; right-wing populism; securitization

1. Introduction

The rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric reflects not merely demographic realities, but the selective interpretation and political mobilization of demographic data. In this process, right-wing populist parties link structural

problems—such as economic insecurity and security concerns—to immigrants, thereby both channeling social anger and strengthening their own political base (Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2021; Wodak, 2015b). This instrumental function of discourse transforms migration from a policy issue into a powerful site of political meaning-making (van Dijk, 2015). In this context, population ceases to be merely statistical data and becomes a tool through which political actors shape public opinion. The framing of migration as a “crisis” (Marques et al., 2025) is fueled by securitization discourses (Kıcıroğlu et al., 2026; Özoflu et al., 2026); a politically shaped perception of threat is constructed through the search for scapegoats and welfare chauvinism.

Due to its geopolitical location, Türkiye is directly affected by crises in neighboring countries and, as a transit country, has become a major stopover point for migration flows (Ceylan, 2022). The refugee movement that began with the 2011 Syrian civil war, along with legal regulations and the EU–Türkiye agreement addressing, has sparked intense political debates, placing the issue of migration at the center of Turkish politics (Balta et al., 2022). This study examines the categorization practices and rhetorical construction strategies deployed by the Victory Party (ZP) and the Good Party (İYİP) in building anti-immigrant discourse within the framework of population politics, exploring how each party produces and wields demographic knowledge as a political tool and how they diverge in doing so.

The two parties at the center of this study, although stemming from the same nationalist tradition, have adopted divergent political trajectories and discursive positions on migration. The İYİP is a nationalist-conservative right-wing party founded in 2017 by Meral Akşener following her split from the MHP, positioning itself as a centrist nationalist alternative within the mainstream opposition. The ZP, by contrast, was founded in 2021 by Ümit Özdağ—who had himself split from the İYİP after accusing it of taking a soft stance on immigration—and can be characterized as a single-issue party comparable to far-right parties in Europe (Ceylan, 2022; Koca & Saç, 2024).

While the İYİP won parliamentary seats in the 2018 and 2023 elections, the ZP holds no parliamentary representation. In the second round of the 2023 presidential election, the Ata Alliance—of which the ZP was a constituent member—emerged as a critical balancing force, with its candidate Sinan Oğan having secured 5.17% of the vote in the first round. However, the alliance split in the second round: While Oğan declared his support for Erdoğan, Özdağ chose to back Kılıçdaroğlu. Recognizing this leverage, Kılıçdaroğlu entered into a written protocol with Özdağ, promising three ministerial posts, including the Interior Ministry and control of the National Intelligence Agency, as well as a commitment to repatriate all refugees within one year (“Özdağ says,” 2023). This agreement ensured that migration—despite the ZP’s limited electoral performance—was placed at the center of mainstream opposition discourse, demonstrating how a single-issue party with a marginal vote share can nonetheless reshape the broader political agenda (Ceylan et al., 2025; Özoflu et al., 2026).

While existing studies either examine anti-immigrant discourse across the full party spectrum (Balta et al., 2022; Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025), focus exclusively on the ZP (Özoflu et al., 2026; Sevinç, 2026; Türk, 2024), or compare multiple nationalist parties without a dedicated focus on right-wing populist anti-immigrant parties as a distinct category (Secen et al., 2024), this study makes three distinct contributions to the literature. First, it contributes to the literature by treating right-wing populist anti-immigrant parties as a distinct analytical category, examining both the ZP and the İYİP, two parties that share the same nationalist roots but diverge significantly in their discursive construction of anti-immigrant rhetoric, within the same

theoretical framework. Second, by integrating Wodak's discourse-historical approach with Rodríguez-Muñiz's framework of population politics, the study demonstrates how demographic knowledge is mobilized as a rhetorical weapon by right-wing populist actors in the Turkish context. Third, by covering two consecutive electoral cycles (the 2023 general elections and the 2024 local elections), the study captures how anti-immigrant discourse was shaped across a critical period of Turkish politics.

2. Right-Wing Populism and the Structure of Anti-Immigrant Discourse

A common feature of nearly all populist movements is that they speak in the name of "the people" and oppose the established elites. Brubaker (2017) highlights the ambiguity of the concept of "the people" here, noting that the term has three fundamental meanings: On the vertical axis, the ordinary people (plebs) are positioned in opposition to the elites; on the horizontal axis are a culturally and ethnically defined people (ethnos) with boundaries drawn against outgroups; and the sovereign people (demos), speaking in the name of popular sovereignty against ruling elites. At its core, populism rests on a conflict that pits a homogeneous and united people against an enemy comprising political, economic, and cultural elites (Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016). Right-wing populism extends this adversarial structure by adding a dangerous "other" category—directly identifying it with a specific outgroup such as immigrants or refugees (Judis, 2016; Mudde, 2019).

The most fundamental ideological characteristic of the far right is nativism—a combination of exclusionary nationalism and xenophobia that advocates for ethnically based citizenship through border closures, assimilation, or deportation (Mudde, 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). For this ideological framework to gain traction in the social sphere, it requires a strategically managed discursive shift. As Krzyżanowski's (2020) model demonstrates, ideas initially perceived as radical are first incorporated into the public sphere to be reinforced and then normalized—a dynamic reflected in survey data showing that 86% of the Turkish public supports deportation (TGSS, 2024), illustrating how radical discursive positions can become normalized within the broader political landscape.

Anti-immigrant discourses are not merely hate-based reactions; rather, they are part of the processes by which political elites manage the population, create political categories, and place immigrants into conditional citizenship statuses (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021; Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019). At the same time, populist actors establish their own political base by accusing elites of being out of touch with the people's real problems (Fassin, 2017), exploiting socioeconomic disillusionment and framing migration as a "politics of fear" (Rodrik, 2021; Wodak, 2015b). Particularly during times of crisis, fears of job loss, crime, and cultural erosion are linked to migrants (Arndt & Thomsen, 2019; Brown, 2016; Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014), reinforcing "welfare chauvinism"—the restriction of public services to citizens on an ethnic or national basis (Kuran, 2024; Uçarer, 2022). As Anderson (2013) points out, the physical and metaphorical boundaries constructed between "us" and "them" both legitimize the exclusion of migrants and expose the privileges of a nationally bounded "community of values." The discursive arsenal through which right-wing populist parties operationalize these strategies—securitization and population politics—is examined in the following section.

3. Securitization: Population Politics and the Construction of Threats

The concept of securitization (Buzan et al., 1998) refers to the process of removing an issue from the realm of normal politics and framing it as an existential threat through discourse that generates urgency and survival anxiety, drawing on collective memory and psycho-cultural tendencies (Balzacq, 2005). Migration is securitized along the axes of internal security, cultural security, and the welfare state crisis (Huysmans, 2000), positioning migrants both as a threat to social homogeneity and as economic competitors who consume public resources. Population politics, in turn, prepares the necessary discursive ground for securitization by treating demography not merely as a neutral science or a collection of data, but as a political form of knowledge that organizes social reality (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, 2021). Demographic narratives are first produced through categorization practices and then transformed into a discourse of existential threat. Rather than reflecting natural or inevitable societal reactions, demographic anxieties are constructed and shaped by political actors. According to Rodríguez-Muñiz (2020, 2021), population politics operates through two phases: the production of demographic knowledge through census data and official identity classifications, and its wielding—the mobilization of this knowledge into public discourse as a rhetorical tool.

Gietel-Basten (2023), drawing on the concept of “demographic imaginaries,” demonstrates that population discourse serves four functions: simplification of complex issues, construction of social unity, creation of scapegoats, and avoidance of real solutions. These functions materialize through demographic illusions: complex population dynamics are thereby simplified, and particular perceptions of threat and existential peril are constructed through the decontextualization and political framing of demographic data. Narratives such as the majority-minority narrative selectively frame demographic change as an existential threat, transforming anxiety into a tool for political mobilization (Alba, 2020) and producing polarizing identities such as “occupier” and “victim.” These demographic illusions create a perception of zero-sum competition, in which migrants’ gain is framed as natives’ loss (Alba, 2020)—a dynamic that finds concrete expression in the ZP’s “privileged foreigner” narrative and the İYİP’s welfare chauvinism framing. In the Turkish context, where right-wing populist parties have systematically deployed these demographic illusions, public perception of migrants has become significantly detached from demographic reality: surveys indicate that the public substantially overestimates the migrant population while expressing high levels of threat perception and support for deportation (TGSS, 2024).

4. The Discursive Transformation of Migration Policy in Türkiye

Türkiye’s migration history encompasses several waves, including migrations from the Caucasus, the Balkans, Iran, and Bulgaria, as well as Kurdish migration from Iraq. Until the 1990s, Türkiye primarily accepted migrants of Turkish descent and culture; these migration waves underwent a relatively smooth process of social integration facilitated by cultural and linguistic proximity, and the phenomenon of migration remained above politics and was not politicized. However, the migration flows from former Eastern Bloc countries between 1991 and 1995, concentrated particularly in Istanbul and the Eastern Black Sea Region, led to the politicization of the migration issue at the local level. The Syrian migration that began in 2011 differs fundamentally from these earlier waves in terms of scale, structural dynamics, and social visibility. Türkiye became the world’s largest refugee-hosting country, with its Syrian refugee population exceeding 2.2 million, representing an unprecedented mass migration movement in Turkish history (Ceylan, 2022; Göç İdaresi

Başkanlığı, n.d.). Türkiye's initial open-door policy assumed a short-term crisis, but the protraction of the conflict and the rapid growth of the refugee population overwhelmed reception capacity, compelling the vast majority of Syrian refugees to settle in urban centers. While refugees living in urban areas face serious difficulties in accessing adequate housing, the absence of legal work permits pushes them into informal employment at extremely low wages and under adverse conditions. The perception of refugees as responsible for rising rents, unemployment, and economic competition from low-wage labor has laid the groundwork for growing anxiety and backlash among the local population (İçduygu, 2015). Within this context of structural vulnerability, Syrian refugee women occupy a particularly precarious position. Their experiences are shaped by multidimensional barriers including insecure employment, seasonal labor, increasing discrimination in the labor market, and the intensification of domestic responsibilities (Çirkin et al., 2025; Öztürk et al., 2019).

Türkiye ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention with a geographical restriction, granting full refugee status only to Europeans. Syrians have been placed under “temporary protection” since 2011, formalized through the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2013) and the Temporary Protection Regulation (2014). In political rhetoric, however, the terms “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” and “temporary protection” are used interchangeably, creating a terminological ambiguity that itself functions as an exclusionary rhetorical tool (Sevinç, 2026; Türk, 2024). To maintain conceptual consistency with international literature and avoid reproducing this instrumentalization, this study uses “refugee” as an umbrella term.

The EU–Türkiye Statement of March 2016 occupies a significant place in the intensification of domestic political conflict over migration in Türkiye. Under this agreement, Türkiye committed to preventing irregular migration flows toward Europe and to readmitting migrants who had crossed into Greek territory, in exchange for an initial three billion euros in financial assistance through the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye—with an additional three billion euros contingent on implementation—and the promise of visa liberalization (Council of the European Union, 2016). This arrangement reflects a broader EU strategy of externalizing migration management to third countries in order to protect its own borders—a strategy that prioritizes security over human rights concerns (Thévenin, 2021). However, the agreement has attracted intense criticism on multiple grounds: it effectively closed the primary route to Europe, leaving many migrants trapped in legal limbo in Türkiye; it enabled the Turkish state to exercise considerable leverage vis-à-vis the EU; the use of funds has lacked transparency (Haferlach & Kurban, 2017; Heck & Hess, 2017). It is within this geopolitical context—in which Türkiye bears a disproportionate share of a global displacement crisis while receiving incomplete burden-sharing from its European partners—that the intensification of domestic anti-immigrant discourse must be situated. As Lüleci-Sula and Sula (2021) demonstrate, Turkish political discourse on migration is structured around four key themes: burden, humanitarian responsibility, justification for transborder operations, and the fault line in EU–Türkiye relations, themes that, as this study shows, find direct expression in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of both the ZP and the İYİP.

The literature on populist anti-refugee discourse in Türkiye converges around three key axes. First, welfare chauvinism emerges as the most decisive negative factor in right-wing parties' discourse, with cultural, security, and economic threat frameworks functioning as secondary mechanisms that legitimize this demand (Balta et al., 2022; Sevinç, 2026). Second, a marked divergence is observed among nationalist parties regarding Syrian refugees: While the MHP opts for strategic silence due to coalition dynamics, the İYİP advocates voluntary return and the ZP supports forced repatriation (Secen et al., 2024). Third, studies

focused specifically on the ZP demonstrate that the party transforms migrants into a comprehensive scapegoat across economic, cultural, and security dimensions (Koca & Saç, 2024) and deepens securitization discourse through both vertical and horizontal antagonism (Özoflu et al., 2026), with this discourse infiltrating the mainstream opposition and reshaping other parties' migration frameworks (Kıcıroğlu et al., 2026; Türk, 2024). The İYİP, by contrast, constructs its discourse primarily around economic, social threat, and security framings while keeping cultural threat emphasis notably limited (Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025).

5. Research Methodology and Data Set

Critical Discourse Analysis goes beyond mere linguistic description to analyze how discourses produce power relations and inequalities, with word choice, implications, presuppositions, and metaphors functioning as powerful rhetorical tools in the discursive production of social fears (van Dijk, 1993, 2015). In this study, Wodak's (2015a) discourse-historical approach was adopted. This approach examines discursive strategies through five fundamental analytical categories: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation (Wodak, 2015a). These five strategies formed the analytical framework for the thematic coding categories. The paragraph level was adopted as the unit of analysis; each text was evaluated within its political context to determine which strategies were predominantly employed. In the findings section, the strategies of nomination and predication were analyzed primarily under the themes of "categorization and rhetorical construction"; the strategies of perspectivization and argumentation were analyzed under the theme of "populist antagonism"; and the strategies of intensification and mitigation were analyzed under the theme of "existential threat and securitization."

As a researcher employing a discourse-historical approach—a methodology that explicitly acknowledges the researcher's critical and normative positioning—I approach this study from the standpoint that anti-immigrant discourse in Türkiye cannot be understood independently of the political contexts, institutional dynamics, and selective framings through which demographic data are interpreted and mobilized. In this context, structural and political failures are often discursively displaced onto refugees, many of whom have fled war and violence. The analytical language employed in this study—including terms such as "exclusionary," "objectification," and "threat construction"—reflects this critical positioning, which does not claim value-neutrality but aims to make visible the mechanisms through which vulnerable populations are discursively marginalized.

The empirical design of the study focused on right-wing populist parties with anti-immigration discourse; in this context, the discourses of the ZP—founded in 2021 and also described as a "single-issue party" (Ceylan, 2022)—and the İYİP, founded in 2017, were examined. The MHP, another actor drawing from nationalist roots, was excluded from the scope of the study because it adopted a silent policy toward migrants following the coalition it formed with the AKP (Secen et al., 2024). The dataset for the analysis consists of the actors' parliamentary group speeches and official press releases (ZP: 57 texts, İYİP: 35 texts). Since the ZP holds no parliamentary representation, data for this party were obtained from official press releases and rally speeches published on the party's official website. Press releases and parliamentary group speeches were analyzed holistically within a continuous timeframe extending from one year prior to the 2023 general elections to the date of the 2024 local elections (that is, from May 14, 2022, to March 31, 2024). The analysis identified three categories: "categorization and rhetorical construction," "existential threat and securitization," and "populist antagonism": the people, the elite, and the other.

The data asymmetry between the ZP's press releases and the İYİP's parliamentary speeches reflects the parties' different institutional positions. The İYİP's official website contains no comprehensive press release archive, making parliamentary speeches the authoritative institutional discourse. ZP's press releases serve as its primary political communication, given its lack of parliamentary representation. This structural asymmetry is acknowledged as a limitation of the study; however, both source types represent each party's official discursive output and are therefore treated as functionally comparable for the purposes of comparative analysis. Because the two parties are represented through different genres of political communication, differences in rhetorical style cannot be attributed exclusively to party ideology or political positioning. The comparison therefore concerns patterns in the parties' official political discourse as available in these source types, rather than a fully genre-controlled comparison.

Coding was conducted by the author following a combined deductive-inductive logic. An initial coding framework was derived from theoretical concepts in the literature—including securitization, welfare chauvinism, and the majority-minority narrative—while remaining open to emergent themes arising from the data. As this study follows a single-researcher design consistent with established discourse-historical approach practice, inter-rater reliability was not calculated; analytical rigor was instead ensured through systematic application of the discourse-historical approach's five discursive strategies across all texts and iterative review of the coding structure. To ensure the representativeness of the quoted excerpts, all texts in the corpus were systematically coded according to the three thematic categories. The frequency with which key discursive patterns recur across the corpus is noted in the findings section alongside selected excerpts (e.g., $n = 9$ of 57 ZP press releases). Where a pattern recurs frequently, this frequency is reported to demonstrate its dominance within the corpus; where an excerpt is unique or rare ($n = 1$), it is retained because it illustrates a qualitatively distinct rhetorical strategy rather than a recurring tendency.

All quotations from the original Turkish-language sources were translated into English by the author. Where analytically significant, original Turkish terms are retained alongside their English translations, for instance: *hendek* (trench) and *göçmenistan* (migrantistan). Back-translation was not applied given the single-researcher design; however, care was taken to ensure that translations preserved the rhetorical intent and ideological loading of the original Turkish utterances.

6. Findings

6.1. Categorization and Rhetorical Construction

Categorization, as an analytical framework for examining how demographic knowledge is produced and politically mobilized, takes on a unique form in the Turkish context. In Türkiye, Syrians are legally defined as having “temporary protection” status; this status is both a legal framework and an emphasis on their standing as guests, rejecting the idea of permanence. In ZP discourse, however, the concept of “temporary protection” is neither completely rejected nor fully embraced. On the one hand, it presents a discourse that acknowledges Syrians' “temporary protection” status in Türkiye (Zafer Partisi, 2024c); on the other hand, by rejecting this categorization, it declares the state's official “temporary protection” status to have “lost its purpose” (Zafer Partisi, 2024a). Whereas Türk (2024) reads the absence of “refugee” as the ZP's primary nomination strategy, this study locates exclusion in the party's instrumentalization of the “temporary protection” status itself—acknowledged in law yet discursively voided of practical validity. The systematic

simultaneous use of the internationally recognized term “asylum seeker” and the crime-connoting term “illegal” within the same texts ($n = 20$) collapses the distinction between legal and illegal status, extending the connotation of illegality even to those with a legal claim—a double categorization strategy in which “asylum seeker” appears 42 times and “illegal” 24 times across the ZP corpus of 57 press releases.

An examination of the metaphorical map of this discourse reveals the use of various metaphors that politicize fear and mobilize anger. Concepts with intense symbolic weight—such as “migrantistan” (*göçmenistan*, $n = 7$), “our borders are riddled with holes” (*sınırlarımız delik deşik*, $n = 3$), “invasion” (*istila*, $n = 9$) and “the world’s amusement park” (*dünyanın lunaparkı*, $n = 4$)—stand out as recurring rhetorical devices in the ZP’s discourse (Zafer Partisi, 2024a, 2024b). The “trench” (*hendek*, $n = 2$) metaphor, also deployed by the İYİP, frames Türkiye as a geopolitical buffer sacrificed to European border security interests (Zafer Partisi, 2024c). In the ZP’s discourse, war and occupation metaphors feature prominently, pointing to an active conflict over sovereignty. Furthermore, in ZP discourse, the narrative of the victimized local population and the privileged foreigner is constructed not merely through bureaucratic statistics but through experiences capable of affecting the emotions of the masses. The ZP employs strategic storytelling to anchor its abstract ideological constructs in the minds of the masses as “lived and concrete realities” ($n = 4$):

Look, go buy an aspirin over there. If you’re two lira short, you can’t buy it. A asylum seeker walks in, gets it for free, and you pay for it. (Zafer Partisi, 2024c)

Like the ZP, the İYİP makes heavy use of the concept of “refugee” in its discourse. At the level of discursive categorization, however, the İYİP follows a dual terminological strategy. In the İYİP’s rhetoric, the crime-connoting term “illegal” ($n = 13$) is used alongside terms such as “irregular migration” ($n = 2$) and “uncontrolled migration” ($n = 5$), which align with international literature and bureaucratic language. The İYİP’s metaphorical narrative operates on a more institutional plane than the ZP’s militaristic imagery, though occasional militaristic vocabulary—such as “invasion” ($n = 2$)—surfaces in municipal-policy pledges (Akşener, 2023b). Key metaphors include “migration corridor” ($n = 1$) and “migrant depot” ($n = 1$), which frame migration as policy mismanagement, as well as “borders turning into a sieve” ($n = 8$) and “trench” ($n = 3$), which position Türkiye as a victim of European border externalization (Akşener, 2022a, 2022b, 2024).

The parties’ respective solution projects further illustrate this discursive divergence. The ZP refers to its solution project as “Anatolian Fortress” (*Anadolu Kalesi*), alluding to Anatolia’s historical battles; in doing so, it transforms migration management from an administrative policy domain into an existential security issue that can only be overcome through active struggle (Zafer Partisi, 2022a). In contrast, the İYİP, by conceptualizing its solution proposal as the “national migration doctrine and strategic action plan,” opts for a more institutional discourse that frames the resolution of the issue not through militaristic coercion but within the framework of rational-legal and bureaucratic state seriousness (TBMM, 2022).

6.2. Existential Threat and Securitization

In the ZP’s discursive construction, migration is reframed from a structural social dynamic into an existential crisis. As conceptualized in Rodríguez-Muñiz’s (2021) theory of population politics, statistical data are decontextualized and transformed into a rhetorical weapon used to mobilize the masses. The repeatedly emphasized figures in the discourse—“13 million” ($n = 23$), frequently paired with the phrase “refugees and

undocumented migrants,” and “11 billion dollars in annual spending” ($n = 6$)—portray migration as an object of both demographic and economic fear. This framing explicitly casts migration as the root problem underlying the country’s crises (Zafer Partisi, 2024c, $n = 2$). One of the most prominent forms of this instrumentalization is the comparison of fertility rates. Unlike the compassion-evoking “good refugee” framing Özçetin (2026) identifies in Turkish mainstream media, the ZP’s discourse subjects refugee women to a radically exclusionary narrative centered on their very bodies and fertility rates ($n = 2$):

A Turkish mother has at most 1.7 children. A Syrian...can have 3 children. Three times as many. If this continues—and if the war ends but these people do not return to their countries—by as early as 2040, the number of Syrians alone in this country will reach 21 million. (Zafer Partisi, 2024d)

As Balzacq (2005) emphasizes, mobilizing collective memory plays a significant role in the effectiveness of securitization discourse. ZP discourse exemplifies this through a multi-temporal threat construction: historical references to civilizational conflicts and past wars (Zafer Partisi, 2024c, $n = 4$) are fused with catastrophic demographic projections, creating a sense of existential urgency that extends far beyond immediate policy concerns. This temporal framing extends into the spatial dimension, as the ZP argues that the indigenous population has already lost its demographic dominance in border cities ($n = 4$) and other cities with concentrated refugee populations ($n = 2$)—a direct instantiation of what Alba (2020) terms the majority-minority narrative as demographic illusion. The gendered dimension of this threat construction is equally explicit: the restriction of Turkish women’s freedom of movement on the streets is directly linked to the presence of migrants ($n = 2$)—a theme Koca and Saç (2024) similarly document in ZP discourse:

Turkish women will be able to walk fearlessly on the streets. We do not want refugees in our country. (Zafer Partisi, 2023c)

The migration issue is framed not as administrative migration management but as a military defense line (Zafer Partisi, 2024b, $n = 4$; including references to landmines, thermal cameras, UAVs). The macroeconomic crisis and deepening insecurity are discursively reduced to the presence of migrants: the burden of complex structural crises, such as inflation and rent hikes, is systematically shifted onto refugees, redirecting social anger from the ruling elite toward migrant communities (Zafer Partisi, 2024e, $n = 7$). Another economic component of this discourse is the “privileged foreigner” narrative. Migrants are portrayed as a privileged group that easily accesses public resources unavailable to the local population; this situation is framed as the exploitation of taxpaying citizens (Zafer Partisi, 2024c, $n = 5$).

This framing—which Arndt and Thomsen (2019) term “ethnicity coding”—transforms social rights into unjust privileges. Its most radical concrete expression is welfare chauvinism, which confines the boundaries of solidarity within ethnic/national identity (Balta et al., 2022; Sevinç, 2026). ZP institutionalizes the exclusionary allocation of public resources solely to the native population through local government pledges ($n = 4$):

No funds from the municipality’s resources will be transferred to asylum seekers or refugees; these belong to the people of Denizli. Second, those who come here have come as our guests, but they cannot engage in commerce here; we will close all the shops they have opened without a license. (Zafer Partisi, 2024a)

The narrative of urban decay, meanwhile, is constructed around the ghettos where refugees have concentrated and the streets they have transformed: “Damascus streets, Aleppo streets have emerged....You’ll have a hard time finding Atatürk Street” (Zafer Partisi, 2023b). This spatial exclusion extends further: the local population is portrayed as being pushed out of public spaces in their own city (Zafer Partisi, 2022a, $n = 4$). As Schyvens et al. (2026) note, populist right-wing voters experience “status uncertainty” in the face of demographic diversification—a dynamic that finds concrete expression in the ZP’s rhetoric of lost urban dominance.

In contrast to the ZP’s existential and militaristic threat construction, the İYİP’s strategy of economic exclusion is framed in a legal-rational tone that centers concerns such as informal employment, labor theft, and market distortion (Akşener, 2023c, $n = 6$). However, this discursive construction is not limited to welfare chauvinism; the issue of migration is also framed as a national security issue (TBMM, 2022, $n = 9$). Regarding demographic threat, the İYİP follows an institutional and limited line. References to demographic concerns appear in only 2 of 35 parliamentary group speeches, confined to data on regional concentration of Syrian refugees in earthquake-affected areas (TBMM, 2023).

Consequently, the demographic threat narrative—centered on majority-minority reversals and existential population decline, which lies at the heart of the ZP’s discourse—is relegated to a secondary position within the İYİP’s framework. In contrast to the ZP’s militarist solution framework, the İYİP frames migration not as an extraordinary security operation but as a manageable foreign policy matter, presenting repatriation as a diplomatic process in accordance with international law ($n = 2$):

As the Good Party, our goal is not to forcibly deport asylum seeker to their countries under inhumane conditions, but to facilitate their return. (Akşener, 2022a)

In this discursive framework, the most powerful appeal centers on the protection of women and children ($n = 3$): “Our people are now worried even about sending their children to the park” (Akşener, 2022b). The rhetoric of urgency surrounding the alleged erosion of national identity is anchored in appeals to national pride and an implicit threshold of cultural tolerance (Akşener, 2024, $n = 2$). In addition, the İYİP constructs the narrative of the victimized local population versus the privileged foreigner through a symbolic appeal to justice. The claim that while Turkish citizens are crushed under the tax burden, migrants are exempt—“It’s shifting the tax it can’t collect from asylum seekers onto the backs of the Turkish people” (Akşener, 2023c)—feeds a populist appeal to economic justice that triggers a sense among the native population that their rights are being violated in their own country ($n = 2$).

The demand in election pledges to impose additional taxes on refugees and shut down social assistance channels can be viewed as a concrete manifestation of welfare chauvinism—a discursive strategy well-documented in the Turkish context (Balta et al., 2022; Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025; Özoflu et al., 2026; Sevinç, 2026). Although this framing appears in only 2 of 35 İYİP parliamentary group speeches, its presence in election pledges signals its strategic salience within the party’s populist framework:

Since the term “citizen” appears in the legal definition of municipal services, we—as the Good Party—will absolutely prevent asylum seeker benefiting from our services in the municipalities we administer from receiving social assistance or scholarships by imposing additional taxes on them. (Akşener, 2024)

In the İYİP's discourse, the theme of regulating public spaces and limiting the visibility of refugees is addressed through institutional and administrative policy proposals. The "sign ban" in the İYİP's local governance vision (Akşener, 2024, $n = 1$) constitutes a "politics of visibility" aimed at reconstructing the symbolic dominance of the Turkish language in the public sphere. In terms of spatial segregation, the İYİP frames the concentration of refugees in certain neighborhoods as the emergence of "ghettos" that must be prevented through new urban planning schemes ($n = 1$):

To prevent undocumented migrants and asylum seekers from forming ghettos in our cities and establishing businesses that serve only one another—creating ethnic enclaves that are miniature Syrias—we will develop and implement new urban planning schemes. (Akşener, 2024)

6.3. Populist Antagonism: *The People, the Elite, and the Other*

The populist backbone of the ZP's discourse reaches its peak along both the ethno-cultural (ethnos) and the vertical (plebs) dimensions of the tripartite conception of the people conceptualized by Brubaker (2017). The political sphere and social relations are divided into three radical poles: the victimized ordinary Turkish people, the corrupt political elites who have betrayed the people, and the immigrants who are invading the country and depleting its resources. As outlined by Özoflu et al. (2026), the discourse combines vertical antagonism (the people vs. the elites) with horizontal antagonism (native citizens vs. the foreign "other").

In the ZP's discourse, both the ruling party (AKP) and the mainstream opposition (CHP and others) are portrayed as accomplices in the migration crisis. As Fassin (2017) notes, populist actors base their legitimacy on the elites' alienation from the people; the ZP transforms this alienation into a system-wide accusation directed at all established political institutions (Zafer Partisi, 2023a, $n = 17$). This rhetoric aligns with the "single-issue party" character—as emphasized by Ceylan (2022)—and its strategy of challenging the system. The ZP extends this conspiracy framing beyond domestic elites to include international actors: Türkiye is portrayed as a deliberate victim of European border externalization, transformed into a trench through the EU–Türkiye agreement—sacrificed to serve Europe's border security interests while bearing the full burden of mass migration alone ($n = 4$):

To this end, the Europeans have persuaded both the government and the opposition here to prevent us from removing them. Both have regarded Türkiye as a moat in front of the European stronghold and have accepted this. (Zafer Partisi, 2024b)

The ZP also defines the phenomenon of migration not merely as the result of an incompetent government but as a "strategic migration engineering" ($n = 2$) operation orchestrated by international actors targeting Türkiye's national security (Zafer Partisi, 2022c). Through practices such as "here are the real numbers" (Zafer Partisi, 2022b) and "we are the ones smart enough to provide a solution" (Zafer Partisi, 2024c, $n = 5$), the ZP devalues the narratives of established elites and positions itself as the sole arbiter of truth in migration discourse—a pattern similarly observed by Kıcıroğlu et al. (2026).

The most striking structural aspect of the discourse is the objectification of migrants: Without the distinction between women and children, all migrants are lumped together and made the target of exclusionary rhetoric (Zafer Partisi, 2022a, 2024c); the emphasis on "by force if necessary" (Zafer Partisi, 2024c, $n = 3$) is the

clearest expression of this absolute objectification. Across the ZP's corpus, refugees are systematically rendered as objects of political management rather than as rights-bearing subjects.

The most distinctive aspect of this objectification is the framing of citizenship granted to migrants as a political conspiracy. The ZP strips citizenship of its legal-administrative status and presents it as electoral engineering ($n = 4$), triggering the fear that the political future will be determined by foreigners:

He, his two wives, and his ten children become Turkish citizens. They vote in elections without knowing Turkish. They're deciding how you'll live. They're making the Turkish nation finance this occupation. (Zafer Partisi, 2024d)

The İYİP, by contrast, does not go as far as the ZP in framing citizenship as a political conspiracy; however, it similarly instrumentalizes citizenship as a tool of electoral engineering. The party warns that granting citizenship to migrants constitutes a deliberate strategy of "voter recruitment" that will allow the ruling party to determine electoral outcomes (Akşener, 2023b, $n = 1$).

An examination of the tripartite populist conflict structure in the İYİP's discourse shows that vertical antagonism (opposition to the elite) is far more dominant than horizontal antagonism (opposition to immigrants). The İYİP positions immigrants not as the perpetrators of the structural crisis, but as a consequence of the damage caused by the corrupt ruling regime. As Secen et al. (2024) also emphasize, one of the key reasons for this is the İYİP's formation of a coalition with opposition parties within the framework of the Nation Alliance ($n = 22$):

The real issue is not the asylum seeker themselves, but this very government that has agreed, in exchange for money, to turn Türkiye into a trench state. (Akşener, 2022b)

Consistent with Fassin's (2017) analysis of populist legitimacy-building, this approach defines the government's migration policy not as a lack of foresight but as a deliberate betrayal of national interests. This victimized-population narrative also serves as a lever for the elite critique. On the international criticism front, the İYİP points to the ruling party's complicity with European countries in the deepening of the migration crisis. The İYİP contends that deliberate foreign-policy concessions made in the name of Europe's border security have reduced Türkiye to an externally constructed "trench," a critique of EU-directed policy that recurs across seven speeches (Akşener, 2022b).

Both the ZP and the İYİP explicitly reject the ruling party's framing of migration through Islamic solidarity, dismissing appeals to "ensar" and "muhacir" rhetoric (Akşener, 2023a, $n = 2$; Zafer Partisi, 2024b, $n = 1$). As Çarkoğlu and Elçi (2021) also emphasize, the ruling party's migration policy is fundamentally based on a populist Muslim solidarity built upon the construction of "the people" through Islamic brotherhood and coreligiosity. By contrast, the İYİP and the ZP reject the rhetoric of religious solidarity, instead constructing an exclusionary populism that redefines the boundaries of "us" on ethno-national rather than religious grounds. This conflict reveals a structural paradox regarding the phenomenon of migration in Türkiye: While refugees are met with a protective acceptance as "religious brothers" in the ruling party's discourse, they are coded as "cultural outsiders" who threaten national welfare and security in the discourse of the right-wing populist opposition, thereby subjecting them to structural exclusion.

7. Conclusion

This study examines population politics in a distinctive context: Türkiye, the world's largest refugee-hosting country, where a Muslim-majority society receives co-religionist refugees fleeing a neighboring civil war—yet rather than producing solidarity, this demographic reality becomes a site of intense exclusionary discourse. By focusing on the production and wielding of demographic knowledge—Rodríguez-Muñiz's two phases of population politics—this analysis reveals how two right-wing populist parties sharing the same nationalist tradition diverge significantly in their discursive construction of anti-immigrant rhetoric, despite operating within the same political and demographic conjuncture.

Although both parties draw from the same nationalist tradition and frame migration as a political problem requiring an urgent solution, their exclusionary discourses diverge distinctly along three key axes: (a) political positioning, (b) the tripartite populist conflict, and (c) threat framing and metaphorical language. In terms of political positioning, the İYİP's discourse follows a centrist nationalist line—aimed at preserving the dynamics of its alliance and its institutional legitimacy—and prioritizes “voluntary return” in accordance with international law. In contrast, the ZP—which emerged as Türkiye's first European-style “single-issue party”—constructs the issue through the radical stance of “forcible deportation if necessary,” setting aside international law and diplomatic courtesy. This divergence is also directly reflected in the parties' “tripartite populist conflict” mechanisms. While the ZP simultaneously targets immigrants, the ruling party, and the mainstream opposition through both horizontal and vertical antagonism, the İYİP focuses primarily on vertical antagonism, framing immigrants as a passive consequence of elite misgovernance rather than an active threat. Notably, national security framing remains the İYİP's most frequently deployed threat register ($n = 9$ of 35 speeches), though attributed to governmental failure rather than to migrants themselves. The gendered dimension of anti-immigrant discourse constitutes a significant analytical finding. The ZP frames gender along two axes, subjecting refugee women to an exclusionary narrative centered on fertility rates, while simultaneously framing the restriction of Turkish women's movement as a consequence of migrant presence. The İYİP, by contrast, deploys a protective framing centered on the vulnerability of women and children—reproducing a paternalistic gender construction without explicitly targeting refugee women. That both parties instrumentalize gender through distinct rhetorical registers underscores that the gendered dimension is constitutive of how population politics operates in the Turkish context.

In terms of threat framing, the ZP frames migration as a militaristic existential crisis, equating it with demographic destruction and cultural invasion, whereas the İYİP—while also deploying welfare chauvinist and security framings—addresses migration within a more legal-rational and institutional register. Analyzed through Rodríguez-Muñiz's population politics framework, the two parties' discourses reveal that while both engage in the production of demographic knowledge through categorization practices, they diverge fundamentally in how they wield this knowledge—divergences that are captured across the three analytical themes of this study. From a theoretical perspective, this study applies Rodríguez-Muñiz's concept of population politics to the Turkish context, illustrating how raw demographic data are selectively interpreted and mobilized as a rhetorical tool in the hands of political actors. This study reveals that political parties not only produce their own categorization practices but also construct anti-immigrant discourse by instrumentalizing the state's official legal statuses and international law—most notably through the strategic deployment of crime-connoting terminology such as “illegal” immigrant alongside internationally recognized terms, thereby transforming legal distinctions into tools of political exclusion.

Future studies could explore the rhetorical strategies and temporal tactics through which demographic threat narratives are constructed and sustained. A detailed analysis of how this exclusionary language spreads to and transforms mainstream parties through a “contagion effect” holds significant potential for future research.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available. The corpus consists of official press releases from the ZP, accessed via the party’s official website (<https://www.zaferpartisi.org.tr>), and parliamentary group speeches by İYİP leader Meral Akşener, accessed via the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (<https://www.tbmm.gov.tr>) and Meral Akşener’s official YouTube channel.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used LLMs as a proofreading tool while preparing the manuscript. However, all analyses and interpretations are the sole responsibility of the author.

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