

To cite text:

Lavezzo, Edoardo. 2025. "Limits of a Competitive Authoritarianism in Security Policies: Interpreting Türkiye's Approach towards the EU." *Philosophy and Society* 36 (2): 479–500.

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LIMITS OF A COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM IN SECURITY POLICIES: INTERPRETING TÜRKİYE'S APPROACH TOWARDS THE EU

ABSTRACT

Middle powers are often states that support and follow democratic principles, demonstrating such atonement in the domestic and foreign policies. However, states that want to emerge in modern multipolarity prefer a more centralised approach, adopting an assertive behaviour against powers or international institutions that criticise alleged 'authoritarian governance'. Among these countries, Türkiye as a middle power has manifested a growing assertive behaviour towards the European Union (EU) after the failed coup of 2016, capitalizing on such antagonism in the referendum of 2017 has allowed the Justice and Development Party, (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / AKP) to transform Türkiye into a Presidential Republic. Nonetheless, such assertive behaviour in Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) has not always corresponded to an open antagonism manifested in the domestic rhetoric. In particular, the polarisation of the AKP against the Europeanisation process moved by Turkish presidentialism has shown an inconstant evolution in the security policies. Hence, this article proposes to interpret Turkish presidentialism in its political polarisation and nationalism against the EU in the domestic and foreign policies after the presidential turn. The article contends that Ankara's leadership, albeit it has evolved the country's governance into a competitive authoritarian governance, the impact of its security policies towards the EU has not favoured an open assertiveness of Turkish behaviour as a middle power.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarianism;
European Union;
Middle Power; Türkiye,
Security Policies.

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Introduction

The redimensioning of democracy and the proliferation of authoritarian modes of governance have been the concerns of leading scholars of democratisation lately (Diamond & Plattner 2015; Diamond, Plattner & Walker 2016). In particular, a growing number of studies are evidencing how middle powers, that manifest an assertive and ambitious foreign policy, have previously experienced a governance change that reduced democratisation and increased the nationalism of the leadership in their decision-making process, showing an ‘unusual middle power activism’ (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). Among these middle powers, Türkiye generates a strong attraction from scholarship, which has analysed the gradual loss of democracy and the evolution of Ankara’s bilateral relations with the EU. Indeed, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU has often been rocky, but it drastically deteriorated following the coup attempt in July 2016. However, it was until the constitutional referendum and the rise of Erdoğan as the main agent within the Turkish governance that the EU voiced the peril of this democratic backsliding and the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish government (Dursun-Özkanca 2022: 746). However, the centralisation of the government can’t be reduced to a mere desire of the AKP and Erdoğan to diminish the bureaucratic and military figures, and neither, the use of nationalistic discourses and political polarisation can be limited to the domestic sphere. Given the current status of the literature, crowded by different definitions that aim to display how the current regime in Türkiye shapes its foreign policy behaviour, scholars have been interrogating themselves on which definition would better describe the Turkish governance after the failed coup and interpreting its actual influence over the TFP, and in particular on its security policies.

Affirming that Türkiye has manifested a growing authoritarianism and that such form has impacted on its foreign policy towards the EU is a complicated task, since middle powers that want to emerge equate their desire for higher recognition with collective bargaining informed by non-conflicting interests, while ignoring the competition in global governance (Parlar Dal 2019: 586). Hence, when a middle power experiences a domestic change of its governance, it does necessary mean that it accepts authoritarianism to advance its image. However, authoritarian regimes in the current multipolarity are often affiliated with regional powers that have bonds with the western politico-economic sphere (Castaldo 2018). Narrowing the explanation of the Turkish governance after the coup and examining the consequences of such change in foreign policy, the literature affirms that the Turkish governance resembles a Competitive Authoritarianism (CA). What distinguishes CA regimes from other forms of authoritarianism is the presence of political competition guaranteed by meaningful democratic institutions that allow oppositions to challenge the governance incumbents (Levitsky & Way 2002). Here, the abuse of the state by a dominant force “places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents” (Leivtsky & Way 2010: 5), meaning that Türkiye has never truly abandoned

democracy but rather it has modelled it under the elites' pressures. According to the scholars that have been investigating the level of authoritarianism in the Türkiye (Esen & Gumuscu 2016; Castaldo 2018; Cagaptay 2018), and such centralisation has interested in particular the relationship between the EU and Türkiye. However, the exact impact of the Turkish CA on the TFP and how the centralisation of the powers has influenced the security policies of Türkiye towards the EU remains answered, especially considering how the recent conflicts occurred in the Middle East and Black actually contest the possible antagonism between the two parties.

Since this topic has been explored but not in the context of Turkish-European security policies, this article proposes to answer the following questions: To what extent has Türkiye become an authoritarian country? What elements of a CA regime have been mostly present in Turkish domestic and foreign policy of Turkish governance? Did Türkiye's approach change after the rise of Presidentialism? How has Türkiye used its domestic centralisation of power to pressure the EU in foreign policy? By answering these questions, the article contributes to share new insights about the TFP behaviour towards the EU as a middle power, examining the implication of its de-Europeanisation process in its security policies. In terms of structure, firstly the article theorises the principles of a competitive authoritarian governance in the domestic, focusing on the institutional aspects that regard power distribution, and then it explains how a competitive authoritarian governance affects the foreign policy behaviour of middle power. Secondly, after a brief literature review that reconstructs the evolution of Turkish governance and its consequences on the EU membership, the paper describes the key domestic elements that constitute the contemporary Turkish governance after the coup. Following this explanation, the article then proceeds to evidence how the institutional changes and the nationalist elements of Turkish presidentialism have impacted on the TFP, narrowing the focus on the impact of its security policies over the Euro-Turkish relationship. The article in conclusion contends that albeit Türkiye has embraced a competitive authoritarian system, there are institutional and ideological limits that impede Türkiye to fulfil entirely its security policies. Another contribution is that the article affirms that the Euro-Turkish relationship nowadays seems to have moved beyond the domestic backlash of Türkiye, embracing a pragmatism in the security policies.

Theorising competitive authoritarianism of the middle powers and foreign policy assertiveness

Foreign policy assertiveness is a complex theme among scholars since determining which factors have affected states' behaviour requires an investigation of both domestic and foreign elements. This is not the case when a state changes its form of governance, especially if it reduces the democratic power of the institutions and gathers it in the hands of few agents. When such event occurs to middle powers, then it means that their former role as followers of

multilateralism and its principles is replaced by an ambitious approach in foreign policy. Most of the middle powers prior to the current multipolarity were western states characterised by a democratic and generally republican form of governance due to their affiliations with the US and the alignment with the western principles of full solidarity towards multilateral institutions, respect of human rights and application of democratic principles when acting in the international system. In contemporary debates, middle-power democracies could be classified as countries which regardless of their geopolitical weight have made democracy support a sustained component of their foreign policy (Kleinfeld et al. 2021). However, with the gradual retirement of the US as the main superpower as well as the growing impact of emerging great powers like Russia and China, a critical number of states classified as emerging middle powers have started to shape the international arena (Jordaan 2003). Albeit the complex definition of what divides an emerging middle power from a traditional middle powers suffers from a westernization of the term, traditional middle powers represent the majority of states in the international system and adopt foreign policy behaviour that respects the international order (Aydın-Düzgüt 2023: 2319). Scholars have found that those emerging middle powers contest the forced unilateral application of democratic principles, adopting a more assertive behaviour to carve out a personalised foreign policy that distinguishes from traditional approaches (Jordaan 2003; 2017). Middle powers that criticise or reduce their alignment with democracy, favouring a more centralised system which reflects a more ambitious foreign policy, use stability issue as opportunities to chip away from the margins where liberal norms are less institutionalized and illiberal great powers are asserting their influence (Aydın 2021: 1382, 1394).

The characteristics of an authoritarian middle power in its foreign policy are the presence of a leadership that follows a nationalist ideology; the reduced power of collegial institutions concentrated instead on single figures or on a closed group of people or institutions that hold the majority of the power; the legitimization of foreign policy choices – especially in the security dominion – according to the elites' perception of the identified menaces; open antagonism and criticism of international institutions. CA firstly allows a government to enjoy institutional flexibility to react towards opposition's electoral power, since the government holds the state resources thanks to the loyalists inside the state institutions. In a competitive authoritarian system this blurred democracy is testified by regular elections which are however subjected to institutional procedures or social incumbents like bribes or political polarisation to manipulate the system without dismantling it (Jaffrey and Warburton 2024: 300). Secondly, a CA builds its agency and institutional capacity to legitimise their decision by adopting populist narratives to gather domestic support in the electorate and then using the legality of the institutions to maintain the majority in the government while persecuting the opponents. Thirdly, states that are characterised by this regime have executive and legislative power concentrated in the hands of few agents, mostly the presidential figure or institutional structures wherein the power of the majoritarian elites influence and the

decision-making process. Finally, CA is characterised by a strong leadership, where the figure of a nationalist leadership dominates the political sphere, using its executive power on the institutions to direct foreign policy behaviour and legitimise assertiveness. This final aspect has however a limitation, since a ruling parties that usually resorts to violence to weaken the opposition, does not use this legitimate coercion systematically (Arslantaş and Kaiser 2023: 498). Given these elements, CA shapes a middle powers' behaviour in an assertive way where the nationalist ideology and the centralisation of powers facilitates the execution of the security policies to satisfy a 'conflict-oriented' approach. Assertiveness of middle powers has been examined through several approaches, but currently four approaches are preferred for these analyses: positional, behavioural, ideological and systemic.

These elements have been widely examined by scholars that explore CA's effects on states' foreign policy behaviour (Weiss & Dafoe 2019, Castaldo & Pinna 2019; Grzywacz and Gawrycki 2021). Most of the scholarship analyses middle powers' foreign policy and thus their impact on the system using a behaviour approach, clarifying also the distinctions among states that belong to this category and explaining which foreign policy aspects determine such status (Jordaan 2017: 397). This paper uses such explanation to describe how that a middle power that reduces its democratic principles, favouring a centralised type of governance, projects such changes in an ambitious grand strategy, where the nationalist element of the leadership, the centralised decision-making process and the political polarisation echoes from the domestic to the foreign policies. Nonetheless, categorising middle powers for their centralisation or autocratisation process is complicated since it questions if illiberal democracies should be included (Castaldo & Pinna 2019: 488). Countries that are slipping out of the democratic sphere cannot be considered as middle-power democracies in the same way (Kleinfeld et al. 2021) as traditional middle powers like Canada, Australia, or the EU members. Geopolitically, the authoritarian turn of middle powers not only can increase the instability in a region but also can influence other states' governance, meaning that their potential authoritarianisation "poses a challenge to their international and regional commitments, and question further development of regional cooperation" (Grzywacz & Gawrycki 2022: 2629). Hence, when a middle power is characterised by an authoritarian regime its foreign policy behaviour manifests a wider and more aggressive grand strategy, where the nationalist elements of the domestic governance are used as legitimising elements of their policies, the centralised governance becomes a diplomatic tool to bargain with foreign powers, and the polarisation of the enemies serves as a legitimising element of its assertiveness. This theorization however remembers how an authoritarian middle power, due to its limited capacities, cannot expect to shape all regional dynamics in its favour, although it has the capacity to project such ambitious behaviour. Hence, a middle power that does not respect the common democratic principles tries to limit its assertiveness by selecting the specific foreign policy area where its diplomatic authority is capable to influence other states' decisions.

Methodology

Illustrating how a competitive authoritarian system impacts on foreign policy behaviour of a middle power, as specified in the opening part, the paper selects Türkiye as the main case study, given the fact that its recent activism in foreign policy has been associated with the elites' behaviour manifested in the post-coup domestic environment (Aydın-Düzgüt 2023; Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol 2023). The paper analyses whether CA can alter the security approach of a middle power, and secondly when its domestic principles can be identified in the security policies of a state that pursues an assertive foreign policy. To do so, the paper follows a behavioural approach of middle powers, focusing on how the elites have evolved their behaviour in foreign policy according to how such elites have intended their pathway and application of an authoritarian governance. Considering how such method “proposes that middle powers can be identified by the framing and pursuit of distinct foreign policy agendas at the international level” (Efstathopoulos 2018: 50), the prior examination of the democratic backlash experienced in the domestic institutions is analysed to comprehend how the domestic turn has influenced TFP behaviour towards the EU.

In addition, since the analysis focuses on how the Turkish elites have described the changes of its governance and how Türkiye has dialogued with the EU over its effects in their foreign policy, the analysis adopts a critical discourse approach to examine the discourses of the elites. The paper adopts a variety of speeches, discourses and statements delivered by the political elites throughout the periodization that commences with the constitutional referendum in 2017 and finishes itself with the recent developments occurred by the time this article has been written (2024). We retrieved our data from publicly available documents on the websites of: Turkish ministry of foreign affairs (TMFA), Turkish Presidency. Moreover, to examine the perception of the EU, the paper recovers speeches and statements released by the websites of the main EU institutions: European Commission (EC); European Parliament (EP) and Council of European Union (CoE). The discourses will be selected where the Turkish elites refer to its domestic sphere when addressing security disputes after the adoption of presidentialism: a) Syrian civil war in the Middle East; b) Libyan crisis and energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya; c) Russian's involvement in the Black Sea and Southern Caucasus.

Since the paper refers to Türkiye as a middle power and investigates its behaviour after a governance shift, the analysis acknowledges that the literature distinguishes between ‘traditional’ and ‘emerging’ or middle powers. The former refers to states that are stable, wealthy, and democratic, while the latter to states that are developing and that are new democracies. Although the article does not intend to expose the concept of emerging middle power for Türkiye, it retrieves the image of an assertive state and challenger of the international order to examine how the Turkish presidential form of governance has impacted on the country's relationship with the EU. After all, “middle powers’

behaviour has been manipulated to justify to domestic and international audiences the foreign policy initiatives of these states” (Efsthopoulos 2018: 49), and hence, it is possible to determine such behaviour by firstly examining the governance turn. In this case, the inquiry exposes the behavioural changes after a governance shift as the ways in which a state interacts in the systemic crises according to the perception that the elites developed in the domestic sphere. Such perception is determined by how the governance shift has increased the power possessed by the elites in directing foreign policies according to a conflict-oriented approach to legitimise assertiveness (Grzywacz and Gawryck 2021).

Literature Review: Türkiye’s relationship towards the EU

Esen and Gümüşçü provide evidence that notwithstanding Türkiye’s position as a middle power and fulfiller of a multivectoral approach, it is undeniable that Ankara’s relations with the EU have regressed, complicating the accession process due to its democratic backlash (2016: 1584). Before the domestic earthquake in governance, Ankara saw its proximity to the EU as a positive democratic influence over the regime, since it gave the AKP the institutional and normative power to signal discontinuity with its political Islamist roots (Ugur-Cinar 2023: 449). Between 2002 and 2010, Türkiye’s leadership was convinced of the possibility that Europeanisation and the Turkish nationalist ideology could coexist so that Turkish institutions and policymakers could have been converged towards EU standards (Alpan 2021: 108). Some scholars underline how the initial attempt of the AKP aimed to make democratic elements coexist with ottoman values; yet in the attempt to create a balanced regime such democratization process has pushed the conflict between secularists and religious conservatives undermining its EU accession (Arısan 2022; Müftüler-Baç 2016: 62). Simultaneously, Türkiye was also pursuing its strategic autonomy in foreign policy, focusing on building up a region-focused activism to shape Türkiye’s role as a middle power that aims to use neo-Ottomanism – a nationalist ideology developed by the former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu – to celebrate the multicultural and multi-ethnic dimensions (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019; Aykaç 2022: 358, 364-366). The AKP still did not want to direct its nationalism in the creation of Turkish geopolitical space, rather preferring to use soft power forms using its rising economy and the cultural aspect of its ottoman past to enhance its grand strategy. However, when the Turkish zero-problems strategy tried to use the neo-Ottoman ideology to influence North African and Middle East states’ foreign policy during the Arab Spring, its diplomatic failure brought Türkiye into political isolation, accused of aiming for a wider regional influence. Türkiye changed its approach by entering into a de-Europeanisation, stopping “benign foreign policy (good international citizenship, conflict mediation, multilateralism) in favour of a more revisionist one” (Sucu et al. 2021: 312).

For some scholars (Tüysüzoğlu 2024; Somer 2019), the reforms realised between 2013 and 2015 targeting the military and the higher judiciary, opened the way for the expression of Islamic identity in the political sphere, and consequently on the TFP. In 2010, the AKP aligned with the Fetullah Gülen Movement (GM) obtained a victory in a constitutional referendum thanks to which Erdoğan's AKP seized the high judiciary, cancelling a tutelary pillar of Türkiye's historic Kemalist militaristic bureaucracy; targeting the selection process of the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors (HSYK), officially following the Europeanisation process, but actually using this democratisation "as a coup-proofing strategy" (Ülgül & Demir 2020: 146). For some scholars, the 2010 referendum represents a shift towards the authoritarian pole within the hybrid zone, since Erdoğan's AKP has captured the high judiciary, the last remaining tutelary citadel of Türkiye's historic Kemalist military-bureaucracy (Azgın 2020: 374). The second event was the Gezi Park protests that occurred on May 28, 2013, when Turkish protestors criticised the government-sponsored project to build Taksim military barracks and a shopping mall to replace the Gezi Park, a public place that echoes the Kemalist republican past. In reaction, "contravening the more conciliatory rhetoric and actions of other AKP politicians and taking a hard stance at every stage of the protests" (Carney 2019: 141), Erdoğan and the AKP took a hard stance against the EU, criticising its low support: "we saw with disappointment that the developments during the Gezi Park events and afterwards as well as the work carried out to ensure the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary have not been fully understood" (TMFA 2014). The third event was the failure of the peace process with the Kurds caused by the elections of 2015 and the political polarisation used by the AKP against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the aftermath of several terrorist attacks that occurred in 2015. When the AKP failed to co-opt with the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), which accused Erdoğan's government of instrumentalising the peace process for containing the pro-Kurdish political movement (Jongerden 2019), the AKP was 'forced' to co-opt with the MHP (Nationalist Action Party), which opposed the peace process (Candar 2019: 262; Resch 2017: 11) to win the election.

The election indeed created scepticism between Türkiye and the EU: while the EU members evidenced how the growing power of the presidential figure was overstepping constitutional prerogatives (EC 2015), in response, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu accused the EU of slowing down the accession process stating that "political considerations must be put aside and technical process should be advanced without further delay" (TMFA 2015). In addition, the domestic polarisation against the PKK and HDP was increased due to the open alleged accusation of the AKP that targeted the HDP as an extension of the PKK. Then, the situation exploded on July 15 with the end of the political power of the Turkish military and political forces that wanted "to unseat the president and made use of Kemalist rhetoric, assuming their historical guardianship role" (Jongerden 2019: 262). Such an event can be described as the last

brick that built the wall of the Presidentialism so long dreamt by Erdoğan, since the political polarisation against the ‘enemies of the state’ within and outside determined an “unprecedented support for the government and the weaknesses of all kind of oppositions” (Castaldo 2018: 481). The AKP government then called the emergency status of Türkiye and signed a series of harsh measures that temporarily obscured the legal existence of the European Convention on Human Rights. The first sphere that was utterly shattered was the critics of the government, in particular the Gülenists belonging to the Fethullah terrorist organization (FETÖ), allegedly accused of being the primary executioner of the coup. Oppositions became traitors and those who dared to express criticism against the centralisation programme of the regime were harshly punished by the government and publicly denounced, since as Ozay Mehmet underlines, “by the time of the 2016 coup attempt, FETÖ had become a real threat to the constitutional order” (2020: 259), giving the AKP the legal mandate to target any oppositions. The second target was the Turkish Armed Forces, whose structure was reshuffled during the state of emergency where several dismissals interested officers affiliated with NATO, often called “Atlanticists”, that favoured the rise of “Eurasianists” or “Pan-Turanic” officials (Ülgül & Demir 2020: 148), and also officers that were politically and ideologically aligned with the Kemalist Türkiye (Arısan 2022: 688). With these measures, for the AKP it was clear that now it was time to capitalise on the domestic turmoil to distance from the EU and seize Turkish governance through a legal referendum.

Turkish governance: determining the presence of authoritarian principles

Extending the state of emergency after the coup, the AKP gained the majoritarian presence in the institutions, legally obtaining the right to fulfil the presidentialist reforms; hence the nationalist Turkish elites “found themselves in the grips of majoritarian authoritarianism with a strong element of arbitrary rule” (Müftüler-Baç 2016: 74), where Erdoğan was the main actor behind the galvanisation of political legitimacy (Glombitza 2021: 252). With the victory of the presidential referendum in 2017 the AKP modified Türkiye’s governance, focusing especially on three main aspects of the judiciary power and collegiality of institutions. Firstly, the Parliament has limited operational ground to exercise its judiciary power, it can only initiate investigations against the president in the case of criminal misconduct, but even that requires a three-fifths majority. Secondly, the President can unilaterally sign executive orders which undermine the separation of powers, marginalizing the role of Parliament by appointing all ministers and senior civil servants in all departments, where all the central agencies (*başkanlık*) answer directly to him. One figure that was particularly hit hard was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has traditionally been a Western-oriented institution previously selected for its professional background (Uzgel 2022), now it represents the secondary and

ideologically aligned figure in the whole Turkish government. Thirdly, thanks to the control of the higher judicial bodies by the head of the state, the executive power was entirely absorbed by the head of the state whereas the parliament was reduced to a mere ‘biased organism’ that bows to the leadership’s choices. Under the new system, the executive branch was dramatically reorganized, offices were rearranged, and new entities, like policy committees within the Presidential office were created. Moreover, deputies are now subjected to a mandatory rotation that “functions as a sword of Damocles hanging over judges and prosecutors whose loyalty is not yet bought” (Arslantaş and Kaiser 2023: 504). Altering the institutional sphere, the rise of a CA regime has further exacerbated the will of the AKP to create a centralised governance led by a presidential figure and controlled by a political polarisation that could be oriented both internally and externally. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of the leadership’s nationalist values and the polarisation of states’ enemies, underlining the main aspect that has altered TFP behaviour as a middle power.

Nationalist leadership

Historically, this governance shift represents a critical move that poses the AKP legislation as a peculiar aspect of modern Turkish history, because the new political regime where Erdoğan alienates the bureaucratic mechanism of the parliament and judiciary system, and develops the country’s domestic politics in his own image like Atatürk did in 1923 (Cagaptay 2018: 7). Using the parliament and the court of justice to target opposition and create the necessary majoritarian support for its nationalist initiatives, Erdoğan and the AKP protect their political power, where “the legitimizing efforts and consent-building strategies by the government and its notably increasing authoritarian conduct are regarded as vital and necessary instruments for the AKP” (Glombitza 2021: 258). Politically, the end of tutelary democracy increased the strength of the presidentialism system, wherein Erdoğan’s executive power and authority over the institutional capacity resemble a full-scale authoritarian regime. AKP retains stable support from its voters, since “the widespread Turkish nationalism and fear of partition of the country exist among the voters of all major political parties” (Yilmaz, Demir & Shipoli 2021: 1125). In this sense, within the ‘Competitive semi-Authoritarianism’, Türkiye’s Presidentialism can be easily described as ‘Erdoğanism’, where “the personality of Tayyip Erdoğan is divinised by partisan voters and elites, and as such a cult of personality around him has been entrenched” (Yilmaz & Bashirov 2018: 1821). Indeed, there has been a strong use of celebrating rhetoric that portrays Erdoğan as a leader that works “tirelessly for his citizens against the grave security issues stemming from alleged internal and external enemies” (Ugur-Cinan 2023: 449). Moreover, Erdoğan is taking advantage of the populist rhetoric to encourage its people to embrace more the ancient times, in particular with the figure of the sultan Abdülhamid II, whose momentum of strong republicanism during 1876-1878 led

to a return of an authoritarian regime, and like the former sultan the Turkish President emphasised its image as a leader who fights on behalf of the people against political and military figures (Wastnidge 2019: 19, 23). Here, Neo-Ottomanism shapes a new vision of Turkish governance, where the goal was replacing a 'conservative democracy' with that of a nebulous 'advanced democracy' (Alpan 2016: 17-18). In practice, it is allowing the AKP to legitimise its nationalist narrative behind the changes in the government and consequently its new assertiveness de-Europeanised foreign policy.

Legitimisation of polarisation

The referendum of 2017 gave political polarisation a new dimension, where the political antagonism among parties has increased the rift in Turkish domestic politics, between those who support Erdoğanism and its Presidentialism and those who aspire to redirect Türkiye into a prior-2016 situation (Tziarras 2018), officially contrasting the Europeanisation process. Because of this referendum, Erdoğan became not only the *de facto* but also the *de jure* authoritarian leader who now has the power to rule by decree" (Yilmaz, Demir & Shipoli 2022: 11). The election results have direct consequences on two inherent problems of authoritarian rule: elite-level defection/rivalry and mass-level oppositional counter-mobilization. In this sense, this article confirms the concept of a conflict-oriented nature developed by Grzywacz and Gawrycki according to which a conflict-oriented domestic politics prefers "a competitive design and a tendency to uphold divisive debates bringing polarisation into play" (2021: 2631). In such environment, Erdoğan was smart to manage polarising discourses to gather domestic support and legitimization of the new form of governance where the polarisation in Türkiye "is fully reflected in the social and cultural attitudes of citizens against members of the opposite camp" (Arbatli & Rosenberg 2021: 297). Not as an authoritarian leader, but rather as the main symbol of Turkish Presidentialism, Erdoğan uses political polarisation "to set the political agenda away from their economic, social, and political failures; to justify future actions against their political opponents; steer polarisation; and maintain their power and position" (Yilmaz, Demir & Shipoli 2022: 4). Nonetheless, the "accelerating pattern of authoritarian responses to increasing social and political instability" (Yılmaz & Turner 2019: 693) has not diverged the political opposition to use the same polarisation against the AKP and Erdoğan's decreased democracy. Moreover, polarisation has been backfiring to the AKP and Erdoğan's popularity, the political polarisation weakened the party's operational capacity to use the coercive legality of the new constitution to block the opposition (Esen 2018: 49). Using the political polarisation against the foreign menaces and interferences that have blocked the TFP, the AKP instrumentalised the nationalist principles of the Presidency to project the strengthening of its diplomatic and material power, contrasting however with the EU security approach.

Interpreting the governance change: EU-Türkiye security policies

With the coup thus, Türkiye's image as a middle power that facilitates political and economic cooperation among Muslim countries "has been toned down in favour of more narrowly defined national interests, often couched in security terms" (Haugom 2019: 215). Such entrepreneurial manifested in the reforming process of the domestic institutions created an open criticism towards the EU, which was no longer seen as a Türkiye's ally due to different elements in their threats and security perceptions. The coup initially served to build a nationalistic and ambitious foreign policy discourse based on the notion of 'strategic autonomy' while drawing attention away from economic problems and other forms of governance crisis (Öniş 2022: 702). This attitude alienated the Turkish elites from the participation in the EU security framework, and in particular from the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); launched in 2017 this multilateral initiative aims to achieve more effective, efficient and synergic military capabilities by combining the material capabilities of each member. Diplomatically, Türkiye remarked the importance of the EU membership for its strategic objective, calling out the EP for lacking a visionary perspective and failing to respect the principle of "pacta sunt servanda" (TMFA 2019), but in practice its initial approach sustained the assertive turn of its elites. Pushing for wider autonomy and authority, the AKP has projected a new version of its Islamic Identity, taking advantage of the 'polished' military sphere from anti-Islamics and Atlantists, the Turkish government's policies post-coup directed the military focus and the police actions on focusing "more on external threats than domestic issues" (Ülgül & Demir 2020: 148). These elements are marking a new stage of Türkiye's behaviour as a middle power, where albeit its foreign policies seem to find a certain cooperation in domestic politics, Türkiye's centralisation remains a major limiting factor, defining the current Türkiye-EU relationship as "transactional and interest-driven relationship devoid of any of its original normative content" (Öniş 2022: 692). The following sections thus analyse the extent to which the CA regime has managed to influence Turkish security policies and how such policies have impacted on the Türkiye-EU relationship. Concluding that Ankara has not always manifested an assertive behaviour, these final sections confirm that albeit the Turkish elites have initially manifested assertiveness in its security policies, due to the misleading consequences, the TFP nowadays follows a more traditional approach as a middle power.

Initial assertiveness: Syria and Eastern Mediterranean

Initially, Türkiye's approach directed its ambitious security policies in the Middle East, focusing on becoming the main middle power in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Firstly, in the Syrian conflict, where the previous instrumentalisation of migration as a bargaining tool allowed Ankara to act "as an opportunistic coercer by using this population movement against the EU"

(Gokalp Aras 2019: 191), previously manifested when the Turkish elites adopted a contested European approach to migration in Syria while directing its economic support to aid an ailing economy (Aydın-Düzgit 2023: 2335). Politically, Türkiye exploited the government's security perception manifested through polarisation and the Neo-Ottoman ideology to show resilience against the EU and protect its regional ambitions. In this sense, seeing that the EU was not accusing Türkiye of committing violation of democratic principles, Türkiye uses the polarisation of the Kurds and PKK to legitimise military operations launched between 2017 and 2019. Operation Olive Branch, launched in April 2018, the TMFA legitimises such military incursion into Syria by depicting it as an act of self-defense against a build-up of terrorists, and as security action that could restore the road map toward such a successful future thanks to the Türkiye's resolute leadership (TMFA 2018). Operation Spring Shield, launched on October 9, 2019 Türkiye legitimises this action as a self-defense reaction under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter to reduce PKK and YPG presence (TMFA 2019). These security operations demonstrate firstly how the Turkish elites wanted to show off its hard power to demonstrate its operational capability (Gümüüş 2022: 177), and secondly, how political polarisation legitimises the Turkish intervention to limit the PKK and cancel any pro-Kurdish terrorist organisations. More deeply, Türkiye's presence in Syria against the PKK and the successful polarisation towards the Kurds represents "more than a resurgence of its assertive role in the Middle East" (Murariu & Anglițoiu 2020: 138), since the new security doctrine adopted by the Turkish military figures in the post-coup political context is manifested as a form of preventive use "of coercive assets, forward deployment if necessary and the use of force beyond borders" (Kardaş 2018: 32). The EU criticised Turkish operations, underlining how the security framework in Syria against the PKK served as a geopolitical magnification of a decoupling pathway started with the failed coup in 2016, leading to a more authoritarian and anti-Western rhetoric (EP 2019).

In the broad Eastern Mediterranean, on the other hand, the nationalist government and its president-based system saw in the power vacuum provoked by Western interventions a massive opportunity to follow a neo-Ottoman strategy. Particularly aiming to increase its authority in Libya, Ankara has been using its military intervention and diplomatic support to reinforce and defend Tripoli's Government of National Accord (GNA). Seeing its success in Syria and warned by the military progresses that the Libyan National Army (LNA) under General Haftar was achieving against the GNA menacing Tripoli, Ankara and the GNA brokered a Memorandum of Understanding on security and military co-operation. Entering the conflict in a proxy-war way, Türkiye has assumed the command of GNA-aligned militias in Tripoli and has empowered them with conventional combat enablers and mercenaries (Yüksel 2020: 147), conducting a proxy war. Moreover, in Libya Türkiye also directed its security policies in the energy sphere, signing a memorandum with the GNA to establish an Exclusive Economic Zone that allows Ankara to project its nationalist concept of the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) far from its closest waters and legitimise

its approach by depicting such behaviour as a matter of national energy security. Here Türkiye adopted an ambivalent behaviour as proven by Erdoğan's words: "[Türkiye] is always ready to resolve the Eastern Mediterranean issue through dialogue on equitable basis"; specifying however that Ankara would consent to any initiative that would "lock the country out of its shores, ignoring vast swathes of Turkish territory" (speech retrieved from Daily Sabah 2020). Currently, Ankara antagonises the EU's energy and political policies in the country and region since it wants to achieve a "redrawing" of maritime borders (Besenyő and Málnácssy 2024: 8), claiming Libya's strategic position. In this case, thus although Türkiye was a partner of the PESCO mechanism given the fact that this initiative leaves the door open to third country involvement, Ankara's security policies regarding Libya and Cyprus' question demonstrate how among PESCO members, rivalry among states undermines any meaningful input to align the Turkish aspirations with the European security policies (Aydin-Düzgüt 2018: 2). Nonetheless, the EU criticism towards Turkish policies in the Eastern Mediterranean contrasts with how Türkiye's military interventions attract the EU security actors, which observe in particular the use of its drones foreseeing a possible cooperation between the EU and Türkiye.

Hedging behaviour: Russia and South Caucasus

Seeing however that pursuing a low neo-Ottoman ideology and adopting a full militarized approach to gain regional influence was leading Türkiye to drift away from its Western orientation (Uzgel 2022), Ankara's presidentialist turn, albeit changing its domestic policies, is recalibrating its behaviour in foreign policy. Indeed, after having reduced its aggressive attitude in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, with Erdoğan's government revising its overambitious foreign policy posture and taking a conciliatory position in the eastern Mediterranean, its security policies showed a new approach in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine-Russia wars. In the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Türkiye considers its role as a security actor as essential for establishing peace, normalising the peace process with Armenia and applying UN international law (TMFA 2023). However, since it has given to Baku Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones to neutralise the Armenian air defense systems and mechanized troops, it has also adopted indirect assertiveness by externalising its material power and sharing it with strategic partners. At that time, the EU didn't criticise entirely the Turkish approach, preferring an attitude of neutrality due to economic-political concerns (Kinik and Çelik 2021: 175). Similarly, Türkiye has applied a mixed security approach the Ukraine-Russia war, where albeit Türkiye considers the Russian aggression against Ukraine as unacceptable since it violates the Minsk agreements, posing a serious threat to the security of our region and the world (TMFA 2022), it has however sold its drones to Ukraine, with the EU open support and material curiosity in observing their performances in a 'hotter' conflict. Simultaneously, Türkiye's criticism against the EU sanctions towards Russia and the ongoing economic

relations with Moscow, reveal another aspect: being a middle power and depending on Russian energy delivery, not sharing the same disapproval of the current occupation, the TFP pursues geopolitical goals outside what could be described as the collective stance of the West (Tüysüzöğlu 2024: 20-21). These recent conflicts thus reveal a double-hedge approach of the TFP and a mixed attitude towards the EU where on the one hand, Türkiye's public statements underline its commitment to regional peace and security among states, but on the other, its drones-based security policies manifest a new approach upon which Türkiye wants to exit from its former geopolitical isolation to create an *'a la turca'* securitisation.

Taking into account how the emerging of a nationalist leadership and political polarisation in the domestic policies have been initially used in Syria and Libya, the recent security events that occurred after the pandemic evidence clear limitations of Türkiye's assertiveness due to its middle power role. In practice, since Ankara's interferences in Libya and Syria have altered Türkiye's image as a middle power, making it appear as a problem-creator country that has increased its influence (Oğuzlu 2023: 680), Turkish policymakers have returned to a more hedging attitude with the EU. Observing in particular the effects of Türkiye's volatility of its foreign and security policy initiatives after the coup, the consequences on bilateral relations with the EU underpinned the cooperation under PESCO framework (Aydin-Düzgit 2018). Since the growing polarisation and populism in the domestic sphere have been used by Erdoğan and AKP to shape Türkiye's nationalist ambitions have not produced the desired gains, Ankara has adjusted its positions by lowering assertiveness and adjusting its diplomacy into more conciliatory positions. Indeed, in the recent conflicts after the pandemic, the Turkish elites had reduced the de-Europeanisation process and the neo-Ottoman perception of its security policies, preferring to pursue its ambitious security policies by observing with a more critical eye the systemic balance of power. These two recent conflicts that triggered diplomatic hostilities with Russia could be seen as geopolitical opportunities where Türkiye uses its hedging behaviour to amplify its position as a reliable bridge between the conflicting parties (Kuşku-Sönmez 2024: 7); where Ankara's activities as a bridge-builder image foster the rapprochement with the EU. At the same time, the persistent behaviour in security policies that refer to nationalist aspirations, like the *Mavi Vatan* issue over Cyprus will still deny Turkish military power in multilateral security initiatives like PESCO. Indeed, although Türkiye's balanced behaviour as a middle power is creating a diplomatic rapprochement, nowadays "neither the EU nor Türkiye is in any position to strictly define their relationship within the framework of EU membership" (Oğuzlu 2023: 685). Providing these evidences, the paper concludes that Türkiye's CA regime has not entirely manifested an assertive foreign policy and it has neither shown aggressive security policies towards the EU, but as the concluding section reveals it has adopted a more hedging strategy to fulfil its nationalist ambitions.

Conclusion

The aim of the article was to verify whether the domestic changes towards a CA regime have produced significant changes in the TFP behaviour, and secondly, how the security policies applied after this governance turn has altered its relationship with the EU. Judging Ankara's changes that occurred at the constitutional and political level have affected the domestic politics, it is possible to affirm that Türkiye's adoption of Presidentialism has undoubtedly changed its relationship to EU. What emerges is that the democratic backlash has favoured the spread of a nationalist image of the country and political polarisation against domestic and foreign threats. The paper confirms that Turkish authoritarianism is certainly changing the vision of Türkiye as a middle power, since its democratic backlash and de-Europeanisation in foreign policy distance it from the common conceptualisation of middle powers. Leaving open space for further analysis that examines the authoritarian turn of middle powers, the paper declares that Türkiye's CA regime has not translated into a constant assertiveness. Initially, the TFP's assertiveness was determined firstly by the consolidation of the powers and secondly, by the gradual loss of diplomatic interest to use the status of EU candidate status now directed towards an entrepreneurial approach that seeks to exercise autonomy and authority towards the EU. However, ever since Erdoğan and AKP seized the institutional organisms, the criticism towards a westernized governance and foreign policy has not always been translated into an assertive image of its middle power, where on the contrary the impact of this change depends on the extent to which its security policy finds the passive European reaction.

Indeed, such limits are observable in the security policies in the post-pandemic world, where Türkiye's assertiveness has been recalibrated in the security policies, favouring a more balanced strategy. This positive rapprochement could interest the future cooperation between Türkiye and the European PESCO, as proven by the recent effects that Turkish drones in Azerbaijan, Libya and Ukraine are allowing. Nonetheless, a paradigm that still needs to be further addressed is the extent to which the Turkish elites will align their foreign policies with nationalist domestic governance. Indeed, as an ambitious regional power, Ankara retains strong claims over its geopolitical authority towards the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean due to political and economic reasons. A peculiar element that should be noted in the recent scenarios where Ankara has acted as a bridge-builder, like the Azerbaijan-Armenian war or the ongoing fight in the Black Sea, is the fact that Turkish security policies interacted with countries that share its centralised governance, or even certain elements that could be referred to CA. Giving these final contributions, the article expects that other qualitative researches with different method could come to different conclusions; however, it also foresees how certain factors of a CA regime do not always produce a stable assertiveness in a middle power's foreign policy. Hence, since the article offers a qualitative interpretation of the TFP

towards the EU after the centralisation of its Presidency, the final conclusions leave room for additional developments that could clarify the nexus between the centralisation of a regime and an assertive foreign policy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Edoardo Laveco

Ograničenja kompetitivnog autoritarizma u bezbednosnim politikama: Tumačenje stava Turske prema Evropskoj uniji

Apstrakt:

Srednje sile su često države koje podržavaju i slede demokratske principe, pokazujući tu opredeljenost kroz unutrašnju i spoljnu politiku. Međutim, države koje teže da se afirmišu u savremenoj multipolarnosti preferiraju centralizovaniji pristup, usvajajući odlučno ponašanje prema silama ili međunarodnim institucijama koje kritikuju navodnu „autoritarnu vladavinu“. Među takvim zemljama, Turska je kao srednja sila nakon neuspelog puča 2016. godine postepeno pokazuje sve samouverenije ponašanje prema Evropskoj uniji (EU). Koristeći tu konfrontaciju tokom referenduma 2017. godine, vladajuća Partija pravde i razvoja (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / AKP) uspela je da transformiše Tursku u predsedničku republiku. Ipak, to odlučno ponašanje u turskoj spoljnoj politici (TFP) nije uvek bilo praćeno otvorenim neprijateljstvom u unutrašnjoj retorici. Posebno, polarizacija koju AKP sprovodi prema procesu evropskih integracija, podstaknuta predsedničkim sistemom u Turskoj, pokazala je neujednačeni razvoj kada je reč o bezbednosnim politikama. Stoga, ovaj članak predlaže tumačenje turskog predsedničkog sistema kroz prizmu političke polarizacije i nacionalizma usmerenog protiv EU u unutrašnjoj i spoljnoj politici nakon prelaska na predsedničku vlast. U radu se tvrdi da, iako je liderstvo u Ankari razvilo sistem vlasti u pravcu kompetitivnog autoritarizma, efekat njegovih bezbednosnih politika prema EU nije doprineo otvorenijem i odlučnijem ponašanju Turske kao srednje sile.

Ključne reči: autoritarizam, Evropska unija, srednja sila, Turska, bezbednosne politike

