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Constructing Enemies, Consolidating Rule: Conspiracy Narratives and Anti-Western Rhetoric in Erdoğan's Populist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how conspiracy narratives and anti-Western rhetoric function as interconnected mechanisms of enemy construction in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist discourse. It argues that Erdoğan's rhetoric operates through a dual logic that combines abstract conspiratorial threats with historically grounded civilizational antagonisms, enabling the simultaneous production of diffuse fears and recognizable enemies. This discursive flexibility allows political adversaries to be recalibrated across domestic crises, diplomatic confrontation, and moments of electoral vulnerability, thereby contributing to the reframing of political competition in increasingly existential terms between the nation and its perceived adversaries. The findings suggest that these repertoires are associated with intensified polarization and wider discursive resonance across diverse constituencies, while also indicating patterns of affective forms of political attachment and a discursive weakening of the normative appeal of liberal-democratic principles. Situating the Turkish case within comparative research on populism and democratic erosion, the article highlights how fear, historical grievance, and adaptable enemy construction are central features of contemporary populist discourse and are frequently discussed in the literature in relation to processes of democratic backsliding.

Keywords: populism, conspiracy narratives, enemy construction, anti-Western rhetoric, political polarization, authoritarian consolidation, democratic backsliding

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership has been central to the political success of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). Following the party's rise to power in the 2002 parliamentary elections, where it secured a parliamentary majority with only 34 percent of the vote due to Turkey's high electoral threshold, Erdoğan emerged as the dominant figure in Turkish politics for nearly a quarter century, first as prime minister and later as president. His political trajectory reflects a broader transformation in political discourse: from an initially accommodationist emphasis on democratization, European Union (EU) accession, and Western alignment to an increasingly populist rhetoric centered on threat construction, polarization, and authoritarian consolidation.

An early indication of this strategic flexibility can be traced to Erdoğan's political recalibration after his imprisonment and the dissolution of his party in 1998. Moderating overt Islamist rhetoric, he repositioned himself around democratic reform and EU accession as both a reform agenda and a means of reshaping the domestic balance of power (Cizre, 2016; Weyland, 2019). This shift foreshadowed a broader discursive transformation throughout the AKP era. While Erdoğan's rhetoric remained largely non-populist between 2003 and 2007, it became moderately populist between 2007 and 2014 and strongly populist after 2014 (Frahm & Lehmkuhl, 2022). Following the AKP's decisive victories in the 2010 constitutional referendum and the 2011 general elections, he

increasingly incorporated religious and nationalist references into his speeches, further consolidating his core support base (Gögüs & Mannitz, 2016).

This article argues that Erdoğan's populist discourse operates through a dual and strategically flexible logic of enemy construction, combining abstract conspiratorial threats with historically grounded anti-Western antagonisms. It shows that this discursive configuration is frequently used to frame domestic political opposition alongside broader external threat narratives, enabling the recalibration of perceived threats across different political contexts. Together, these discursive modes contribute to the framing of routine political competition in increasingly existential terms between the people and their perceived adversaries, a dynamic that is often discussed in the literature in relation to polarization and processes of political consolidation.

This discursive transformation became particularly visible during major political crises. The Gezi Park protests of 2013 marked a critical turning point, as mass demonstrations were framed as an assault on the "national will." Later that year, the December 17–25 corruption investigations targeting AKP ministers and members of Erdoğan's family were recast as part of a coordinated political conspiracy (Demir, 2021). The controversial and opaque coup attempt of July 15, 2016 (Christofis, 2021; Kingsley, 2017; Taş, 2018; Waterfield, 2017) further expanded this logic, enabling Erdoğan to present political opposition, dissenting institutions, and foreign actors as interconnected threats to national survival. Across these episodes, Erdoğan's discourse strategically reconstructed domestic enemies according to shifting political needs, while simultaneously linking them to broader external and civilizational threats (Finchelstein, 2019; Guiler, 2016).

Scholars have increasingly highlighted the growing importance of conspiratorial narratives in populist politics, often described as conspiratorial populism (Bergmann, 2020; Hofstadter, 1964; Müller, 2016; Uscinski, 2018). Among populist and neo-authoritarian leaders, conspiracy narratives and anti-Western sentiment frequently function as mechanisms of domestic political mobilization and regime legitimation. By recasting liberal-democratic principles—such as pluralism, civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional accountability—as externally imposed "Western" norms, such discourse facilitates authoritarian consolidation and the construction of alternative regime identities (Applebaum, 2024; Halbach, 2014; Kneuer, 2017). Comparable strategies are also observable among leaders and political parties in Venezuela, Russia, and several EU countries, such as Poland and Hungary (Bergmann, 2024; Krekó, 2021; Oner & Shehadeh, 2023). In the context of Erdoğan's Turkey, this article places anti-Western rhetoric and conspiratorial populist strategies within a broader comparative framework, demonstrating how historically embedded anti-Western imaginaries intersect with flexible enemy construction, the erosion of liberal-democratic norms, and the consolidation of increasingly personalistic rule.

The Turkish case is particularly significant because conspiracy narratives frequently merge with civilizational and anti-Western imaginaries, allowing domestic political conflicts to be reframed as broader struggles involving external threat perceptions. Against this backdrop, the article examines how Erdoğan employs conspiracy narratives and anti-Western rhetoric not merely to reflect political tensions but to actively construct threat frameworks that structure political competition. More specifically, it demonstrates how enemy categories remain strategically adaptable: depending on changing political circumstances, diverse domestic actors can be recast within a broader Manichean framework that links internal dissent to external hostility.

More broadly, the article contributes to comparative research on populist communication and democratic backsliding by showing how conspiracy narratives and anti-Western rhetoric function as interconnected mechanisms of political discourse. Rather than operating as episodic reactions to crisis, these discursive repertoires form a durable framework through which political conflict is frequently articulated in existential terms, contributing to patterns of polarization and reshaping the terrain of political contestation.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative text analysis of Erdoğan's speeches. While the qualitative component examines how themes of threat and enemy construction are articulated, the quantitative component traces the frequency and distribution of conspiratorial and anti-Western references across a systematically compiled speech corpus. This mixed-method approach enables an integrated analysis of how populist discourse operates across rhetorical patterns and their textual distribution.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical foundations of populist rhetoric, conspiracy narratives, and the construction of political enemies. The following section analyzes how Erdoğan's discourse mobilizes narratives of threat, polarization, and anti-Western sentiment. The subsequent section introduces the dataset and methodological framework. This is followed by a presentation of the empirical findings. The article concludes by discussing the broader implications for research on populism, political polarization, and democratic backsliding.

POPULISM, ENEMY CONSTRUCTION, AND CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES

Populist discourse is fundamentally structured through antagonistic divisions that distinguish a morally virtuous "people" from corrupt elites, threatening outsiders, or hostile forces. Laclau (2005) argues that political discourse contains populist elements to the extent that it employs equivalential logic to construct a frontier between "the

people” and their adversaries. Similarly, Canovan (2002) identifies the core components of populist ideology as “the people,” “democracy,” “sovereignty,” and “majority rule,” all of which are relationally constituted (p. 33). Within this framework, “the people” signify not merely a numerical majority but a morally legitimate collective capable of challenging political opponents (Taggart, 2000). Political conflict is thus framed through a moral opposition between a virtuous in-group, corrupt elites, and perceived external threats (Mudde, 2007).

Charismatic leadership occupies a central position within populist narratives. Populist leaders present themselves as the authentic embodiment of the people’s will while distancing themselves from established political elites (Germani, 1978; Mény & Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000). Their appeal rests on framing politics as a struggle to defend national interests against elite domination and systemic injustice, thereby mobilizing support through narratives of exclusion, betrayal, and grievance (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Panizza, 2005; Pasquino, 2008).

Building on the foundational work of Wiles (1969), Canovan (1981), and Taggart (2000), as well as more recent scholarship, populist discourse can be characterized by several recurring features: emphasis on the will of the people, anti-elitism, the construction of binary oppositions, hostility toward perceived “others,” reliance on charismatic leadership, and the frequent use of conspiracy narratives. Through these mechanisms, populist discourse contributes to the moralization of political boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, a dynamic often associated in the literature with intensified polarization. Crucially, these antagonistic boundaries are rarely fixed. Rather, populist discourse allows enemy categories to remain strategically adaptable, such that “the other” can be redefined in response to shifting political circumstances, crises, and evolving regime needs.

Populist polarization and the construction of the other

As recent scholarship on democratic erosion suggests, intense political polarization can weaken democratic norms and facilitate the concentration of political authority (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Within this context, the construction of “the other” constitutes a central category in populist discourse. According to Taggart (2002), populism structures political debate through a “politics of simplicity,” the reassertion of popular sovereignty, and the imposition of sharp political dichotomies (pp. 76–77). The division between “the people” and “the other” is therefore constitutive of populism’s political logic (Panizza, 2005). Across different contexts, populist discourse juxtaposes a virtuous and besieged people against corrupt elites and a range of threatening “others” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). External actors are frequently constructed as threats to economic security, cultural identity, or the way of life of ordinary citizens, while political elites are accused of betraying popular interests (Canovan, 2002; Mény & Surel, 2002).

Central to this discourse is a moralized distinction between “the people” and their opponents rather than an empirically grounded difference in political preferences. Populism advances a Manichean worldview in which politics becomes a moral struggle between friends and enemies, leaving little room for legitimate pluralism (Mudde, 2004). In this framework, opponents are not treated as legitimate rivals but as corrupt actors aligned with hostile forces, a dynamic that sustains movement cohesion through identification with the people and hostility toward perceived enemies (Pasquino, 2008). Populism’s homogenizing conception of the people further intensifies this antagonism by redefining opponents as the “anti-people,” portrayed as serving illegitimate elites or external interests (Finchelstein, 2019). By claiming exclusive access to the people’s authentic will, populist leaders delegitimize pluralism, a dynamic often associated in the literature with conditions conducive to authoritarian consolidation (Taggart, 2002; Svolik, 2019).

In this polarized environment, conspiracy narratives provide a particularly effective discursive tool for reinforcing and intensifying the moral division between the people and their enemies. Importantly, the identity of these enemies remains context-dependent and strategically adaptable, allowing populist leaders to shift between domestic opponents, institutional rivals, and external actors according to changing political needs. This flexibility can function as a dynamic mechanism of political survival rather than a fixed ideological repertoire.

Conspiracy narratives and the personalization of political authority

According to Laclau (2005), populism inherently relies on the discursive construction of an enemy—whether the ancien régime, the oligarchy, or the Establishment (p. 39). Because politics is structured through an “us/them” distinction, the “other” is frequently framed not merely as a political rival but as a morally corrupt or dangerous enemy (Mouffe, 2005). This dualistic logic transforms political contestation into a moralized struggle that erodes democratic pluralism and mobilizes collective resentment through scapegoating and enemy construction (Carlin et al., 2019). In this context, populist leaders often portray political opponents not as legitimate competitors but as existential enemies (Müller, 2016). Conspiracy narratives play a central role in this process by systematically linking domestic and external adversaries into a unified threat structure.

Conspiracy narratives have long been recognized as a recurring feature of political discourse. As Hofstadter (1964) argued, the “paranoid style” in politics frames historical developments as the product of secret plots

orchestrated by powerful and malevolent actors. Populist movements have similarly been associated with suspicion toward hidden external forces, including colonial powers, global elites, or financial actors (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969). Such narratives simplify complex political realities by attributing crises to coordinated actions by hidden and powerful actors, often linking domestic elites to foreign forces (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Taggart, 2000). Within this framework, foreign powers and international institutions—frequently associated with Western influence—are depicted as existential threats to the people, reinforcing chauvinistic narratives and conspiratorial interpretations of global developments (Kaltwasser, 2015; Rosanvallon, 2021).

Within this discursive framework, populist leaders increasingly personalize political authority by presenting themselves as the embodiment of the people, confronting not merely political opponents but existential enemies. Leaders portray themselves as defenders of the nation against external threats while depicting domestic elites as traitors aligned with hostile forces (Bergmann, 2018; de la Torre, 2017). War metaphors further reinforce this narrative by invoking a permanent state of emergency that can legitimize restrictions on civil liberties and democratic norms (Taggart, 2018). As Bergmann (2020) argues, conspiracy narratives enable populists to advance a threefold claim: they construct external threats to the nation, accuse domestic elites of collaborating with these threats, and position themselves as the sole defenders of the “pure people.”

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that populist discourse can be understood as operating through a dual and strategically flexible structure of enemy construction, linking external threats with internal adversaries in a unified narrative of political conflict. This coexistence enables populist leaders to recalibrate threat narratives across shifting crises, audiences, and phases of consolidation. This framework provides the conceptual lens for analyzing how these discursive strategies are systematically deployed in Erdoğan’s political discourse.

CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES, ANTI-WESTERN RHETORIC, AND THREAT CONSTRUCTION IN ERDOĞAN’S DISCOURSE

Applying the theoretical framework developed above to the Turkish case, this section examines how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strategically reconstructs political enemies through the interaction of conspiracy narratives, anti-Western rhetoric, and historically embedded threat imaginaries. Rather than functioning as isolated rhetorical devices, these discursive elements operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that transform political conflict into an existential struggle over national survival, sovereignty, and the boundaries of the political community.

To situate these dynamics, it is necessary to consider their broader historical and cultural foundations. Within the Turkish context, contemporary threat narratives intersect with long-standing imaginaries of encirclement and external intervention. As Morin (2022) observes, the myth of encirclement has deeply shaped political culture by portraying the nation as perpetually besieged by hostile forces. Political discourse frequently mobilizes the notion of *dış mihraklar* (“external powers”) to designate these adversaries. Historical anxieties such as the Kurdish question—which, amid rising separatist terrorism in the 1990s, revived fears of national partition—and the so-called “Sèvres Syndrome”—referring to the Treaty of Sèvres, which envisioned the partition of the Ottoman Empire among Western powers after World War I but was never implemented—have further reinforced anti-Western sentiment across different segments of society (Bora, 2003; Coban Oran, 2022). These historically sedimented fears provide a durable symbolic reservoir through which contemporary political threats can be narrated and reactivated.

Many scholars characterize the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and similar movements as forms of “Islamic populism” shaped by anti-Western and anti-imperialist ideas (Filc, 2019; Hadiz, 2016; Moghissi, 2019). However, as Finchelstein (2019) cautions, equating Islamic political critique with populism risks overstating the role of religion and obscuring broader global patterns, since the fusion of divine authority with popular sovereignty appears across diverse political contexts. Nevertheless, anti-imperialist sentiment, the legacy of colonial domination, and interactions with Marxist and nationalist currents have long shaped political imaginaries in the Muslim world (Ayooob, 2008; Lapidus, 2002; Roy, 1994). Within this broader historical context, the concept of the *ummah*—often functioning as a symbolic counterpart to “the people”—(Hadiz, 2016) continues to inform contemporary political rhetoric, particularly where the West, Christianity, Jews, or global institutions are framed as adversarial forces.

At the same time, the use of religion as a symbolic boundary between “the people” and threatening “others” is not unique to Muslim-majority societies. European radical-right leaders such as Viktor Orbán invoke Christianity or “Judeo-Christian” identity to portray Muslims and liberal elites as outsiders (Csehi, 2022; Morieson, 2021). Similarly, Donald Trump appeals to an idealized past centered on white Christian heritage, while Vladimir Putin grounds his national narrative in Slavic identity and Orthodox faith (Bafail, 2025). These examples illustrate that religion—whether Islamic, Christian, or otherwise—can function as a flexible symbolic resource through which populist leaders construct moral communities and legitimize the exclusion of perceived adversaries. Erdoğan’s discourse should therefore be situated not solely within an Islamic framework, but within a broader comparative perspective that treats religion as a strategic resource in populist mobilization.

Conspiracy narratives targeting the West further intensify this discursive framework by linking historically rooted anxieties to contemporary political developments. Notably, suspicion of international plots and foreign influence is not confined to Islamist constituencies; elements of the secular opposition have also articulated similar concerns. Early critics of the AKP, for example, alleged conspiracies involving international actors and hidden networks, portraying Erdoğan himself as part of a covert plot against the secular republic (Polat, 2016; Baer, 2013). As democratic backsliding has intensified, these converging threat perceptions have facilitated a growing alignment between religious and secular nationalist currents, particularly after the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Despite their ideological differences, these actors increasingly converge around a shared set of perceived adversaries—including Western liberal democracy, Kurdish political demands, the Gülen movement*, the United States, and the European Union (Başkan & Taşpınar, 2021). This demonstrates that anti-Western and conspiratorial threat narratives exceed ideological divides and can be strategically activated across competing political camps, enabling Erdoğan’s discourse to resonate across broader and more heterogeneous audiences.

Conspiracy narratives and enemy construction

Elections occupy a central place in populist politics, where electoral victory is interpreted not merely as a mandate but as proof of what Müller (2016) conceptualizes as *exclusive representation*, allowing populist leaders to recast institutional constraints as illegitimate limits on popular sovereignty. As Müller (2021) notes, “populists in power assert that a triumph at the ballot box translates into everyone’s now having to accept that they, and only they, represent the will of the people” (p. 19). Classical accounts of populism similarly emphasize that appeals to the “general will” can legitimize both the centralization of authority and the erosion of institutional constraints (Germani, 1978; Taggart, 2000; Worsley, 1969). In this sense, the invocation of the people becomes a mechanism for concentrating power in the hands of a single leader, delegitimizing rivals, and making fear and anxiety particularly effective tools of political mobilization (Urbinati, 2019; Carlin et al., 2019).

In Erdoğan’s discourse, this claim to exclusive representation has been systematically reinforced through strategic polarization. Early AKP campaigns positioned Erdoğan as the authentic representative of “Black Turks” against secular, Western-oriented “White Turks,” thereby consolidating an anti-elitist narrative centred on the victimization of the conservative majority (Aslan, 2016; Heper & Toktaş, 2003). Although the AKP pursued EU-oriented reforms until around 2010, Erdoğan’s rhetoric continued to emphasize a “local and national” (*yerli ve milli*) discourse (Polat, 2016, p. 77). This logic became particularly visible after the AKP’s victory in the March 2014 local elections, which Erdoğan framed as a form of popular acquittal following the December 17–25 corruption investigations, effectively shifting judgment from institutional accountability to the “court of public opinion” and transforming electoral success into evidence of innocence, public vindication, and exclusive legitimacy (Zalewski, 2014).

As democratic backsliding deepened, conspiratorial narratives became increasingly central to Erdoğan’s discourse, framing opposition as coordinated plots and legitimizing repression (de Medeiros, 2018). Consistent with populist theory (Hawkins, 2010; Wodak, 2015), Erdoğan’s construction of the “other” remained context-dependent and strategically adaptable. Depending on the political conjuncture, diverse actors—including Gezi protesters, Kurdish political movements, the Gülen movement, liberal groups, academics, journalists, civil society actors, and business elites—were recast as enemies and frequently linked to external threats within a Manichean “us versus them” framework. Enemy construction thus operated not as a fixed ideological repertoire but as a strategically flexible mechanism through which domestic adversaries were redefined according to shifting political needs and successive phases of power consolidation.

A particularly illustrative example of this logic is Erdoğan’s discourse on the Gülen movement, which occupies a central place in his construction of internal enemies and conspiratorial narratives. During the first decade of AKP rule, the movement broadly aligned with the government as part of a heterogeneous coalition seeking to challenge the entrenched secular and military-backed Kemalist establishment. Once this alliance deteriorated, however, Erdoğan increasingly redefined the movement as a Trojan horse serving hostile foreign interests. Within this narrative, it became associated with the United States, the CIA, Israel, the Rothschild family, an alleged global “higher intellect” (*üst akıl*), and “Crusaders” (White, 2017), thereby linking domestic opposition to a broader constellation of external enemies. This transformation demonstrates the strategic flexibility of populist enemy construction, in which former allies are reclassified as fundamental threats in line with shifting conjunctural needs.

* The Gülen movement, also known as the Hizmet (“service”) movement, was one of Turkey’s most influential and internationally active religious and social networks, with significant presence in education, media, and parts of the state bureaucracy. After its alliance with the AKP collapsed, the Erdoğan government officially designated the movement as the “Fethullahist Terrorist Organization” (FETÖ) and portrayed it as responsible for major political crises, including the December 17–25, 2013 corruption investigations and the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.

Narratives of betrayal and national encirclement further reinforced this logic by collapsing political neutrality into disloyalty. Following the December 17–25 corruption investigations—recast by Erdoğan as an attempted coup against his government—his rhetoric increasingly framed Turkey as besieged by hostile external powers and divisive domestic actors, frequently invoking the post–World War I occupation of 1918 and recasting contemporary politics as an “existential war” (Morin, 2022, p. 187). On the anniversary of the investigations, addressing the worlds of economy, politics, and media, Erdoğan declared: “Bitaraf olan bertaraf olur” (“Those who remain neutral will be eliminated”), adding that those who fail to take sides are “yok olup gitmeye mahkumdur” (“condemned to disappear”) (Bianet, 2014). In this formulation, neutrality itself becomes a marker of enemy status, while political alignment is transformed into a condition of national survival. By recasting his political struggle as a renewed “War of Independence” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2014), dissent is delegitimized as a fundamental threat to the nation.

In this way, Erdoğan’s discourse not only generates new threats but also reactivates historically embedded fears within Turkish political culture, integrating anxieties about foreign intervention and internal betrayal into a unified conspiratorial narrative. Enemy construction thus becomes a central mechanism of political strategy: by attributing domestic crises to a multiplicity of “foreign enemies,” political contestation is reframed as a matter of national survival, thereby legitimizing repression under the rubric of security (Barkey, 2021; Gürpınar, 2020). This dynamic produces a form of security fetishism in which dissenting actors are systematically demonized, contributing to Erdoğan’s elevation as the “tall man in the target” (Türk, 2014, p. 241).

Particularly after 2013, this domestic logic of enemy construction became increasingly intertwined with anti-Western rhetoric. Erdoğan’s discourse portrayed the United States, Europe, and international institutions as biased, hostile, or complicit in domestic crises (Oner & Shehadeh, 2023). During periods of acute political turmoil, this rhetoric further incorporated anti-Christian and anti-Semitic tropes, attributing events such as the 2013 Gezi protests to coordinated Western and Zionist conspiracies (Aslan, 2015). By linking domestic opposition to historically resonant external enemies, these narratives contribute to patterns of political polarization while reinforcing a broader discursive strategy centered on fear, insecurity, and perceptions of external threat.

Fear, external threat, and electoral mobilization

Populist leaders frequently mobilize narratives of external threat and internal betrayal within broader political communication strategies. By framing political competition as a struggle for national survival, such rhetoric contributes to the activation of collective fear, strengthened in-group cohesion, and the delegitimization of dissent (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2007). Political, economic, and security crises therefore provide strategic opportunities to reinforce the perception of a nation under siege. As Moffitt (2016) argues, populist leaders often construct and perform crises to generate urgency and rally supporters around their leadership. In this sense, populist discourse does not merely describe threats but actively produces them, converting perceived enemies and external dangers into mechanisms of electoral mobilization.

In the Turkish case, Erdoğan has systematically employed fear as a central electoral strategy (Finchelstein, 2019). This logic is reinforced by the personalization of political authority, as Erdoğan presents himself as the embodiment of *milli irade* (the national will) and transforms loyalty into an electoral imperative. Within this framework, elections are frequently framed as moments of national survival, while long-standing sociocultural cleavages—particularly between conservative Muslims and more secular segments of society—are strategically activated to consolidate a durable support base (Cherian, 2025; Parlak, 2015; White, 2017). More broadly, this reflects a recurring populist pattern in which narratives of siege and victimhood legitimize continued dominance while deflecting responsibility for domestic crises (Morieson, Yilmaz, & Kenes, 2024).

Since 2011, this strategy has increasingly relied on Islamist and nationalist rhetoric that mobilizes anti-Christian and anti-Western narratives to consolidate support. Opposition actors—from the Gülen movement to the main opposition CHP—are frequently depicted as part of “Crusader” or “Vatican” conspiracies allegedly aligned with Western powers. Within this framing, domestic dissent is recast as betrayal, while foreign influence is incorporated into a broader anti-Western imaginary that portrays external actors as “imperialist powers,” “Crusaders,” or a broader “Crusader Alliance” often linked to Zionist networks. Symbolically, the “Crescent,” associated with Erdoğan and the AKP, is contrasted with the “Cross,” representing both political opponents and hostile external forces (Demir, 2025; Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2017, pp. 14–15).

These dynamics become particularly visible during high-stakes electoral contests. Following the December 17–25 corruption investigations, Erdoğan framed the crisis as a conspiracy orchestrated by Western powers and executed by the Gülenist “parallel state” embedded within the bureaucracy, placing it at the centre of his election campaign. The electoral effectiveness of this strategy became evident in the AKP’s victory in the March 2014 local elections (Baykan, 2018). A similar pattern emerged during the closely contested 2017 constitutional referendum campaign. As victory became less certain, Erdoğan strategically escalated diplomatic tensions with Germany and the Netherlands, transforming the external crisis into a central theme of the campaign. In this context, he described

the Netherlands as “Nazi remnants and fascists” amid a dispute over a cancelled rally (BBC News, 2017). Göksel (2019) argues that this rhetoric influenced electoral behaviour, particularly among the Turkish diaspora in Europe, and bolstered support for the presidential system.

Beyond its immediate electoral function, this strategy also operates at the level of affective political attachment. Erdoğan’s anti-Western rhetoric and conspiracy narratives evoke deep-seated feelings of fear, insecurity, and historical humiliation among his religious supporters, who constitute a significant segment of the electorate. At the same time, these narratives provide a sense of stability, belonging, and identity by framing the AKP as a protective political “home” that shields loyal citizens from perceived external threats, thereby reinforcing emotional attachment and political legitimacy (Kentel, 2021).

Taken together, these strategies suggest that fear-based and anti-Western rhetoric functions as a recurring discursive framework through which crisis, insecurity, and external threat are framed in politically consequential terms.

DATASET AND METHODOLOGY

Data

This study employs a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative interpretation with quantitative text analysis to examine Erdoğan’s populist discourse, with particular attention to conspiracy narratives and anti-Western rhetoric directed at the West, the United States, the European Union, European countries, as well as Christianity and Judaism.

Data collection proceeded in two stages. First, a systematic review of selected daily newspapers published between May 2013 and April 2017 was conducted to identify recurring instances of conspiratorial and anti-Western rhetoric in Erdoğan’s public discourse. This initial media survey informed the construction of the lexical categories used in the subsequent corpus analysis. Relevant instances were cross-checked, where possible, against official transcripts published in the *Presidential Publications* series and the digital archive of the Presidential National Library. The selected timeframe captures a critical period in Turkish politics, beginning with the Gezi Park protests in May 2013 and extending to the April 2017 constitutional referendum, which institutionalized the presidential system.

Textual data constitute a central resource in political discourse analysis because they enable the systematic examination of the relationship between language, ideology, and power (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Hunger & Paxton, 2022). Accordingly, the core dataset consists of more than 1,800 speeches delivered between 2002 and 2022, collected from the digital archives of the Presidential National Library (*Cumhurbaşkanlığı Millet Kütiiphanesi*, n.d.) and other official sources. The corpus includes all publicly accessible speeches, statements, and campaign addresses available in the official archives for this period. This longitudinal corpus enables both close qualitative interpretation and quantitative measurement of linguistic trends associated with populism, conspiracy thinking, and anti-Western sentiment across Erdoğan’s full period in national power, from the AKP’s rise in 2002 to 2022.

To operationalize the central categories, two custom lexicons were constructed: 27 lexical stems associated with conspiratorial discourse and 18 stems indicative of anti-Western rhetoric. Lexical items were derived inductively from Erdoğan’s discourse targeting perceived domestic and foreign adversaries and refined iteratively through corpus observation and existing literature. Fixed multi-word expressions (e.g., *psychological warfare*, *economic weapon*) were treated as single lexical categories. A speech was coded as containing conspiratorial or anti-Western rhetoric if it included at least one lexical item from the relevant lexicon. For reasons of brevity, only illustrative examples are discussed in the main text, while the full lexicons are provided in Appendix. These lexicons form the basis for the frequency analysis and qualitative contextualization presented in the following section.

Coding and analytical procedure

Building on this coding framework, computational text analysis was used to quantify lexical frequencies and identify recurrent patterns associated with conspiratorial and anti-Western rhetoric. Standard preprocessing procedures—including text normalization, tokenization, and basic cleaning—were applied to ensure a consistent and noise-reduced dataset. Frequency counts of lexical stems served as the primary quantitative indicator, while co-occurrence patterns were used to examine intersections between conspiracy narratives and anti-Western framing.

Because dictionary-based approaches may not fully capture context-dependent meanings, the quantitative findings were complemented by close qualitative readings of strategically selected speeches and triangulated with contemporaneous media coverage and official transcripts. This integrated procedure strengthens both the internal validity of the coding framework and the interpretive reliability of the mixed-methods findings.

While the lexical analysis provides a systematic indicator of recurrent rhetorical patterns, the study does not rely solely on frequency counts to derive its substantive conclusions. Rather, the quantitative findings serve as heuristic evidence that complements qualitative discourse analysis. The central interpretations advanced in the

article emerge from the combined assessment of lexical patterns, contextual readings of speeches, and their relationship to broader political developments. Consequently, the quantitative component should be understood as a tool for identifying and contextualizing discursive tendencies and shifts in rhetorical emphasis rather than as a standalone basis for causal inference or for establishing direct relationships between rhetoric and political outcomes.

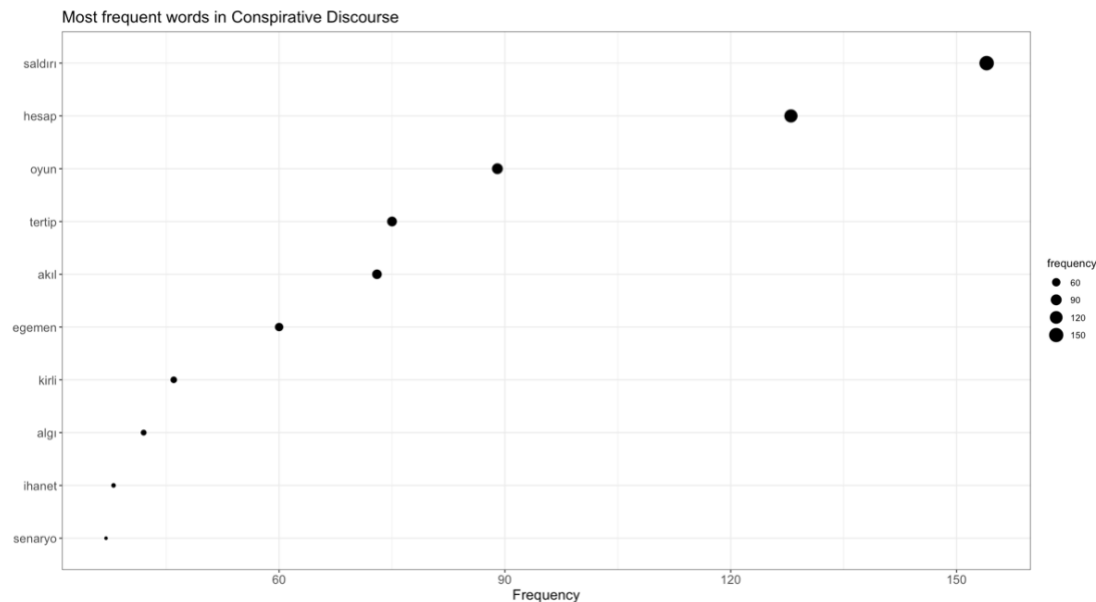
EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF ENEMY CONSTRUCTION IN ERDOĞAN'S DISCOURSE

Lexical patterns of conspiratorial and anti-western discourse

The quantitative analysis begins by identifying the most frequent lexical items within the conspiracy and anti-Western lexicons. **Figure 1** visualizes the dominant vocabulary structuring Erdoğan's conspiratorial discourse over time.

Figure 1

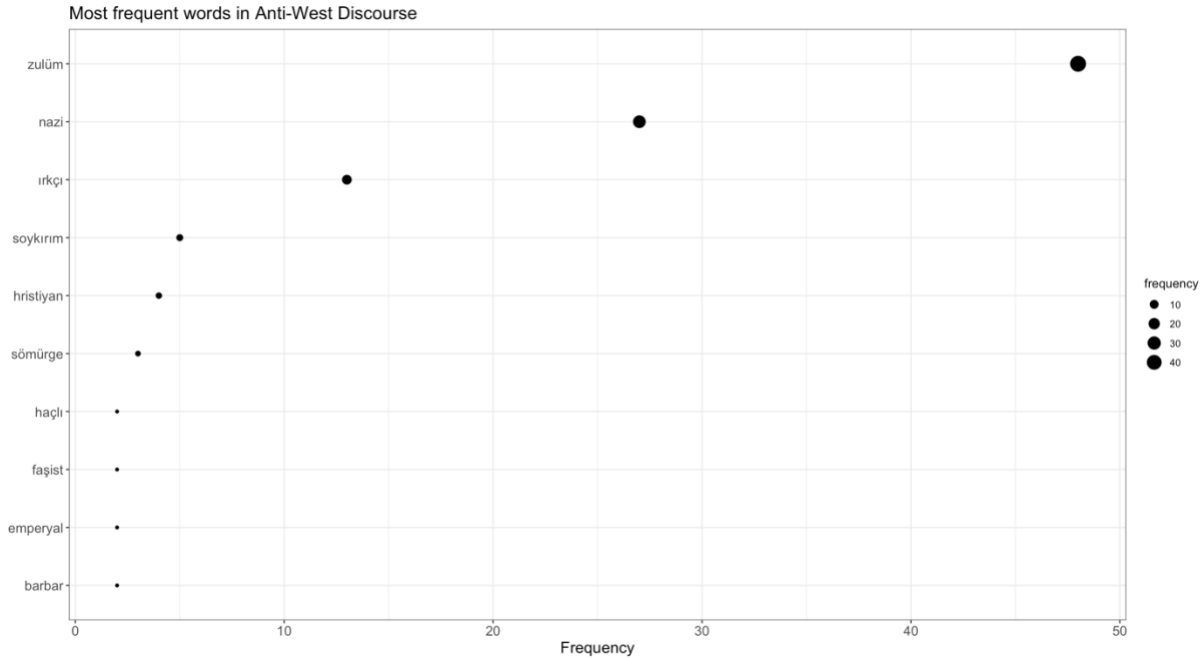
The ten most frequent words in conspirative discourse



The first graph (**Figure 1**), titled *The Ten Most Frequent Words in Conspiratorial Discourse*, presents the most frequently occurring lexical items in Erdoğan's conspiratorial rhetoric. Ranked by frequency, the ten most common terms are *saldırı* (attack), *hesap* (plan/project), *oyun* (game), *tertip* (plot/conspiracy), *akıl* [*üst-akıl*] (mastermind), *egemen* [*güç*] (hegemonic [power]), *kirli* [*ittifak/oyun*] (dirty [alliance/game]), *algı* [*operasyonu*] (perception [operation]), *ihanet* (betrayal), and *senaryo* (scenario). Collectively, these terms revolve around hidden coordination, manipulation, and existential threat. Their repeated use suggests a recurring discursive repertoire through which political developments are represented as deliberately orchestrated attacks against the nation rather than as contingent political processes, thereby contributing to a polarized “us versus them” narrative.

A particularly striking pattern is that the dominant conspiratorial vocabulary refers less to stable and clearly identifiable enemies than to hostile processes—attack, plotting, manipulation, betrayal, and covert orchestration. This process-oriented lexicon constructs a sense of continuous hidden assault, producing a perception of persistent national siege. At the same time, concepts such as *mastermind*, *hegemonic powers*, *dirty alliances*, *perception operations*, and *scenario* systematically obscure agency while amplifying fear of the unknown. This abstraction preserves strategic ambiguity: the same lexical repertoire can later be selectively concretized according to changing political conjunctures, allowing Erdoğan's discourse to recalibrate enemies across domestic opponents, foreign states, and broader civilizational threats. In this sense, the frequency of abstract and process-centred conspiratorial vocabulary provides quantitative evidence that complements the qualitative finding that enemy construction in Erdoğan's discourse remains both fear-amplifying and strategically flexible. This strategic ambiguity allows the same conspiratorial repertoire to be mobilized across changing political contexts without consistently identifying concrete external actors, thereby contributing to flexible patterns of political mobilization.

The second graph (**Figure 2**), titled *The Ten Most Frequent Words in Anti-Western Discourse*, presents the most frequently occurring lexical items in Erdoğan's anti-Western discourse. Ranked by frequency, the most common terms are *zulüm* (persecution), *Nazî,ırkçı* (racist), *soykırım* (genocide), *Hıristiyan* (Christian), *sömürge* (colonial), *Haçlı* (Crusader), *faşist* (fascist), *emperyal* [-ism, -ist] (imperial [-ism, -ist]), and *barbar* (barbarian).

Figure 2*The ten most frequent words in anti-western discourse*

Unlike conspiratorial discourse, which relies heavily on abstract and anonymous actors, anti-Western rhetoric is structured around historically saturated and morally explicit signifiers. These terms evoke collective trauma, persecution, colonial domination, and civilizational conflict, drawing on durable narratives of victimization and historical grievance. Their recurrent use contributes to representing Western actors as politically hostile, morally illegitimate, and ideologically corrupt.

This lexical repertoire is analytically significant because it reduces ambiguity by invoking historically recognizable adversaries through morally charged symbols such as *Crusader*, *colonial*, and *Christian*. Rather than relying primarily on diffuse threat processes, anti-Western rhetoric draws on historically familiar repertoires of external hostility. In this way, it represents the West not merely as a political rival but as a civilizational and moral adversary, reinforcing a durable discursive framework through which contemporary tensions are interpreted in relation to longer histories of conflict and grievance.

Taken together, the quantitative findings point to a dual rhetorical structure in Erdoğan's discourse: conspiratorial language constructs diffuse and process-oriented threats, while anti-Western rhetoric draws on historically recognizable and morally charged representations of external adversaries. This dual pattern suggests how these discursive repertoires can amplify perceptions of threat, contribute to political polarization, and preserve strategic flexibility in the construction of political adversaries. A closer qualitative analysis is necessary to show how these lexical patterns are activated, recalibrated, and embedded within Erdoğan's broader populist strategy across specific crises and political contexts.

Qualitative analysis of discursive repertoires

Building on the quantitative patterns identified above, this section examines how conspiratorial and anti-Western vocabulary functions within Erdoğan's broader political discourse. While frequency counts reveal the distribution of specific terms, qualitative analysis shows how these expressions are embedded in narratives that construct enemies, reactivate historical grievances, and frame political contestation in increasingly existential terms of national survival and threat perception.

Erdoğan's speeches, typically delivered with the assistance of teleprompters and prepared by structured speechwriting practices (Bianet, 2021; Doğan, 2021), reflect structured rhetorical and lexical choices rather than spontaneous reactions. Across different political contexts, his discourse repeatedly invokes civilizational contrasts—such as East versus West, Muslim versus Christian, and Ottoman versus European histories—thereby situating contemporary political conflicts within a broader narrative of historical confrontation and national sovereignty.

A central mechanism of this discourse is the repeated framing of Turkey as a nation under coordinated attack from both internal and external adversaries. As Erdoğan asserts, "Turkey is under a major attack both at home and abroad. These attacks are not because we are weak but because we are strong and becoming stronger" (Erdoğan, 2017). Such statements frame contingent political developments as coordinated attacks against the

nation, reinforcing a siege narrative in which Turkey's perceived strength is interpreted as generating external hostility.

A central component of this siege narrative is the recurring reference to an alleged "üst akıl" ("mastermind"), an intentionally vague yet omnipresent force said to orchestrate hostile global actors. Depending on the context, this entity is associated with "the West," "Europe," "the United States," or unspecified "international dark networks." Erdoğan claims that these actors seek to "redesign Turkey" because "they do not want a strong Turkey" (Erdoğan, 2015). Through this flexible construction of an external enemy, domestic political challenges are often reframed within broader conspiratorial narratives, enabling discursive linkages between internal opposition and wider constellations of external actors.

Within this broader framework, "the West" functions as a broad and ideologically charged category. Erdoğan declares, "Now I call out to the world from here: O world, O West" (Erdoğan, 2015), portraying the West as responsible for a wide range of global injustices, from "the deaths of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean" to "the shooting of Turkmens and Arabs in Syria with planes" (Erdoğan, 2011). Actors accused of having "fictionalized the conflicts in the Islamic geography" are likewise attributed to Western intervention. In this way, contemporary crises are embedded within a broader anti-Western narrative in which the West is represented as a primary reference point for explaining disorder, suffering, and instability across the Muslim world.

This anti-Western rhetoric is further reinforced through historical comparisons with the Ottoman past. Erdoğan depicts the West through a repertoire of hostile labels—such as "Crusader," "imperialist," "colonialist," "invader," "racist," "genocidal," "bloodthirsty," "slaveholder," "fascist," "Nazi," and "oppressive"—while presenting the Islamic world, and particularly the Ottoman Empire, as "peaceful," "tolerant," and "just." By linking contemporary political tensions to historical narratives of confrontation, this framing represents the West as a morally recognizable historical adversary situated within a broader civilizational register of conflict.

By drawing on memories of the Crusades, colonial domination in Africa and the Islamic world, the postwar occupation of Turkey, and the devastation associated with world wars, this discourse intensifies the moral negative framing of the West through historically sedimented grievances. In doing so, it also weakens the normative appeal of the liberal-democratic values commonly associated with the West—such as pluralism, the rule of law, civil rights, and democratic accountability—thereby contributing to broader patterns of personalization in political discourse.

Erdoğan also employs personalization and symbolic naming to render complex political and symbolic conflicts intelligible to broader audiences. By reducing the West and the Christian world to individualized figures such as "Hans," "George," and "Helga," he constructs abstract international actors as more recognizable adversarial figures, while simultaneously representing himself and his constituents as the collective embodiment of ordinary Turkish citizens—"Hasan," "Ahmet," "Mehmet," "Ayşe," and "Fatma." In public rallies, he reinforces this contrast to articulate political authority and moral legitimacy: "The European Union will not like this. But I don't care what Hans, George or Helga say, I care what Hasan, Ahmet, Mehmet, Ayşe and Fatma say. I care what God says..." (Erdoğan, 2017), and "You George, you Hans, you cannot defeat us... I love my people for the sake of God, and my people love me for the sake of God" (Erdoğan, 2018).

Through such personalization, geopolitical conflicts are framed as a moral confrontation between ordinary citizens and external actors. At the same time, the contrast between Western and Turkish-Muslim names evokes a broader civilizational boundary between the Christian West and the Muslim community, reinforcing an 'us versus them' dichotomy and contributing to affective forms of political attachment among supporters. This naming strategy may broaden the resonance of Erdoğan's discourse across a wide spectrum of constituencies—including nationalist, conservative, Islamist, and secular anti-Western audiences—by translating geopolitical antagonism into everyday moral and cultural categories. Occasionally, this personalization is further reinforced through religious references that embed political authority within a broader moral and theological framework.

Another notable feature of Erdoğan's rhetoric is the strategic differentiation between domestic and foreign audiences. While harsh and polarizing language is frequently directed toward domestic opposition, critical media, and civil society actors—often depicted as terrorists or "pawns" of foreign powers (Demir, 2025)—similarly explicit rhetoric is less often directed toward foreign states or societies. Delivered through carefully prepared speeches, this pattern is consistent with a degree of rhetorical calibration rather than purely situational improvisation.

Domestically, Erdoğan frames political contestation in security terms by portraying dissent as part of a broader conspiracy and by linking his political fate to that of the nation. Referring to the December 17–25 bribery and corruption investigations, he asserted, "The target of this operation was not the party or the government, but the country itself. The target was not the government or party, but Turkey" (Erdoğan, 2014). Events such as the Gezi Protests are likewise framed as "plots organized from inside and outside," while the Kurdish political movement, the main opposition party, and both domestic and international media are depicted as actors portrayed as contributing to instability in the country: "The aim is not Kobani. The aim is to undermine our national unity. But they will not succeed" (Erdoğan, 2014).

Internationally, by avoiding direct confrontation with specific states or societies, Erdoğan preserves diplomatic flexibility while simultaneously externalizing responsibility for domestic political challenges. This selective calibration provides qualitative support for the risk-managed polarization identified in the quantitative findings.

Taken together, the qualitative analysis reinforces the dual structure identified in the quantitative section. Erdoğan's rhetoric systematically combines abstract conspiratorial enemies—such as “mastermind” or “hegemonic powers”—with historically recognizable anti-Western adversaries associated with civilizational conflict. This dual discursive strategy enables him to securitize domestic politics while maintaining rhetorical flexibility toward foreign actors. The qualitative evidence further suggests that the relative salience of these repertoires shifts across political contexts: conspiratorial abstraction becomes more prominent during domestic crises, whereas historically grounded anti-Western rhetoric intensifies during diplomatic confrontation, electoral vulnerability, and moments of regime legitimation. At the same time, this discourse translates political conflict into emotionally resonant categories of belonging, humiliation, and moral protection, thereby deepening affective attachment to Erdoğan's leadership. By simultaneously mobilizing diffuse conspiratorial enemies and historically grounded antagonists, his discourse sustains a narrative of national siege that facilitates political polarization, electoral mobilization, and the consolidation of political authority.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that conspiracy narratives and anti-Western rhetoric are not merely episodic features but constitute a recurring and central component of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist discourse. The findings reveal a dual architecture of enemy construction in Erdoğan's discourse: conspiratorial narratives rely on abstract, often anonymous actors such as hidden masterminds or global networks, while anti-Western rhetoric invokes historically recognizable adversaries associated with civilizational conflict. This dual structure enables the simultaneous production of diffuse threats and identifiable antagonists, reinforcing a broader narrative of national siege while preserving rhetorical flexibility and strategic ambiguity in international contexts.

The findings further highlight the context-dependent recalibration of these discursive repertoires. Conspiratorial abstraction becomes particularly salient during domestic crises, where political opponents, former allies, media actors, and civil society can be incorporated into narratives of perceived threat. By contrast, historically grounded anti-Western rhetoric intensifies during diplomatic confrontation, electoral vulnerability, and moments of political legitimation, linking contemporary conflicts to memories of national encirclement, foreign intervention, and civilizational confrontation. In this way, Erdoğan's discourse continuously adapts enemy construction to shifting political conjunctures while sustaining a durable framework of political communication.

These discursive strategies function not only through threat construction but also through affective framing. By articulating political crises, external threats, and historical antagonisms through themes of humiliation, protection, and collective survival, Erdoğan's rhetoric reinforces affective forms of political attachment among diverse constituencies. This emotional dimension contributes to the personalization of political authority, in which loyalty to the leader is symbolically linked to broader notions of national belonging, while opposition is often framed in moralized terms such as betrayal or alignment with external enemies.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that conspiratorial and anti-Western rhetoric function not merely as descriptions of political threats but as discursive mechanisms through which such threats are constructed. In this sense, polarization can be understood as part of a broader repertoire of political communication centered on mobilization and boundary construction. By combining discursive threat construction, historical antagonism, emotional resonance, and strategic flexibility, Erdoğan's populist discourse contributes to patterns of political polarization and context-sensitive electoral mobilization. These dynamics are, in turn, frequently discussed in the literature as features associated with broader processes of authoritarian consolidation and democratic backsliding.

Future research could examine whether similar patterns of contextual recalibration, affective mobilization, and the discursive weakening of the normative appeal of liberal-democratic principles operate across other populist and neo-authoritarian regimes, thereby contributing to comparative research on populist communication, polarization, and democratic erosion.

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Ethical statement

This study is based exclusively on publicly available speeches and documents and did not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of human subject research. Therefore, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required under the applicable institutional guidelines.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation, manuscript preparation, revision, and final approval of the submitted version.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of publicly available speeches and documents cited throughout the article.

AI disclosure

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving the clarity and presentation of the manuscript. The author was responsible for all conceptual development, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, and the final content of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Full Lexicons

Conspiracy Theory Lexicon (27 lexical stems/expressions)

akıl [üst-akıl] (mastermind), ameliyat (surgical/operation), algı [operasyonu] (perception [operation]), dış [güç/mihrak] (external [power/force]), egemen [güç] (hegemonic [power]), emperyal [-izm, -ist] (imperial [-ism, -ist]), ekonomi silahı (economic weapon), hesap (plan/project), ihanet (betrayal), ittifak (alliance), karalama (defamation), kirli [ittifak/oyun] (dirty [alliance/game]), komplo (conspiracy), lobi [faiz, silah, savaş, kaos, terör, medya, robot] (lobby [interest, weapon, war, chaos, terror, media, robot]), mühendislik (engineering), operasyon (operation), organize (organized), oyun (game), proje (project), psikolojik savaş (psychological warfare), sabotaj (sabotage), saldırı (attack), senaryo (scenario), talimat (instruction), tertip (plot/conspiracy), tezgâh (ruse), tuzak (trap)

Anti-Western Lexicon (18 lexical stems/expressions)

barbar (barbarian), dış [güç/mihrak] (external [power/force]), emperyal [-izm, -ist] (imperial [-ism, -ist]), faşist (fascist), Haçlı (Crusader), Hans (Hans), Hristiyan (Christian), Holokost (Holocaust), Corç (George), ırkçı (racist), kan (blood), katliam (massacre), Ku Klux Klan, Nazi, sömürge (colonial), soykırım (genocide), terör (terror), zulüm (persecution)