

Pragmatic Populism: Ideologies and Populism in Turkey and Russia

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Abstract

Turkey has responded uniquely to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, at times taking up a mediator role and at times being a staunch supporter of Ukraine. In this paper, I sought to shed light on Turkey's response as well as the relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. To do this I looked at Erdoğan and Putin's populism, using Ben Stanley's concept of populism as a "thin ideology" that populist leaders supplement with other ideologies.¹ I looked at three categories of supplemental ideologies: historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies. I compared and contrasted how Erdoğan and Putin have used supplemental ideologies within those categories to complement their populism. I also analyzed the effect of the leaders' populism on Turkish and Russian foreign policy. I found many similarities in the way both leaders combined populist rhetoric with historical, religious, and nationalist rhetoric. Putin and Erdoğan used supplemental ideologies to portray themselves as the representatives of an exclusive ingroup under siege from foreign elites. I also found that ideology affected both countries' foreign policy in similar ways. Both leaders justified a more aggressive, interventionist foreign policy using populism and supplementary ideologies. I contend that those similarities can be described as pragmatic populism, a leadership strategy that President Putin and President Erdoğan have used to solidify their authoritarian grip on power, justify aggressive foreign policy moves, and crack down on dissent.

¹ Ben Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289>.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced countries across the world to choose how to respond to the drastic actions of Vladimir Putin's Russia. Turkey's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has stood out from other countries, especially other NATO countries. Turkish companies have repeatedly been accused of helping Russia evade Western sanctions, providing a vital lifeline for the Russian economy.² Strikingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have remained close personal friends after the Russian invasion; Putin called Erdoğan his "dear friend" and called to congratulate Erdoğan for his victory in the May 2023 presidential election.³ Turkey has tried to position itself as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war by brokering the landmark 2022 grain deal that allowed Ukrainian grain to be transported and sold.⁴ President Erdoğan has offered to be an intermediary between Russia and Ukraine, putting Turkey in a balancing role but no longer a key ally of Ukraine.⁵ Until July 2023, Turkey had blocked Sweden's bid to join NATO, albeit for reasons unrelated to the invasion of Ukraine.⁶ However, Turkey's sudden about-face on the issue of Sweden's NATO membership at the NATO summit in July 2023 may signal a shift in Turkish policy toward a more pro-Ukraine stance. Self-interest may have also played a role in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's sudden change of heart; Turkey had been trying to obtain American F-16 fighter jets for years, and the United States announced it would transfer the jets shortly after Turkey agreed to support Sweden's entry into NATO.⁷ Practical concerns have been a major factor in determining Turkey's policy response to the war in Ukraine. A common thread among Turkey's policy responses is not unwavering support for Ukraine, but consistently self-interested decisions. Many of the responses, such as Turkey's mediation efforts or the sanctions evasion of Turkish companies, allow Turkey to gain wealth and influence even if they help Russia's war effort. The dominance of practical considerations in decision-making is something that Russian President Vladimir Putin shares with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Starting in his early career, Putin has used his reputation

² Jonathan Spicer, "U.S. Warns Turkey on Exports Seen to Boost Russia's War Effort," Reuters, February 5, 2023.

³ "Putin Congratulates 'dear Friend' Erdoğan for Winning Turkish Election," Reuters, May 28, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-congratulates-turkeys-erdogan-2023-05-28/>.

⁴ "Black Sea Grain Initiative | Joint Coordination Centre," United Nations, accessed June 5, 2023.

⁵ Ilya Kusa, "From Ally to Mediator: How Russia's Invasion Has Changed Ukraine-Turkey Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 10, 2022.

⁶ Judy Woodruff and Dan Sagalyn, "Turkey President Erdoğan on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Future of NATO," PBS, September 19, 2022.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/turkey-president-erdogan-on-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-future-of-nato>.

⁷ Zeena Saifi, "Turkey eyes recalibration with the West as Russia's isolation grows," CNN, July 13, 2023.

as a militaristic leader to gain power and support. Putin's leadership of military operations in Chechnya gave him enough influence and support to become president. In President Putin used the surge of support he received after the annexation of Crimea as a justification for a referendum that could extend his rule until 2036.⁸ In this project, I seek to explain Turkey's unique position and the importance of practical concerns by looking at the populism of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin. In this paper, I find that Putin and Erdoğan similarly use supplemental ideologies in addition to populism to portray themselves as the representatives of an exclusive ingroup under siege from foreign elites. I also argue that ideology affected both countries' foreign policy in similar ways. Both leaders justified a more aggressive, interventionist foreign policy using populism and supplementary ideologies. I contend that those similarities can be described as pragmatic populism. Pragmatic populism is the use of various ideologies in combination with populism for practical political purposes.⁹ President Putin and President Erdoğan have used pragmatic populism to solidify their authoritarian grip on power, justify aggressive foreign policy moves, and crack down on dissent.

Background

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan got his start in politics as part of the Islamist Welfare Party, and he was elected mayor of Istanbul in 1994. He served as mayor until 1998 when he was arrested for "inciting religious hatred."¹⁰ He was released in 1999 and founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001 after the Welfare Party was banned. In 2002, the AKP won parliamentary elections and took power. After a constitutional amendment was passed allowing him to become prime minister despite his prior conviction, Erdoğan became prime minister of Turkey on May 14, 2003.¹¹ Since then, Erdoğan and the AKP have focused on consolidating power, resulting in the rise of what Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu call a "competitive authoritarian" regime.¹² The AKP began the process of consolidating power by slowly but steadily taking power away from the Turkish military. When the AKP came to power the military essentially held a veto power in Turkey, but through reforms and large trials, the AKP was able to take power out of the hands of the military.¹³ The 2016 failed coup was a turning

⁸ "Vladimir Putin," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, June 27, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Putin>

⁹ Dr. Önder and I came up with the term "pragmatic populism" in a discussion of Gönül Tol's Book *Erdoğan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria*. We drew a lot of inspiration from Tol's book when discussing pragmatic populism, although Tol did not use the term in her book.

¹⁰ "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, June 26, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan#ref340065>.

¹¹ "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

¹² Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732>.

¹³ Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," 1584-5.

point; Erdoğan and the AKP began cracking down on the Gulen Movement in response to the coup, despite a lack of clear evidence that Gulenists were responsible for the coup.¹⁴ In the wake of the coup attempt, Erdoğan continued to consolidate power and attack democracy using the ideology of populism.¹⁵ Populism has been an important characteristic throughout the entirety of Erdoğan's rule.¹⁶ Erdoğan's populism takes many forms and combines with many other ideologies. The results of this can be seen in Erdoğan's rhetoric, but also in Turkish foreign policy because, as Gönül Tol writes, "foreign policy serves as the chosen medium through which [Erdoğan's] chosen ideology is expressed and reproduced."¹⁷ Erdoğan is a deeply pragmatic leader, who co-opts different ideologies to supplement his populism and support his antidemocratic rule.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin began his career with the KGB but entered politics after the fall of the Soviet Union. He rose through the ranks in the 1990s and gained the trust of Boris Yeltsin, then the president of Russia, and earned public recognition for leading a military operation in Chechnya. On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin resigned and named Putin acting president.¹⁸ From the start of his rule, Putin and his allies worked to strengthen his grip on power by passing laws designed to create an unfair electoral system.¹⁹ These and other antidemocratic reforms have helped Putin consolidate power. A major turning point in Putin's rule occurred in 2012 and 2013. The Russian economy was in decline, leading Putin to legitimize his rule by portraying himself as the protector of the Russian people rather than as the bringer of economic prosperity.²⁰ The annexation of Crimea was also an influential event. The annexation was widely supported by Russians, giving Putin even more popularity that allowed him to pass a referendum in 2020 that could extend his rule until 2036.²¹ Putin has created a "consolidated authoritarian" regime where Putin holds power with very few constraints.²² Throughout his more than two decades in power, Putin has drawn on populism, especially in his discourse.²³ Although there

¹⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, and Galib Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoğanism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1818.

¹⁵ Julius M. Rogenhofer, "Antidemocratic Populism in Turkey after the July 2016 Coup Attempt," *Populism* (Leiden, Netherlands) 1, no. 2 (2018): 117. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-00001010>.

¹⁶ Yilmaz and Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 Years," 1820.

¹⁷ Gönül Tol, *Erdoğan's War: a Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022) 4.

¹⁸ "Vladimir Putin," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

¹⁹ Allen Lynch, "Vladimir Putin," in *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics*, ed. Klaus Larres. (Oxon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021) 166.

²⁰ Leon Aron, "Putinism After Crimea," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 77. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0067>.

²¹ Lynch, "Vladimir Putin," 170.

²² Freedom House, "Russia: Nations in Transit 2023 Country Report," accessed July 11, 2023. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2023>.

²³ Tina Burrett, "Charting Putin's Shifting Populism in the Russian Media from 2000 to 2020," *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 1 (2020): 201.

are some differences in the ways Erdoğan and Putin rule, there are many similarities in their discourse that show that both leaders can be described as populist.²⁴ In this paper I compare the populism of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, specifically looking at complementary historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies.

In this essay, I utilize Ben Stanley's theory of populism as a "thin ideology." Stanley writes that populism "populism is a 'thin' ideology that in practice is to be found in combination with established, 'full' ideologies."²⁵ Stanley also identified four main characteristics of populism:

- "The existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: 'the people' and 'the elite'.
- The antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite.
- The idea of popular sovereignty.
- The positive valorisation of 'the people' and denigration of 'the elite'."²⁶

For this project, I chose three distinct categories of established ideologies that supplement populism: historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies. These three categories often supplement populism. Many populist countries, especially those in Eastern Europe have passed memory laws, which utilize a certain version of history to support authoritarian regimes.²⁷ The combination of religion and populism, which is very common worldwide, often ends up "prophesying a vision of politics as a tool for the foundation of a new society."²⁸ Nationalism often supplements populism when populist leaders portray the virtuous people of their nation under siege from corrupt foreign elites.²⁹ The combination of the 'thin' ideology of populism and other complementary ideologies manifests itself in both the discourse of politicians and the foreign policy of countries. According to Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, populist foreign policy "can be understood via the specific

²⁴ Sultan Tepe and Ajar Chekirova, "Faith in Nations: The Populist Discourse of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin," *Religions* 13, no. 5: 445 (2022): 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050445>.

²⁵ Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism," 95.

²⁶ Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism," 102.

²⁷ Nikolay Kuposov, "Historians, Memory Laws, and the Politics of the Past," *European Papers* (Online. Periodico) 5, no. 1 (2020): 115.

²⁸ Pedro Zuquete, "Populism and Nationalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 460.

²⁹ Benjamin De Cleen, "Populism and Nationalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, 342-362. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 343.

ideology populism as a thin-centered ideology attaches itself to.”³⁰ Thus, in this project, I draw on analyses of the discourse of Putin and Erdoğan as well as the foreign policies of Russia and Turkey. I show that Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have supplemented their populism with historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies. I examine discourse and foreign policy to fully understand the ways that these three types of ideologies have supplemented populism in Russia and Turkey. I describe the combination of populism and supplementary ideologies in Turkey and Russia as “pragmatic populism,” because Presidents Putin and Erdoğan have used populism and complementary ideologies for their own practical purposes.

Imperial Heirs: History and Populism³¹

Erdoğan and the AKP have utilized neo-Ottoman narratives about Turkey’s past to shape Turkish foreign policy. President Erdoğan’s neo-Ottomanism involves a glorification of Turkey’s Ottoman past to create a narrative that supports his domestic and foreign policies. Neo-Ottoman representations have taken a variety of forms, but they all serve to promote Turkey’s Ottoman heritage.³² One potent example of a representation of neo-Ottoman historical ideology is the Panorama 1453 Museum in Istanbul, which was sponsored and built by the AKP. The museum’s centerpiece is a 360-degree panoramic painting of the Conquest of Constantinople which depicts a mythologized version of the battle that puts Sultan Mehmet II at the center of a glorious holy conquest.³³ The Panorama 1453 Museum ahistorically represents a military victory to portray the Ottoman Empire as a glorious, holy empire. Erdoğan and the AKP have also rewritten textbooks, sponsored television shows, and supported Ottoman-style architecture to institutionalize a positive image of the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ Neo-Ottoman narratives take many forms, but it always involves distorted representations of the Ottoman past that portray Turkey’s Ottoman heritage as glorious and holy. The glorification of the Ottoman past allows Erdoğan to pragmatically draw on a romanticized version of historical events.

³⁰ Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, “Populism and Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, 342-362. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 384.

³¹ This section draws on a paper about Turkish collective memory I wrote for Professor Eric Langenbacher’s “Politics and Memory” class.

³² Pınar Aykaç, “Multiple Neo-Ottomanisms in the Construction of Turkey’s (trans)national Heritage: TİKA and a Dialectic Between Foreign and Domestic Policy,” *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 3 (2022): 358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2021.1970543>.

³³ Gönül Bozoglu, “‘A great bliss to keep the sensation of conquest alive!’: The Emotional Politics of the 1453 Museum in Istanbul.” in *Populism: Representations of Self and Other*, eds. Chiara De Cesari and Ayhan Kaya. (Abingdon, Oxon ;: Routledge, 2020), 97.

³⁴ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: the Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 177.

Turkish foreign policies are also representations of Erdoğan's historical populism that represent narratives of Turkey's past. Neo-Ottomanism uses shared history to connect the former territory of the Ottoman Empire and to portray Turkey as the country at the center of the Ottoman region, instead of a country on the periphery of Europe.³⁵ Thus, Ottoman history justifies Turkey's place as the preeminent regional power. The historical narrative of neo-Ottomanism also justifies a more active and influential role for Turkey internationally, not just in former Ottoman territories. Former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, whose ideas are foundational to AKP foreign policy, argues that Turkey's Ottoman legacy and geographical position at the center of "Afro-Eurasia" give it influence on the world stage.³⁶ Davutoglu's contention that Turkey is at the center of the Ottoman region which is at the center of Afro-Eurasia is a manifestation of neo-Ottoman memory. Neo-Ottomanism justifies Turkey's claim to influence former Ottoman territory. Simultaneously, Turkey's active foreign policy in the region promotes neo-Ottoman memory. Thus, historical populism has a major effect on foreign policy. Erdoğan's pragmatic neo-Ottomanism also supports Turkey's influence in the former Ottoman territory by portraying the breakup of the Ottoman Empire as a tragic misstep of history. Neo-Ottomans bemoan the loss of historically Ottoman territories, and portray Turkey's modern borders as "an artificial creation, a result of the colonial policies of Western powers."³⁷ Dismissing Turkey's modern borders stirs up anti-Western sentiment and allows Turkey to intervene in other nations' affairs. Thus, denying the legitimacy of the modern borders of former Ottoman territory to support Turkey's status as a powerful nation that can influence events throughout its surrounding region.³⁸ AKP foreign policy doctrine dictates that Turkey should actively ensure cooperation and security in its region.³⁹ The idea that Turkey should play an outsized role in regional affairs is a direct result of neo-Ottoman populism that portrays Turkey as the inheritor of the glorious legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Erdoğan and the AKP pragmatically justify Turkey's active role in regional affairs by claiming the heritage of the Ottoman Empire and denying the legitimacy of modern borders. Vladimir Putin has used a similar historical ideology to supplement his populism.

Vladimir Putin and his allies have engaged in historical revisionism, especially concerning Russia's imperial and Soviet pasts. The revisionist tactics have allowed Putin to create a populist narrative of World War

³⁵ Igor Torbakov, "Neo-Ottomanism Versus Neo-Eurasianism? Nationalism and Symbolic Geography in Postimperial Turkey and Russia," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2017): 141-2. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-4164303>.

³⁶ Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 186.

³⁷ Torbakov, "Neo-Ottomanism Versus Neo-Eurasianism," 138

³⁸ Torbakov, "Neo-Ottomanism Versus Neo-Eurasianism," 141.

³⁹ Emin Fuat Keyman and Sebnem Gumüşcu, *Democracy, Identity and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Hegemony through Transformation* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 75.

Two that glorifies the Soviet role and claims the heritage of the Soviet victory for the people of modern-day Russia. A 2014 law institutionalized a one-sided, nationalist version of World War Two as the official historical narrative in Russia. The law prevented dissenters from spreading any opposing narrative about the war.⁴⁰ Putin has used military parades and uniforms as symbolism to commemorate the Soviet victory in World War Two and claim that Russia is the successor to the victorious Soviet Union.⁴¹ Putin, echoing popular beliefs among Russians, has created a narrative that portrays Russia as the hero of the “Great Patriotic War.” This narrative omits or minimizes Soviet collaboration with Nazi Germany through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁴² These tactics allow Putin to spread a populist narrative of World War Two that strengthens his grip on power by portraying the Russian president as the heir to the victorious legacy of World War Two. Putin’s representations of history often focus on narratives of the “Great Patriotic War” at the expense of the rest of Russian history.⁴³ However, Putin has at times turned to memory of the Tsarist Russian Empire as part of his attempts to restore Russia’s greatness.⁴⁴ Putin and his allies have used different leaders of the Russian Empire as the subjects of historical comparison in order to highlight different aspects of Putin’s rule.⁴⁵ His pragmatism is reflected in his flexible use of different historical narratives; Putin’s main goals are about maintaining control, so he will use any historical narrative that suits his purposes. The memory of Russian history that Vladimir Putin spreads is similar to neo-Ottomanist memory in Turkey. Both populist historical ideologies glorify the military victories of Turkey and Russia’s imperial predecessors and claim the legacy and heritage of those victories. Historical populism is not just targeted at a domestic audience, however. Historical claims can justify interventionist foreign policy, as in the cases of Turkey and Russia.

Russia has consistently meddled in the affairs of former Soviet states, especially Ukraine. Russia’s imperial heritage provides historical justification for continued Russian involvement decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ The legacy of Russia’s past provides justification for continued meddling, which has a

⁴⁰Edele, Mark. “Fighting Russia’s History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II.” *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 29, no. 2 (2017), 94-95. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed June 19, 2023). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A553202828/LitRC?u=wash43584&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=2acff8e4>.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Wood, “Performing memory and its limits” in *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. David L. (David Lloyd) Hoffmann (Abingdon :: Routledge, 2022), 257.

⁴² Wood, “Performing memory and its limits,” 251.

⁴³ Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: the Politics of the Past in Putin’s Russia*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 38.

⁴⁴ “Russia’s War in Ukraine: How the 19th Century Imperialism and 20th Century Fascism Found Home in the 21st Century Russia,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2022), 105.

⁴⁵ Khodarkovsky “Russia’s War in Ukraine,” 103.

⁴⁶ Andreas Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial past and Competing Memories.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5(2), 107–115. (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2014.05.005>

noticeable effect on Putin's foreign policy decision-making. Russia's foreign policy seeks to maintain dominance over the post-Soviet space because of widespread Russian nostalgia for the supposed greatness of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ Memory of Russia's lost status and influence provides motivation for an aggressive Russian foreign policy. Russian decision-makers, especially Vladimir Putin, cultivate the narrative that Russia can shape events in the Former Soviet Union because of Russia's historical status as the dominant regional power. The historical narratives of the Tsarist Russian Empire and the Soviet Union influence many modern Russians' thinking about Ukraine and lead Russians to deny that Ukraine has the right to exist independently of Russia.⁴⁸ Thus, Putin can pragmatically use Russian historical ideology in order to legitimize Russia's constant involvement in the affairs of other countries, especially Ukraine. The Russian narrative echoes neo-Ottomanist claims that Turkey's Ottoman past places Turkey as the most influential state in former Ottoman territories. Russian memory also denies Ukraine's right to exist by casting doubt on the legitimacy of an independent Ukraine and its borders. Russia's involvement in Ukraine has consistently relied on the assumption that an independent Ukrainian national identity is "artificial."⁴⁹ The two central claims of this narrative are that Russians and Ukrainians are one people and that the creation of an independent Ukraine was a mistake. In his 2021 article, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Vladimir Putin himself spread the narrative that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people— a single whole."⁵⁰ In the same article, Putin also claimed that when the Bolsheviks partitioned the USSR into individual Soviet republics, "Russia was robbed."⁵¹ In an address right before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Putin said that the Soviet policy of creating individual Soviet republics was "worse than a mistake."⁵² Putin's narrative directly challenges Ukraine's independence, right to exist, and modern borders. This narrative is similar to many neo-Ottomanist claims about the illegitimacy of modern borders in the former Ottoman territory. Just as Putin portrays the creation of Ukraine as a tragic mistake, many neo-Ottomanists portray the breakup of the Ottoman empire as illegitimate and a loss for Turkey. There are many strong similarities in common Russian and Turkish narratives of the

⁴⁷ Andreas Kappeler, "Ukraine and Russia," 110.

⁴⁸ Taras Kuzio, "Conclusions," in *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War*, ed. Taras Kuzio, (First edition. London: Routledge, 2022), 264.

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict." (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2022), 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40567>.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia, July 12, 2021. Available in English at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6618>.

⁵¹ Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

⁵² Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, February 21, 2022. Available in English at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

imperial past; both narratives distort historical events, deny the legitimacy of modern borders, and dictate that Turkey and Russia, as heirs to powerful empires, should have an outsized influence on regional affairs.

There are undeniable similarities between prominent Russian and Turkish historical populism. Presidents Putin and Erdoğan pragmatically use historical ideologies to legitimize their own rule. Both leaders claim that their countries are the heir to a formerly glorious empire. Ahistorical representations of military victories are an important part of constructing narratives of past imperial glory. Erdoğan created a mythology surrounding the Conquest of Constantinople, and Putin created a similar mythology surrounding the Soviet victory in World War Two. These mythologies are a part of Presidents Putin and Erdoğan's historical ideologies that portray their countries as heirs to glorious imperial legacies. Both men have used these ideologies to supplement their populism. They focus on the role of the people as inheritors of the imperial legacy, combining elements of historical and populist ideologies. Putin and Erdoğan's historical populism has had a major effect on Turkish and Russian foreign policy. Both men utilize revisionist history to justify their involvement in the affairs of countries in the region of the former empire. President Putin created a revisionist historical narrative that denied Ukraine's right to exist as an independent country, justifying his invasion of Ukraine. Erdoğan and the AKP have used their historical populism to claim that Turkey should be the preeminent regional power in the former Ottoman territories. Both ideologies involve significant distortions of historical events to legitimize the active role of Turkey and Russia in their historical sphere of influence. Furthermore, Erdoğan's and Putin's historical populism both lament that Turkey and Russia have lost influence and status following the breakup of the Ottoman and Russian/Soviet empires. An important difference in the historical populism of Putin and Erdoğan is that Putin focuses on the more recent victory in World War Two while Erdoğan's populism focuses on the more distant Ottoman past, especially the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. However, both leaders are pragmatists, so their use of historical ideology is flexible. Overall, there are many similarities between the historical populism of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The similarities reflect both leaders' pragmatic usage of ideologies to supplement their thin populism.

Pious Populists: Religion and Populism

Religious ideologies can supplement populism in order to create representations of pious people resisting the corrupt, unfaithful elite. Erdoğan's religious populism is a striking and important feature of his rule. President Erdoğan, who was educated in a religious high school, has drastically transformed the role of religion in public life in Turkey, and he has turned to Islamism as a method of ideologically justifying his rule. Islamism, as defined by Mohammed Ayoob, is "a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups,

and organizations that pursue political objectives.”⁵³ President Erdoğan’s Islamism uses religious narratives to create a populist “us vs. them” dynamic that strengthens his grip on power. Since around 2011, the AKP has used Islamism to drastically transform Turkey into a more openly Islamic society.⁵⁴ President Erdoğan has personally cultivated populist narratives that draw on Islam to unite voters. His references to Islam often relate religion and modernity, a pragmatic tactic that seeks to garner support from his conservative base without alienating voters who support secularism.⁵⁵ Erdoğan’s rhetoric frequently features references to the pious people of Turkey under siege from Westerners and elites.⁵⁶ These references are a clear-cut example of the construction of a populist “us vs. them” dynamic based on religion. In addition to personally propagating populist Islamist narratives in his rhetoric, Erdoğan has used Turkish institutions to spread Islamist views. Friday sermons from the Diyanet, Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs, follow the government’s populist narratives. As Ihsan Yilmaz, Mustafa Demir, and Nicholas Morieson’s analysis shows, Diyanet sermons construct vertical, horizontal, and civilizational binaries that portray Muslims as victims under attack from the West.⁵⁷ The Diyanet’s role in propagating the AKP’s religious populist ideology is a drastic transformation of the role of the Diyanet in Turkish society. The Diyanet used to control religion and keep it separate from the affairs of the state, but under the AKP it has become a political institution that spreads the AKP’s beliefs.⁵⁸ The AKP has also overhauled the Turkish education system to include more religious education.⁵⁹ The government has also increased funding for Imam Hatip schools, religious schools that are becoming increasingly popular throughout Turkey.⁶⁰ The religious overhaul of Turkey is a significant break from Turkey’s secular traditions. The institutionalization of religious populism is a significant change in Turkish politics. Although Turkey was once a far more secularist nation, the AKP has used religion to dictate what it means to be Turkish and to create an

⁵³ Mohammed Ayoub, *The Many Faces of Political Islam : Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

⁵⁴ Yilmaz and Bashirov, “The AKP after 15 Years,” 1822.

⁵⁵ Lorenzo C. B. Gontijo and Roberson S. Barbosa. “Erdoğan’s Pragmatism and the Ascension of AKP in Turkey: Islam and neo-Ottomanism,” *Domes* Milwaukee, Wis. 29, no. 1 (2020), 80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12205>.

⁵⁶ Tepe and Chekirova, “Faith in Nations,” 9.

⁵⁷ Yilmaz, Ihsan, Mustafa Demir, and Nicholas Morieson, “Religion in Creating Populist Appeal: Islamist Populism and Civilizationism in the Friday Sermons of Turkey’s Diyanet,” *Religions* 12, no. 5: 359 (2021), 11.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050359>

⁵⁸ Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, “Turkey’s Diyanet Under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?” *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): (626-7), 626.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1233663>.

⁵⁹ Yilmaz and Bashirov, “The AKP After 15 Years,” 1822-23.

⁶⁰ Special Reports, “With More Islamic Schooling, Erdoğan Aims to Reshape Turkey,” Reuters, January 25, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-Erdoğan-education/>.

exclusively Islamic national identity.⁶¹ The exclusively Islamic national identity of the AKP is an essential part of Erdoğan's religious populism. By defining the "people" whom Erdoğan represents in religious terms, the Turkish president is able to supplement populism with Islamism. Through rhetoric and institutional transformation, Erdoğan and the AKP have promoted Islamic populist narratives in Turkey. Those populist Islamic narratives have also greatly affected Turkish foreign policy.

Erdoğan's religious populism has led to a new focus on the Muslim world in Turkish foreign policy, based on rhetoric that portrays Turkey as the leader of a trans-national community of Muslims. Part of this shift toward the Middle East and the Islamic world is also a shift away from Europe. Erdoğan's populist rhetoric also directs anger at Europe and other Western countries. Turkey has been a candidate to join the European Union (EU) since 1999, but negotiations reached an impasse because of Turkey's human rights record and Turkey is unlikely to join the EU anytime soon.⁶² Tensions in Turkey-EU relations go back decades and have many causes, but Erdoğan's rhetoric certainly has not improved relations. Erdoğan and the AKP have built on the animosity caused by the EU's rejection of Turkey to accuse the West and EU of Islamophobia and anti-Turkish views and call for a reorientation of foreign policy away from Europe.⁶³ That reorientation led Erdoğan and the AKP to focus on the Middle East and, as previously discussed, the former territory of the Ottoman Empire. In combination with neo-Ottoman narratives, populist Turkish Islamism dictates that Turkey should play a leading role in the ummah, or the worldwide community of Muslims.⁶⁴ The Diyanet's Friday sermons frequently claim that Turkey is the defender of the community of Muslims while placing a variety of groups in the role of the aggressor.⁶⁵ These narratives have had a tangible effect on Turkey's foreign policy. They justified Turkey's support for Sunni rebels and eventual intervention in Syria and Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi in Egypt.⁶⁶ Turkey's drastic shift in foreign policy orientation under Erdoğan

⁶¹ M. Hakan Yavuz and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkish Secularism and Islam Under the Reign of Erdoğan INTRODUCTION," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1580828>.

⁶² Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "An Examination of the Underlying Dynamics of Turkey-European Union Relations through the Lenses of International Relations Theory," *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 5 (2022), 745-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2060083>.

⁶³ Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdoğan's Pragmatism and the Ascension of the AKP in Turkey," 85.

⁶⁴ Taş, Hakkı. "Continuity through Change: Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey." *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 12 (2022): 2869–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2108392>. 2879

⁶⁵ Yılmaz, Ihsan, Mustafa Demir, and Nicholas Morieson. 2021. "Religion in Creating Populist Appeal: Islamist Populism and Civilizationism in the Friday Sermons of Turkey's Diyanet," *Religions* 12, no. 5: 359. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050359> pg 11

⁶⁶ Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdoğan's Pragmatism and the Ascension of the AKP in Turkey," 85.

is a result of his pragmatic populism. Because Erdoğan emphasized the role of religion in Turkey, he focused on playing a larger role in the Middle East and turned away from the European Union.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin has similarly used religion to justify his rule and transform Russian society. Putin and the Russian government tightly control the Russian Orthodox Church and use it to legitimize Putin's presidency. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian government restored the Russian Orthodox Church to an influential place in Russian society by restoring cathedrals and removing Soviet-era restrictions on religion. The alliance between church and state created a mutually beneficial relationship wherein both institutions support and justify each other and the Russian government can "position itself as a modern-day defender of the faith."⁶⁷ Although the Russian government returned the Russian Orthodox Church to prominence, the Russian state strictly controls the Church, and it agrees with the government's narratives.⁶⁸ The Russian Orthodox Church has used rhetoric that incorporates many of Putin's ideas about Russia's place in the world. Church rhetoric portrays Russia as the defender of tradition against the rest of the world, especially the West.⁶⁹ Putin has also used rhetoric to link his rule and the values of the Russian Orthodox Church. In his speeches, Putin, who was raised in the strictly secular Soviet system, doesn't often overtly reference religion, but he uses religious imagery to portray himself as the defender of the pious Russian people.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Orthodox Christianity has become part of the traditional ideology that Putin uses to justify his rule and portray himself as the defender of the Russian people and culture.⁷¹ Putin's regime and the Russian Orthodox Church have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Putin and the Russian government have restored Russian Orthodoxy to prominence after the era of Soviet suppression of religion. The Russian Orthodox Church supports Putin's policies and allows Putin to portray himself as the champion of the traditional values of the Russian people. In turn, Putin has instrumentalized the Russian Orthodox Church to create a religious populist narrative of the faithful, traditional Russian people. Putin's religious populism affects Russian foreign policy, especially by rallying support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

⁶⁷ James Mersol, "When Russian Values Go Abroad: The Clash Between Populism and Foreign Policy," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2017). 96–97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27001449>.

⁶⁸ Marcin Skladanowski and Cezary Smuniewski, "The Secularism of Putin's Russia and Patriarch Kirill's Church: The Russian Model of State-Church Relations and Its Social Reception." *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 14, no. 1 (2023), 9-10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010119>.

⁶⁹ Alexander Agadjanian, "Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin's Russia." *Religion, State & Society* 45, no. 1 (2017), 54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1272893>.

⁷⁰ Tepe and Chekirova, "Faith in Nations," 13-14.

⁷¹ Natal'ia Zorkaia, "Orthodox Christianity in Post-Soviet Society." *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 3 (2014), 16. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940520301>.

Putin's religious populism justifies an aggressive Russian foreign policy, especially the invasion of Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch Kirill, is the dominant religion in the post-Soviet region. However, the Ukrainian, Latvian, Estonian, and Moldovan Orthodox churches are autonomous churches in the Russian Orthodox Church, and other regional churches have various levels of autonomy.⁷² The Russian Orthodox Church frequently expresses support for Putin's foreign policy; Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has publicly supported Russia's aggressive foreign policy, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁷³ The Ukrainian Orthodox Church condemned Russia's invasion and tried to assert its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, but it was ultimately unable to formally become independent.⁷⁴ Putin has used religion to deny Ukraine's independence. In a speech, he claimed that Ukraine and Russia are descended from the same Christian kingdom, so Ukrainians and Russians are one people.⁷⁵ In a letter to the World Council of Churches, Patriarch Kirill echoed Putin's claim, writing that Russians and Ukrainians "came from one Kievan baptismal font, are united by common faith, common saints and prayers, and share common historical fate."⁷⁶ Similar to the historical narrative, this religious narrative denies that Ukrainians are an independent people, separate from Russia. The narrative that Putin and his allies in the Russian Orthodox Church have spread justifies Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Religious narratives are a major part of Vladimir Putin's pragmatic populism and they have been a crucial justification for aggressive Russian foreign policy.

Presidents Putin and Erdoğan have similarly used religion to garner support and justify their chosen foreign policies. Both leaders include religion as a key part of their country's national identity. Erdoğan has overhauled Turkish society, transforming many formerly secular institutions, such as the Diyanet and education system so that they openly promote Islam. Similarly, Vladimir Putin has returned the Russian Orthodox Church to a prominent place in Russian society. The Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarch Kirill have echoed many of the Russian government's narratives. Putin himself does not reference religion in his rhetoric as often as President Erdoğan, but faith is still an important part of Putin's descriptions of the Russian people.⁷⁷

⁷²Ksenia Luchenko, "Why the Russian Orthodox Church Supports the War in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed June 24, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88916>.

⁷³ Skladanowski and Smuniewski. "The Secularism of Putin's Russia and Patriarch Kirill's Church," 11-12.

⁷⁴ Luchenko, "Why the Russian Orthodox Church Supports the War in Ukraine."

⁷⁵ Aidan Houston and Peter Mandaville, "The Role of Religion in Russia's War on Ukraine," United States Institute of Peace, March 17, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/role-religion-russias-war-ukraine>.

⁷⁶ Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, "Response by H.H. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca (English Translation)," trans. Ioan Sauca, World Council of Churches, March 10, 2022.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation>.

⁷⁷ Tepe and Chekirova, "Faith in Nations," 15.

Erdoğan's religious education is a likely reason that he frequently uses religious language in his rhetoric. Putin has a secular Soviet background, so he does not use religious rhetoric as often as the Turkish president. However, both leaders portray themselves as representatives of the pious people. Putin and Erdoğan use religion to define a populist "people versus elites" binary and claim that they represent the faithful of their country. Religious populism contributes to Putin's claim that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Putin and Patriarch Kirill's references to Russia and Ukraine's shared history often include the claim that the modern nations of Russia and Ukraine are descended from the same Christian kingdom.⁷⁸ This claim is part of Putin's revisionist history that attempts to deny Ukraine's independence by pointing to Russia and Ukraine's historical ties. The religious element adds another dimension to legitimize Putin's historical claims, especially given the support of Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox Church. Religious and historical narratives also reinforce each other in Erdoğan's populist narratives. Historical representations of the Ottoman past often emphasize that the Ottoman Empire was the seat of the Caliphate of the Islamic World and claim that it was an empire under attack from secularism and from the West.⁷⁹ The populist foreign policies that Erdoğan and Putin have justified with religious narratives are also similar.⁸⁰ Both leaders use faith to minimize the importance of borders; Putin has used the Orthodox faith to claim that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, and Erdoğan has used Islamist rhetoric to claim a leadership role for Turkey in the Muslim world. For both Putin and Erdoğan, religion plays a key role in legitimizing their populist leadership and foreign policy.

Nationalism and Populism

Erdoğan's espousal of nationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon that reflects his pragmatic populism. He has pivoted to nationalism as an ideological foundation for his rule because nationalism has become a winning ideology in Turkey. In 2015 the AKP underwent a dramatic transformation; the party began using nationalist rhetoric, especially anti-Kurdish rhetoric, to attract more conservative voters. That shift was a reaction to the rise of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).⁸¹ The HDP's electoral success, despite Erdoğan's efforts to sway Kurdish voters, showed that pursuing a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict would not help Erdoğan stay in power.⁸² Therefore, since 2015 Erdoğan and the AKP have increasingly turned

⁷⁸ Houston and Mandaville, "The Role of Religion in Russia's war on Ukraine."

⁷⁹ Tepe and Cherkova, "Faith in Nations," 9.

⁸⁰ Although it lies beyond the scope of this paper, both Putin and Erdoğan have used antisemitic rhetoric to consolidate the support of their followers

⁸¹ Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "How Russia Exploited Nationalism in Turkey to Expand Its Influence in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 28, no. 2 (2021), 112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12583>.

⁸² Nicholas Danforth, "A Fetih Accompli: How Erdoğan Married Religion and Nationalism" *New Lines Magazine*, May 28, 2023. <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/a-fetih-accomplish-how-erdogan-married-religion-and-nationalism/>

to nationalist rhetoric to gain support from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and anti-Western Kemalists.⁸³ In the recent 2023 election campaign, Erdoğan used nationalist rhetoric to win reelection despite skyrocketing inflation, a lacking response to catastrophic earthquakes, and a broad opposition coalition.⁸⁴ Just like his Islamist rhetoric, Erdoğan's nationalist rhetoric defines Turkey in opposition to the West. The United States' support for Kurdish fighters in Syria has lent credence to Erdoğan's anti-Western rhetoric.⁸⁵ In speeches Erdoğan often stresses that Turkey must pursue an autonomous foreign policy and reject Western influence, for example saying "only we can solve our problems...[foreigners] like the conflicts, fights and quarrels of the Middle East."⁸⁶ This is the nationalist version of the populist "us versus them" binary, but it once again pits the Turkish people against the West. Since 2015, Erdoğan has effectively used nationalism in conjunction with populist rhetoric to appeal to voters and strengthen his grip on power.

The AKP's nationalist transformation manifests itself in Turkey's foreign policy. As part of his nationalist turn, Erdoğan has increased Turkey's military intervention targeting Kurds in Syria. In 2016, 2018, 2019, and 2020 Turkey undertook military operations in Syria attempting to push the YPG, Kurdish forces that Turkey considers to be the Syrian branch of the PKK, away from the Turkish border.⁸⁷ Erdoğan's military operations against Kurds have created a "rally around the flag" effect that, albeit temporarily, increases the AKP's share of votes.⁸⁸ Another part of the nationalist turn has been a harsher refugee policy. In the 2023 election campaign, Erdoğan promised to repatriate one million Syrian refugees, a shift to a harsher policy that appeals more to nationalist voters, although still not as harsh as his opponent Kemal Kilicdaroglu who said he would send all migrants back to their countries of origin.⁸⁹ Although AKP voters are more likely to support higher spending on refugees, a 2018 poll by the Center for American Progress showed that 78 percent of Turkish voters

⁸³ Hakki Taş, "Continuity through Change: Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 12 (2022), 2881. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2108392>.

⁸⁴ Nabih Bulos, "Making Turkey Great Again: How Erdoğan Rode to Reelection on a Nationalist Wave," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-06-02/turkey-erdogan-rode-nationalism-wave-win-reelection>.

⁸⁵ Danforth, "A Fetih Accompli."

⁸⁶ Max Hoffman, Michael Werz, and John Halpin. "Turkey's 'New Nationalism' Amid Shifting Politics." Center for American Progress, February 11, 2018.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/turkeys-new-nationalism-amid-shifting-politics/>

⁸⁷ Salim Çevik, "Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq." *SWP Comment* 37 (2022), 2.

https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C37_TurkeysOperations_Syria_Iraq.pdf

⁸⁸ Çevik "Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq," 7.

⁸⁹ Burcu Karakas, Ece Toksabay, Huseyin Hayatsever, and Maya Gebeily. "Turkey's Erdoğan Faces Struggle to Meet Syrian Refugee Promise." *Reuters*, May 31, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-faces-struggle-meet-syrian-refugee-promise-2023-05-31/>.

agreed with the statement: “Turkey spends too much time and money caring for refugees from other countries and should focus more on its own citizens.”⁹⁰ A harsher refugee policy is popular with Turkish voters, showing the popularity of nationalism in Turkey today. Erdoğan has responded to this wave of nationalism by using more nationalist rhetoric and turning to nationalist foreign policies such as a harsher stance against Syrian refugees and more military action against the Kurds.

Vladimir Putin has also used nationalism as an ideology to supplement his populism. Although Putin’s nationalism at times takes the form of both state nationalism and ethnic nationalism, a major shift from state nationalist rhetoric to ethnic nationalist rhetoric occurred in the 2010s. In 2012 after widespread demonstrations, Putin began incorporating more ethnic nationalist rhetoric to assuage the demonstrators.⁹¹ The 2014 annexation of Crimea marked another turning point in Russian nationalist discourse. The Russian nation became more important than the Russian state, and the annexation of Crimea was depicted as the rebirth of the Russian nation.⁹² That turning point marked a period of greater repression domestically as Vladimir Putin consolidated his power leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁹³ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the culmination of the rise of nationalism in Russia. Putin’s nationalist rhetoric justifying the invasion portrays his “special military operation” as a necessary step to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine from Ukrainian neo-Nazis.⁹⁴ Although Putin’s nationalism has evolved to focus more on ethnicity and less on the state, there are some consistent features of the role his nationalism plays in Russia. Putin legitimizes his rule by portraying himself as the protector of the Russian people domestically and internationally.⁹⁵ Putin’s nationalism emphasizes the importance of unity while rejecting the legitimacy of alternative or dissenting viewpoints.⁹⁶ Putin’s nationalist rhetoric thus creates a populist dichotomy wherein Putin is the defender of the Russian people from domestic and international threats. The dichotomy paints any opposition or dissent as illegitimate

⁹⁰ Hoffman, Werz, and Halpin. “Turkey’s ‘New Nationalism’ Amid Shifting Politics.”

⁹¹ Helge Blakkisrud, “The Kremlin’s New Approach to National Identity,” in *The New Russian Nationalism*, eds. Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud, (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 255.

⁹² Yuri Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2016), 387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1076959>.

⁹³ Daniel Treisman, “Putin Unbound: How Repression at Home Presaged Belligerence Abroad,” *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 3, (2022), 48. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A714894419/BIC?u=wash43584&sid=bookmarkBIC&xid=5043b14b.

⁹⁴ Paweł Rojek, “Imperialism and Nationalism: The Nature of Russian Aggression in Ukraine,” *Studies in East European Thought* 74, no. 4 (2022), 448. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-022-09501-1>.

⁹⁵ Bo Petersson, “Nationalism and Greatness: Russia Under the Putin Presidencies,” in *Research Handbook on Nationalism*, eds. Liah Greenfield and Zeying Wu, (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 379. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789903447.00041>.

⁹⁶ Sean Cannady and Paul Kubicek, “Nationalism and Legitimation for Authoritarianism: A Comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2013.11.001>.

because it goes against the will of the Russian people, which Putin personifies. Putin's nationalist rhetoric legitimizes his rule to the Russian people, and it has also played a major role in his justification of the invasion of Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin's nationalism is directly connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There has been significant debate about the ideological foundations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some experts believe a new Russian imperialism was the driving force, while others believe that nationalism was more important.⁹⁷ I believe that both arguments have merit because Putin has used a variety of ideological narratives to justify the invasion. Putin's use of ideology is motivated by political calculations and his desire to increase Russia's power.⁹⁸ Therefore, he uses whatever justifications, whether nationalist or imperialist, best fit the situation. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on Putin's use of nationalism to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Eleanor Knott describes Putin's claims about Ukraine as "existential nationalism" because, to Putin, Ukraine's identity is "both 'artificial' and a threat to Russia."⁹⁹ Furthermore, Putin's narrative has relied on various claims that Russia's invasion is protecting the rights of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ These claims clearly rely on nationalist ideas about Russian and Ukrainian identities, but they also fit well with populist discourse. Populist politics often combine nationalist and populist ideas to exclusively define the "people" as members of the nation, who are under attack from foreign elites.¹⁰¹ Vladimir Putin has done exactly that by portraying himself as the defender of the ethnically Russian people from the threat of an independent Ukraine. This fusion of nationalism and populism is a prototypical example of nationalism supplementing the thin ideology of populism. Ultimately, nationalism has helped Vladimir Putin justify the invasion of Ukraine. The Russian president has effectively combined nationalism and populism to portray himself as the defender of the Russian people from the threat of global elites and Ukraine.

President Putin and President Erdoğan have both used nationalism to supplement their populist politics. Anti-Westernism has been a key feature of both leaders' nationalist rhetoric. They use nationalism to

⁹⁷ Paweł Rojek describes this debate in "Imperialism and Nationalism", and Michael Khodarkovsky makes the case for imperialism in "Russia's War in Ukraine: How the 19th Century Imperialism and 20th Century Fascism Found Home in the 21st Century Russia." *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2022): 95–169. while Taras Kuzio makes the case for nationalism in "Imperial Nationalism as the Driver Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 1 (2023): 30–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12875>.

⁹⁸ Teper, "Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea," 389-90.

⁹⁹ Eleanor Knott, "Existential Nationalism: Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 1 (2023), 47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12878>.

¹⁰⁰ Rojek, "Imperialism and Nationalism," 450.

¹⁰¹ De Cleen, "Populism and Nationalism," 334.

supplement their populism by claiming that the people of their nation are under attack from global, and especially Western, elites. Putin and Erdoğan both turned to nationalism in response to popular movements. Putin co-opted nationalist rhetoric following the 2012 protests, and Erdoğan turned to nationalism to win over conservative nationalist voters after failing to win over Kurdish voters. Both leaders responded to popular “demand” by using nationalism to supplement their populist ideologies. They spoke of a new binary between the virtuous people of the nation and the corrupt foreign elites. This is a common occurrence in populist parties; many populists portray the ingroup of the nation under siege from foreign outgroups.¹⁰² The combination of nationalism and populism has motivated both leaders to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy. Erdoğan’s military operations in Syria and Putin’s aggression toward Ukraine are similar in that they target groups seen as an existential threat to the nation. Once again though, the Russian invasion of Ukraine stands out as a far more drastic action than any Turkish foreign policy action. The invasion, which Putin has justified through existential nationalist discourse, was an attempt to fully wipe out Ukraine, going far beyond Turkey’s comparatively limited involvement in Syria. Furthermore, the Kurdish issue is unique to Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan’s military action against Kurds in Syria is deeply tied to domestic concerns and Erdoğan’s attempts to woo nationalist voters in Turkey. Overall, however, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have taken a similarly pragmatic approach in turning to nationalist populism.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there are undeniable similarities between the pragmatic populism of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Both men have similarly used historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies to supplement their ‘thin’ populism. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has glorified Turkey’s Ottoman past in an effort to legitimize his own rule. Erdoğan has also turned to Islamism to complement his populism. He often refers to himself as the defender of the pious people of Turkey. Increasingly since 2015, Erdoğan has also used nationalist rhetoric. Mainly by advocating a tougher approach to fighting Kurds in Syria, Erdoğan has recently begun taking a more hardline nationalist approach to foreign policy. In speeches, he has used more anti-West nationalist rhetoric as well, although there was been a tactical shift to more positive rhetoric in the summer of 2023 in an effort to curry favor with President Biden and NATO. Vladimir Putin has, in many respects, used a very similar mix of ideologies. Vladimir Putin has glorified the past, both of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, especially concentrating on military victories. He has presented a revisionist narrative that emphasizes Russia’s past success in an effort to justify greater influence for modern Russia. Although he has used

¹⁰² De Cleen, “Populism and Nationalism”, 349.

religion to a lesser extent than Erdoğan, Putin has still revitalized religion in Russian public life. Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church have formed a mutually beneficial alliance that supports Putin's rule, as well as the invasion of Ukraine. Thirdly, Putin has turned to nationalist populism in his recent attempts to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. His nationalist narratives deny that Ukraine can exist independently of Russia. There are many similarities between Vladimir Putin's and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's use of populism and ideology. However, the leaders are pragmatists who use whatever narratives fit best for their purposes. Thus, because populism is 'thin' and flexible both leaders use whatever supplemental ideology fits their purposes best. Their similar use of supplemental historical, religious, and nationalist ideologies provides insight into the strategic and pragmatic relationship between the two leaders and into Turkey's response to the war in Ukraine. However, both leaders are ultimately pragmatists who can change their stances depending on what best fits their purposes, so their relationship is constantly changing and could easily deteriorate.

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