

THE SLIDING WEST:
**POPULISM AND
RELIGION AS
CHALLENGES TO THE
LIBERAL ORDER**

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About Istanbul Policy Center

Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) is an independent policy research institute with global outreach. Its mission is to foster academic research in social sciences and its application to policy making. IPC team is firmly committed to providing decision-makers, opinion leaders, academics, and general public with innovative and objective analyses in key domestic and foreign policy issues. IPC has expertise in a wide range of areas, including – but not exhaustive to – Turkey-EU-U.S. relations, education, climate change, current trends of political and social transformation in Turkey, as well as the impact of civil society and local governance on this metamorphosis.

PREFACE

As part of its Observatory Program, Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), in cooperation with the Transatlantic Academy, organized a third conference on the theme of the future of the liberal order.¹ This one-day roundtable, “The Sliding West,” took place on May 28, 2015 at the Washington, DC headquarters of German Marshall Fund of the United States. The purpose of this roundtable, like that of the preceding ones, was to develop new ideas and gain fresh insights from a small group of international participants with a view to contributing to the ongoing debates on the shaping of the post-Western world.

This series of conferences has drawn upon the work done by the Transatlantic Academy over the past three years but is not confined solely to the issues taken up by the Transatlantic Academy fellows. The first conference held in Istanbul on May 22-23, 2013, took as its point of departure the Transatlantic Academy’s 2013 report *Transatlantic Disconnect: Citizenship and Accountability in the Transatlantic Community*.² The questions that arose in that meeting have been incorporated in the conference report *Considering the Future of the Liberal Order: Hope, Despair and Anticipation*.³

The second meeting took as its point of departure the Transatlantic Academy’s 2014 report *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World*. That report acknowledged at the outset that the West’s “material and ideological hegemony” was coming to an end.⁴ However, it concluded that the Western world would be able to play a significant role in promoting liberal values and practices and contribute to the shaping of a rules-based world in future, provided that it has the ability to recover “its political and economic strength.”⁵ These ideas were condensed into the conference report *The Liberal Order in Peril: The Future of the World Order with the West against the Rising Rest*.⁶

The third conference, detailed in this report, took as its point of departure the Transatlantic Academy’s 2015 report, *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*.⁷ That report emphasized the need for the West to adhere to its liberal values in order to reinforce its stand to prevent global divergence away from the liberal order. The West as a whole, especially the United States, needed to stand up for its values in a more prominent way than it has in recent years.

The Observatory’s Chatham House roundtable format lent itself to the tentative nature of intellectual considerations in respect to the perceived changes in the global order. One can anticipate a future world on the basis of the clues gleaned from current trends; but, how the future world might differ from ours remains a matter of intellectual speculation.

¹ See Appendix.

² Transatlantic Academy, *Transatlantic Disconnect: Citizenship and Accountability in the Transatlantic Community* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2013).

³ Ahmet O. Evin, Onur Sazak, and Lisa J. Repell, *Considering the Future of the Liberal Order: Hope, Despair and Anticipation* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, 2013).

⁴ Transatlantic Academy, *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2014), 13.

⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁶ Ahmet Evin and Megan Gisclon, *The Liberal Order in Peril: The Future of the World Order with the West against the Rising Rest* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, 2015).

⁷ Transatlantic Academy, *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015).

IMPLICATION OF PUTIN'S CHALLENGES TO THE WEST

First on the agenda of the “The Sliding West” was Russia vis-à-vis the United States and the European Union (EU). In the opening statement it was claimed that there was a striking difference between the latter two. The United States and the EU were like “Mars and Mercury” when it came to dealing with Russia: While the United States focused on military confrontation with Russia, the EU emphasized commercial relations. For years, the Russian economy had been crippled by U.S.-led sanctions, whereas the EU had been more open regarding its trade with Russia, largely because of its heavy reliance on Russian oil and natural gas. In response to recent displays of Russian military aggression, it was the United States that had been consistently critical; it has taken the lead in deploying U.S. troops to Russian border countries such as the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary in Operation Atlantic Resolve to train and arm local armies with a view to preparing them to stand up to future cases of Russian aggression. Further and more importantly, disagreement regarding the Syrian conflict had reignited the longtime rivalry between the U.S. and Russian hegemony in the Middle East, especially since Russia had shown that it had no qualms about attacking U.S.-trained anti-Assad forces.

There was a clear civilizational gap between Russia and the West as reflected in the discrepancy between the idea and rhetoric emanating from the two sides. Although the West, specifically the United States, had tried to reach out to Russia, the Russian agenda both before and after the Cold War had proven to be a formidable impediment to the implementation and success of Western liberalism. Over forty years ago, the Soviet Union had signed the Helsinki Accords, marking what most people had thought was the beginning of a new era of common understanding between Europe and Russia. The two blocs agreed on a joint acceptance of “Western” principles, i.e. the post-modern, democratic status quo after World War II, which would, it was thought, ease tensions between the two powers. However, those who appeared optimistic about the accords had since lost hope. Russia had openly and plainly violated the entire document of the Helsinki Final Act, and there appeared no end in sight to its continuing defiance of its basic principles.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States had been actively engaging with Moscow with a view to bringing Russia into partnership with the West. The United States had been doing so because it realized

Russia's importance and the potentially positive role it could play in global affairs. Russia's resistance to adopt the liberal order had been disappointing for the United States and its Western allies. But many continued to hope that as a result of intensive dialogue along with increased pressure from sanctions Russia would eventually adopt the Western liberal order. But, a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union and the bipolar world order, the question needed to be asked: Will Russia ever get the Western perspective?

Although the West believed it had been largely conciliatory toward Russia since the Cold War (a claim with which not only Putin but other leaders in Moscow would hardly agree), Russia was perceived to be deliberately unreceptive to the West's advances. It had retained the deep mistrust of the West inculcated in the Bolshevik era and had seen a link between the West's longtime imperial aims and its own economic demise following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Western scholars and policymakers had underestimated the psychological effects of the Soviet Union's demise on the Russian people. The end of the Cold War appeared to hold the promise of a better, economically more prosperous, and liberal Western lifestyle for Russians. However, the reality was another decade of economic hardship, instability, and political uncertainty in a difficult transition from the strong-arm of Soviet leadership to what was hoped to be a more inclusive democratic system. Instead, chaos prevailed. The economic consequences of the Soviet collapse, coupled with the disengagement of its former satellite states, strained the newly born Russian Federation. Moreover, Russia's fall from being an imperial power and landing in a new, unipolar world led by the United States and its allies struck a tremendous blow to Russia's national pride. Although towards the end of the Soviet era Russia had only a fraction of its former power left, it nevertheless had wielded influence over its satellite states. The real blow came with its loss of influence over many of its dependents; the Russian pride sustained the shock of seeing Warsaw Pact countries applying for membership of the EU and the Newly Independent States of Central Asia welcoming U.S. assistance to open them up directly to global markets bypassing Russian transport connections. It has been clear since the beginning of its recovery from the Soviet era that Russia was still seeking to rewrite history by its own right, longing for a return to the nineteenth-century imperial state it once was. It was hard to fall to the bottom after being on top.

Only by the end of the 1990s, after Vladimir Putin's 1999 appointment as prime minister and his subsequent election in 2000 as president that Russia's transition problems appeared to be somewhat alleviated. Putin had been pursuing two aims: to regain stability and reclaim influence in the world. In 2015, he could be judged as successful in both. With Russia's GDP quintupling from 2000-2008, seeing only a slight drop from 2008-2012, and then recovering and rising after 2012, Putin had certainly managed to regain overall stability for Moscow.

How long could this positive economic performance last? Until recently prospects for an economic downturn did not cause much anxiety. Putin put resources into a Sovereign Wealth Fund. Although not one of the largest among funds its kind, it could nevertheless be mobilized to tide over Russia's finances in the case of a downturn. The overall optimistic outlook for Russian finances, however, had been the result of rising oil (and therefore natural gas) prices rather than Putin's management of the economy.

As a result of the unexpected drop in oil prices to surprisingly low levels, Russia's finances had been seriously squeezed. Although hydrocarbon prices were expected to recover, when and to which level they would recover could not be predicted. Two new questions had arisen under the current circumstances: (i) Would Russia be forced to reduce its international engagements, particularly military and naval deployments abroad? (ii) Was Putin facing the dangers of losing some of his charisma as a result of the looming economic problems?

In his quest to reclaim influence, Putin had been successful in presenting a strong and unified picture of Russia, pitting his state against the West and its powers. There was a widely accepted view in Russia of a West that is paranoid and delusional: a West that actively undermined Russia and Russian interests in order to keep Russia unstable. This perception implicated both NATO and the EU and led to the belief that the West presented a serious military threat to Russia. As a consequence, Russia believed it had the duty to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers outside of Russia, the *Russkiy Mir* in its neighborhood. In Russia's view such a conspiracy theory had lent legitimacy to its actions. In fact, as Russia understood it, it was Russia's legitimate right to project its influence (read power) across the globe to balance the West's ambitions and threat. However, in reality Russia was still a nineteenth-century power that believed in the naked use of force. It believed in the benefits of rela-

tive power, and that, in order to have relative power, it also had to have unstable neighbors dependent on it for protection and influence. The rising narrative enforced by Putin's government and reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church had built a culture of paranoia and defense, catapulting Russia away from the West rather than moving towards it.

Further, after the May 2015 Riga Summit, Russia had indicated that the Eastern Partnership—a joint initiative involving the EU to increase multilateral relations between the EU, its member states, and their Eastern European partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine—had been intended to pull Eastern European countries away from Russia, thus justifying its recent history of reckless military actions. On the one hand, the Eastern Partnership's continued commitment to the EU in Riga had increased the West's sphere of influence in Eastern European countries, further isolating Russia. On the other, Russia's failure to fulfill its international commitments continued to deepen Western mistrust and distance diplomacy. As a result, Russia, it may be argued, felt encircled and responded once more with a show of force and reckless military action. It was not surprising that Russia had chosen Ukraine as its "whipping boy" in the region. To Russia, Ukraine had appeared divided and weak in the wake of the demonstrations leading to the Maidan Revolution of February 2014, culminating in the Ukrainian President Yanukovich's flight to Moscow. At issue had been Yanukovich's sudden refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, despite his earlier announcement to the contrary, instead signing an agreement with Russia. The Yanukovich regime's disproportionate use of force against demonstrators leading to casualties had provoked a revolutionary regime change, which Moscow had claimed to be illegitimate. Moscow then had taken advantage of Ukraine's weak moment and sent troops to Ukraine and Crimea to annex the latter and instigate a secessionist revolt in the former. This, it appeared, had provided Putin with a means to reverse his declining popularity, and it had worked.

Putin's belief in himself and in the "New Russia" had certainly posed a threat to the neighborhood and regional stability. There was much international concern over the annexations of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Crimea, as well as Russian troops located in Transnistria. Increased Russian pressure on Georgia, as well as other neighbors, was directed not only at governments but also at civil society and the cultural arena. Economic pressure was also used for imposing Russia's will on those countries and forcing them to

join the Eurasian Union instead of moving towards the West. Minority rights, particularly in Chechnya, were ignored under Russia's influence; domestic as well as foreign NGOs had come under Russian attack as part of Moscow's plan to undermine democracy in the region.

Putin appeared to have a tacit contract in mind: he seemed to be saying that in return for the stability and prosperity he had given to the Russian people, he would expect the Russian people to give him unchecked power. As Russia juxtaposed itself belligerently against the liberal order, it also forestalled international cooperation. For example, cooperation in the Arctic and Africa had come to an end.

Given that Russia chose to threaten its neighbors and thus regional security, the question of what could be done about Putin's "New Russia" came up—a question that is as real as it is rhetorical. Ought the West simply take Russia for what it was? Or give Russia a chance to reset its policies? The West needed to be prepared, as some arguments ran, to support those neighborhood countries threatened by Russia—be even prepared to play the NATO card to signal its serious commitment to defend those countries against Russian aggression. The West, however, also needed to adopt an appropriate and effective strategy, an essential prerequisite of which was to learn how to counter Russia's hybrid warfare. An opposing viewpoint offered was to assess the regional reaction from Russia's optic: the West needed to recognize, the argument went, that Russia had an interest in Eastern Europe, perhaps even more than the United States or EU did. If the West was not ready to take that viewpoint into account, what other policies could it pursue?

The alternative policies were articulated in terms of a series of steps as follows. First, the West needed to ensure active implementation by Russia of the Minsk II agreement, since this agreement was vital for preserving the West-Russia relationship. Second, the West needed to assure Russia that Ukraine and Georgia would never join NATO. Otherwise, was the West prepared to keep an open door policy to entice other countries to continue to implement Western policies? And, consequently, was the West prepared not only to perpetuate a relationship of high tension with Russia but also cause Russia to keep a high degree of pressure on its neighbors? Third, the West's missile defense policies needed to be questioned: Was preserving or expanding the West's current missile defense system worth the price of Russian paranoia? Finally, but importantly, there was a need for Russia to take the first steps, regardless of the situation.

It was further asked, in turn, why the West should endorse Russian paranoia by retracting promises made to Ukraine and Georgia by promising that the latter two countries would never be a part of NATO. The answer to this, however, was made quite clear: Georgia and Ukraine could not join NATO, because if they did Article 5 would kick in immediately due to the presence of Russian troops on what is considered to be Georgian and Ukrainian territory. Instead, alternative strategies and measures of defense needed to be put into place in order to help protect the sovereignty of these states in the face of Russian aggression. The West could not allow these states to stand on their own, and certainly the West did not intend to let them collapse into the reincarnation of the Soviet Union. However, rather than being obsessive about whether or not the West was succumbing to Russia's paranoia, one ought to turn to the bigger question of how the West could get back on an even keel with Russia. The first step toward reconciliation, as noted, needed to come from Moscow; but, nevertheless, the United States still needed to think about what steps the West ought to take afterwards.

How serious a military threat did Russia pose to the West? In respect to the developments in the Caucasus, there was a rise in Cold War thinking; the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 had left a vivid impression of how easy it was to start a regional conflict that pitched Russia against the West. The region remained uneasy behind a thin veneer of stability. Russian troops remained in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; Georgia would still prefer to move closer to the West, but for reasons articulated regarding NATO commitments, it was not likely to get any closer to the West than being in the EU's Eastern Partnership; Azerbaijan had not developed, unlike Georgia, an aversion to Russia, and it might even be moving closer to Russia; and Armenia had remained too dependent on Russia.

Developments in Syria had also shown the degree of Russia's assertiveness. At a time when the West unanimously blamed Assad for the civil war and bloodshed in Syria, Russia had continued to defend the Assad regime; when Damascus seemed to be in danger of defeat, Russia had escalated its military intervention to fully support the Assad regime. However, in which ways and to what extent the multi-faceted civil war in Syria might have had an impact on Russia's already tense relations with the West remained a matter of speculation as a result of the ISIS factor and other collateral developments. The rise of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and its rapid conquests in Syria and Iraq had deflected attention from the ongoing Syrian civil war to unprecedented atrocities committed

by ISIS militants. ISIS had emerged as the greatest threat to Western and regime security because of its effective military organization, its ability to recruit fighters worldwide, and its disruptive terrorist actions in Europe and globally. As a result, the West had not reacted vehemently to Russia's escalated interferences in Syria, even if Russia's and the West's primary goals diverged: Russia's mission was to prop up the Assad regime by closing the immediate vicinity of Damascus from opposition forces (that combined a range of U.S. armed irregulars to radical Islamists, al-Qaida, and ISIS supporters), while the coalition forces focused on targeting ISIS positions in other areas of Syria and Iraq. Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane that had violated (albeit for a few seconds) Turkey's airspace had complicated NATO's relationship with Moscow even more than active Russian intervention in Syria. While the Western alliance immediately showed support for Turkey as a result of the Russian fighter jet's violation of Turkish airspace, NATO, in particular the Pentagon, had not been happy with Turkey's targeting of Kurdish positions across the border mostly in Iraq instead of giving full support to the coalition's air operation against ISIS. Washington had made clear several times that it did not agree with Turkey's consideration of the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a terrorist group allied with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); PYD remained an important ally for Washington in the U.S. war against ISIS. By insisting on pursuing its own policy priorities in that neighborhood, Ankara appeared to have isolated itself from international efforts to find a solution to the Syrian crisis. A gradual convergence of Russian and Western views, particularly with respect to the cease-fire agreement in Syria, had provided a surprising twist to the present history of relations between Moscow and Washington, which, shaped by mutual distrust, were still far from being cordial.

CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: RELIGION AND POPULISM

The second section began with a focus on populism before expanding into the relationship between religion and populism. Populism, it was posited, was a difficult concept to pin down, but the idea had its roots in Latin American politics and was mostly associated with leaders such as Peron, Vargas, and Chavez. Populism, an elusive term, could be associated with any political movement—with both the left and right, with fascism and democracy, with radical redistribution and neoliberalism. It could be a strategy by challengers or incumbents. Any practical movement or regime that made its central appeal to “the people” had often been characterized as populist. Populism could simply be defined as the political mobilization and discourse of the antagonism between the disenfranchised but honorable populace and the immoral elite.⁸

Recent scholarship suggested that populism ought not to be seen as an entity but as a political practice. According to Jansen’s definition, populism had two components: mobilization and discursiveness, involving “mobilization of ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action.”⁹ Populism was something political actors *do*: actively forming “the people” as a social group and reconstituting their interests in line with a leader, a leader in power or opposition. Because populism had thrived on the success of getting significantly large groups to participate in the political process and articulating their demands, milder forms of populism had often been confused with participation and popular democracy. A clear distinction needed to be made between the two: for populism itself would challenge liberal democracy by virtue of political mobilization to support a particular goal, thereby encouraging majoritarianism. The discussion then turned to the question of what the relationship between populism and religion was and why populism was more common in some countries and not others.

It is often assumed that religion is a conservative force. Yet, it was claimed, this was not necessarily true. Taken as a conservative force, religion justified the world as it was, as reflected in the works of the great sociologists, Marx, Durkheim, and (sometimes even) Weber. It was essentially seen as a force to bolster and legitimize the status quo. But recent work on the sociology of religion

had reached diametrically opposite conclusions. The “sacred transcendence” of religion (that is, the claim that religion offered an ultimate reality beyond our mundane world), it was argued, endowed religion with a critical outlook. From that perspective, temporal authority could be judged according to divine authority, and the status quo could be resisted as being a manifestation of temporal authority. Accordingly, mobilization against the status quo, therefore temporal authority, could indeed be considered as religious duty.

Religion was taken as a just force by which the people could collectively and rightfully change the status quo. Bellah, for instance, brought an example from American democracy to light, citing that the puritanical roots in the Protestant covenant—the idea that the American people have entered into a covenant with God which, if broken, would bring punishment to the sinful nation—had a significant impact on mobilizing the American political discourse throughout history, including Lincoln’s popular religious appeal to end slavery in the 1860s.¹⁰ Indeed, from the colonial era, through Lincoln, and through to the modern day, with examples ranging from Hurricane Katrina to Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s relationship to the Obama campaign, religion had been an essential part of the American political scene, especially as a popular tool for mobilization.

Religion, therefore, was not necessarily a conservative force *per se*; it could as easily be adapted to further popular or populist causes as it could be to reinforce conservative positions. Turkey was a case in point: in Turkey’s increasingly conservative environment, appeal to Muslim values went hand-in-hand with populism; in fact, religion came to be used by dominant political actors to reinforce populist mobilization.

In Turkey, there had been a sliding trend towards the right—towards becoming not only more Islamic but also more centered around the leadership of former Justice and Development Party (AKP) leader and current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.¹¹ But why had Turkey been sliding toward the right? The convergence of two streaks of populism, Islamism and Erdoğanism, it was posited, needed further explanation. Recourse to historical

⁸ Robert S. Jansen, “Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism,” in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre, 159–188 (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2015), 166–167.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” originally published in the issue “Religion and America,” *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96 no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21. This article is also available at http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm, accessed February 20, 2016.

¹¹ See Nora Fisher Onar, “Islam in Turkey: From Muslim Democracy to Islamist Autocracy?” in Michael Barnett, et al., *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015), 53–75.

sociology was necessary to help explain the rise of such trends.

Populism and religion in Turkey largely had revolved around the century-old conflict between the center and the periphery.¹² Referencing Mardin's scholarship, after the ties between the people, the palace, and Islam were severed following the reforms of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s and 30s, Islam was relegated to the peripheral masses, while the new secular, Westernized elite came to power. Seeds of this peripheral force were mobilized by the conservative populist discourse of the 1950s; however, this populist movement was only to be crushed by the military in the coup of 1960. Subsequent military dominance, as well as the conflict between rural and urban, upheld this republican status quo throughout the subsequent decades.

The principles of the modern Turkish state, it could be argued, began to change after three decades of sliding to the right. After the 1980 military coup, the Turkish state came to be propped up by a tripartite consensus, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which was an effective ruling coalition among (i) the military at the top, (ii) the nationalists, and (iii) the Islamic-oriented right. As a result, the composition of Turkey's political elite was changed; it now included the religious right that had in prior decades been concealed. The anti-communist agenda of the Cold War further reinforced the standing of this group, since the religious right was considered by the United States and Turkey's pro-Western establishment as an effective means to counter communist infiltration into Turkey and its neighborhood. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the perceptions of the Communist threat lost its immediacy. In the meantime, the stalemate of Turkey's civil war in the Southeast throughout the 1990s, a series of ineffectual coalition governments, and mismanaged economy resulted in the electoral losses by the nationalist groups of the left and center. By the early 2000s the remnants of the republican elite that made up the post-1980 coalition had totally lost their influence in the political arena.

The sweeping electoral victory of the center-right AKP in 2002 marked the beginning of a new era of battle for hegemony of the state between the military and the Islamic right, which was led by none other than Erdoğan and his circle. Through the following years of radical change in Turkey, largely inspired by pro-EU reforms, Erdoğan was able to cement his power over the long-standing military establishment, especially by means of the 2011 Ergenekon trials, which effectively imprisoned

the top brass of the old guard secularist military and replaced them with less vocal cadres. Throughout this period of fundamental transformation in the political sphere, Erdoğan's leadership cult, some of which had followed him since his days as the bombastic, ultra-conservative Islamist mayor of Istanbul, had continued to grow, giving the former prime minister, now president, the strength to execute the continuing shift to the right. In the fashion of a true populist, Erdoğan had successfully given political voice to the disenfranchised masses on the religious right, uniting this group around himself and the party under an anti-military, anti-elite, pro-religious discourse.

In connection with "Jansen's concept of populist mobilization as political practice," three factors were cited in the Turkish case as summarized briefly above:

1. *Political constellation*: Given the threat of a military or judiciary intervention against the AKP government up until 2011 (such as the closures of former religious parties, e.g. the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party) the AKP leadership had made a systematic effort to deemphasize the religious identity of the party and not to have a confrontational attitude vis-à-vis the secularist military and bureaucratic elite. By 2011, however, there was no longer a realistic risk of a military intervention or a judicial party dissolution. This represented a significant change in the political terrain in which the party operated.
2. *Political habitus*: Since the late 1980s, Islamic parties in Turkey have consistently increased their votes by claiming to represent the periphery against the secularist center, and Erdoğan's political career—decisively marked by his imprisonment in 1999—had depended on this good old formula. Now, given the new lack of constraints previously imposed by the military and the high judiciary—and in preparation for the 2014 local and presidential elections—Erdoğan had chosen to play the game that he knew best and aimed to consolidate the religious-conservative constituency of his party.
3. *Political events*: The Gezi protests, the most significant wave of popular anti-government protest in the history of the Turkish republic, had led to a desperate attempt on the part of Erdoğan to reclaim popular support for the AKP and for himself. Erdoğan thus pursued a politics of polarization around the old center-periphery cleavage in Turkey, most immediately signified by religious-conservative vs. secular-Westernized identities and symbols.¹³

¹² Şerif Mardin, "Center and Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 102, no.1 (1973): 169-190.

¹³ Ateş Altınordu, "Religion and Populism," working paper, Sabancı University, 2015.

These three factors, it was argued, demonstrate why populist mobilization, intrinsically linked to religion, has been a conspicuous mark of recent Turkish politics, especially since 2013.

A comparison was suggested between the AKP and the Tea Party, the religious right of the American Republican Party that also obscured the boundaries between religion, politics, and freedom—the only difference was that the AKP kept on winning elections. An additional similarity between the Tea Party and the AKP was distaste for institutions, seen as obstructive constructs to the manifestation of popular will.

Another feature of populism in the Turkish case was the blurring of distinction between legality and reality. Widespread criticism and protests swept across Turkey with the Gezi Park protests in 2013 until these protests had been suppressed by disproportionate use of violence by security forces. Since the AKP had been in power for over a decade by the time the Gezi Park protest began, why the Turks could not see the authoritarian drift earlier was a question raised, as was the question “why didn’t the EU see Turkey’s drift,” especially since it was a candidate state for membership subject to scrutiny by the European Commission, which published an annual report on Turkey, the so-called *Progress Report*. In response it was suggested that the AKP had presented itself as a moderate Islamist party, which was an intoxicating concept for the EU policymakers. Its rapid domestication of the military and isolation of the military from political power obscured its other, less liberal policies, and the EU became fascinated with these Muslim populists in power.

Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies and increasing ties with his Islamic neighbors had called into question the West’s post-Arab Spring idea that Turkey can be a “model of Muslim democracy” for the Middle East. If Turkey were to proceed on a road towards increased Islamism, how would roughly half the population with secular preferences respond? Additionally, in the post-Gezi Park period, the question of the “other” Muslims, that is, the Alevis and Kurds, had come to present a precarious challenge to the pro-Erdoğan, non-Kurdish, Sunni Islamic identity that Ankara had cultivated. On the one hand, the growing voices of the Alevi and Kurdish minority narratives that had sprung out of the Gezi movement posed a challenge to the post-1980 top-down Islamization of Turkey. On the other hand, it is exactly this strategy of top-down Islamism imposed by the military in the 1980s that had produced a compliant generation that was also keen to reinforce the authoritarian legitimacy of Erdoğan as the singular head of state. Current conflicts in the Southeast between the Turkish Armed Forces and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), as well as the state’s

political relationship with the self-identified Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), were pointing to the extent of the divide between state-sanctioned religion and the state’s regard for its Kurdish population. Overall, it was indeed difficult to say whether Turkey was becoming more religious, given the rise of these narratives countering authoritarianism. Ultimately, however, the results and consequences of the 2015 general election—which, due to the failure of the four parties elected on June 7 to form a coalition, was superseded by a snap election held on November 1—would guide, rightly or wrongly, Western opinions about the Islamist trend.

Another violently radical trend exemplified by ISIS had presented a deeply disturbing combination of religion and populism that ran counter to, yet alluringly alongside, the traditional conception of Islam and the state. Within the past four years of conflict in Syria, ISIS had not only managed to gain a vast amount of territory throughout the Levant by mobilizing an army of jihadists, but it had also managed a heavily enticing propaganda machine that had recruited tens of thousands of fighters, including over 20,000 foreign fighters. ISIS not only held the monopoly on violence in the Islamic world through publishing series of violent videos, largely brutal beheadings of Westerners and those of their own faith who they have branded as “apostates,” but it also offered the promise of a utopian, albeit puritanical and separatist, Islamic State grounded in tangible territory. Such propaganda functioned both as a warning to the West and as a means to legitimize violent murder in the name of religion, vis-à-vis its rhetoric to its own population and to the world. This pattern of justification should not be surprising, given decades of global jihadist activity, particularly in the region. However, the idea of jihadists claiming an actual state under the auspice of a self-proclaimed caliphate was something new and quite particular to ISIS itself. That, in turn, constituted a new affront to the ruling liberal order. From the Western perspective, ISIS seemingly had no method to its madness, for example, the barbaric destruction or black market sales of historic relics. Upon closer look, however, it was revealed that such sales were used to finance Islamic State activity as well as a propaganda tool to destroy secular Western-supported narratives of civilization. From a Western perspective, the alleged imposition of upwards of 50 percent tax on all goods in the state and calls to physically sacrifice oneself for the cause would be thought to deter residents (or rather slaves) from resisting ISIS. It was also argued that the popular appeal of fighting a war in the name of religion to construct global change ought not be underestimated, especially given the intrinsic connection between populism and religion throughout modern history.

HAS TURKEY LEFT THE WEST?

In the wake of a discussion that dwelt on some significant ways in which Turkey seemed to be diverging from both the EU and the transatlantic alliance in general, the question of whether Turkey had left the West was inevitably raised.

Although Turkey's drift to the right might have had parallels in Europe, its confessional particularism appeared to be in sharp contrast with the non-confessional principles of the West. The fact that Ankara's confessional particularism was incorporated into Turkey's foreign policy appeared to reflect a divergence from the European and U.S. foreign policy in that Turkey chose to play the role of an independent regional power rather than that of a NATO member state negotiating for EU membership. Particularism, especially of a sectarian kind, was arguably against the internationalist/universalist tenants of the liberal order.

Turkey's engagement with Russia also put strains on Turkey's transatlantic relations, especially when Erdoğan approached Putin in 2013 to ask for his intercession to have Turkey admitted to membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Earlier that year, Ankara had announced a major military procurement decision to award a contract to develop a long-range missile system to a Chinese company. On that occasion, an incredulous Washington hastened to voice its objection to the mixing of NATO's sophisticated defense system with non-allied foreign ones.

Given the increasing destabilization of the Middle East and North Africa, however, both Europe and the United States had appeared to support Turkey as a potentially stabilizing actor in the region. Major differences aside, Turkey's NATO membership was not questioned by either side, and Erdoğan's bid for Shanghai Cooperation Organization membership, soon dropped, was taken as a bluff triggered by Ankara's frustration over its stalled EU membership talks. And, although stalled, the membership negotiations had not been suspended; neither side had suggested that they should be suspended or terminated.

Whether Turkey had left the West remained an outstanding question in the absence of concrete evidence one way or the other.

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APPENDIX

Observatory Conferences

- Florence, June 2001
- Florence, April 2002
- Siena, October 2003
- Florence, May 2004
- Barcelona, June 2004
- Madrid, May 2005
- Istanbul, May 2006
- Barcelona, January 2007
- Athens, March 2007
- Istanbul, June 2007
- Lisbon, November 2007
- Berlin, December 2008
- Istanbul, April 2009 (with IE Med)
- Istanbul, June 2010 (with the Transatlantic Academy)
- Istanbul, May 2012 (with IPC- Kronberg Talks)
- Istanbul, May 2013 (with the Transatlantic Academy)
- Paris, May 2014 (with the Transatlantic Academy and Columbia Global Centers)
- Washington, DC, May 2015 (with the Transatlantic Academy)

Euro-Turkish Dialogue Conferences

- Hamburg, November 1995
- Venice, March 1996
- Lyon, June 1998
- Edinburgh, May 1999
- Brussels, October 1999
- Stockholm, June 2001
- Stockholm, November 2002

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

NOTES

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