

# The Role of the Opposition in Autocratization

The Case of Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP)

Seren Selvin Korkmaz





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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Thursday 5 September 2024 at 14.00 in Sal E487, hus E, Universitetsvägen 10 E.

### Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of opposition parties in autocratization, focusing on Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). By examining the CHP during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule from 2002 to 2023, it reveals the complex roles and strategies of opposition actors in both resisting and contributing to autocratization. It challenges the binary view of opposition success or failure, suggesting that opposition parties like the CHP are dynamic entities within autocratic regimes. They can combat and contribute to autocratization through their discourse, policy decisions, and actions. By analyzing the CHP's evolving strategies, alliances, and discourse, the research underscores the opposition's pivotal role in shaping Turkey's political landscape. Employing a diverse methodology, including 20 elite interviews, 10 focus group discussions with 60 participants, archival research, and participant observation, the thesis introduces two new concepts: rigid opposition and flexible opposition. Initially, the CHP maintained a rigid opposition characterized by identity-based polarization. However, over time, the party shifted to a more flexible approach, forging strategic alliances and adopting an inclusive discourse. This transformation underscores the adaptable nature of opposition strategies, illustrating that opposition actions cannot be solely evaluated on a binary success-failure scale. While the CHP's flexibility is essential in countering autocratization, it also poses the risk of contributing to it and diluting party identity. Additionally, the dissertation examines the evolution of the CHP's discourse. By comparing election campaigns and protests, the study shows how the CHP's shift from an exclusionary to an inclusive discourse challenged the ruling AKP's polarizing populist narrative, while the previous exclusionary approach contributed to political polarization. This inclusive discourse played a crucial role in the CHP's success in the 2019 local elections. Furthermore, the thesis investigates the CHP's strategic alliances and opposition coordination, probing into the motivations and challenges encountered by CHP political elites. It identifies the primary challenges encountered by the CHP in maintaining cohesive opposition alliances and elucidates how these challenges impact the process of autocratization in Turkey.

**Keywords:** *opposition, autocratization, election, democratic erosion, political parties, CHP.*

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Seren Selvin Korkmaz





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*to Prof. Mine Eder, whose knowledge, guidance and resilience have illuminated the paths of countless students, and to those who lost their lives and memories in the February 6, 2023 earthquakes in Turkey.*



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# Contents

List of Articles .....	i
Abstract .....	1
Sammanfattning (Summary in Swedish) .....	2
1 Introduction .....	3
1.1 Chapter Outline .....	5
1.2 Objectives and Research Questions .....	6
1.3 Limitation of the Thesis .....	8
2 Situating the Project in Light of Previous Research .....	10
2.1 Explaining Autocratization .....	10
2.2 The Opposition under Autocratization .....	11
2.3 Explaining Populism .....	13
2.4 Towards a New Conceptualization for Opposition Strategies under Autocratization .....	15
2.4.1 Rigid and Flexible Opposition .....	15
2.4.2 Exclusionary and Inclusive Discourse .....	17
2.4.3 Tenuous and Strong Alliance .....	18
2.5 Analyzing Opposition under Autocratization in Turkey .....	21
2.5.1 Autocratization and Autocratic Legitimation under AKP Rule .....	21
2.5.2 CHP-AKP Entanglement .....	25
3 Research Design and Methodology .....	29
3.1 Agency-based, Actor-driven Approach .....	29
3.2 Material and Data Collection .....	29
3.3 Elite Interviews .....	32
3.4 Archival Research, Newspaper Scanning and Secondary Sources .....	33
3.5 Focus Group Discussions .....	34
3.6 Ethical Considerations .....	35
4 Summary of Research Papers .....	37
4.1 Article 1: The Role of the Opposition in the Autocratization Process: The Case of Turkey .....	37
4.2 Article 2: Opposing Autocratization in Turkey: From Exclusionary to Inclusive Discourse .....	39

4.3	Article 3: Dynamic Opposition Alliances under Autocratization in Turkey: Republican People's Party (CHP) as a Moderator Party .....	40
5	Discussion and further research .....	42
6	References .....	45



# List of Articles

## **Article 1**

Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2024. "The role of the opposition in autocratization: the case of Turkey." *Third World Quarterly* 1–18.

## **Article 2**

Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2023. "Opposing autocratization in Turkey: from exclusionary to inclusive discourse." *Z Vgl Polit Wiss* 17, 343–364.

## **Article 3**

Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2024. "Dynamic Opposition Alliances under Autocratization in Turkey: Republican People's Party (CHP) as a Moderator Party." Working paper. A modified version is published in Turkish ( Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2024. "Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi ve İttifaklar Siyaseti." *Doğu-Batı* 110.)



# Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of opposition parties in autocratization, focusing on Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). By examining the CHP during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule from 2002 to 2023, it reveals the complex roles and strategies of opposition actors. It challenges the binary view of opposition success or failure, suggesting that opposition parties like the CHP are dynamic entities within autocratic regimes. They can both combat and contribute to autocratization through their discourse, policy decisions, and actions. By analyzing the CHP's evolving strategies, alliances, and discourse, the research underscores the opposition's pivotal role in shaping Turkey's political landscape. Employing a diverse methodology, including 20 elite interviews, 10 focus group discussions with 60 participants, archival research, and participant observation, the thesis introduces two new concepts: *rigid opposition* and *flexible opposition*. Initially, the CHP maintained a rigid opposition characterized by identity-based polarization. However, over time, the party shifted to a more flexible approach, forging strategic alliances and adopting an inclusive discourse. This transformation underscores the adaptable nature of opposition strategies. However, the dissertation also notes that, while flexibility is essential in countering autocratization, it also poses a risk of diluting party identity. Additionally, the dissertation examines the evolution of the CHP's discourse. By comparing election campaigns and protests, the study shows how the CHP's shift from an exclusionary to an inclusive discourse challenged the ruling AKP's polarizing populist narrative, while the previous exclusionary approach contributed to political polarization. This inclusive discourse played a crucial role in the CHP's success in the 2019 local elections. Furthermore, the thesis investigates the CHP's strategic alliances and opposition coordination, probing into the motivations and challenges encountered by CHP political elites. It identifies the primary challenges encountered by the CHP in maintaining cohesive opposition alliances and elucidates how these challenges impact the process of autocratization in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Turkey, opposition, autocratization, election, democratic erosion, political parties, CHP

# Sammanfattning (Summary in Swedish)

Denna avhandling utforskar oppositionspartiets roll när ett land går i auktoritär riktning -autokratisering- med fokus på Turkiets främsta oppositionsparti, det republikanska folkpartiet (CHP). Genom att undersöka CHP under Rättvise- och utvecklingspartiets (AKP:s) styre från 2002 till 2023 påvisar den komplexiteten i oppositionsaktörers roller och strategier. Avhandlingen utmanar en binär syn där oppositionspartier bedöms utifrån om de lyckas stoppa autokratisering eller ej, och framför istället en syn på oppositionspartier som CHP som dynamiska aktörer under autokratiska regimer som kan bekämpa såväl som bidra till autokratisering genom sin diskurs, policybeslut och handlingar. Genom att analysera hur CHP:s strategier, allianser och diskurs utvecklas understryker studien oppositionens centrala roll i att forma Turkiets politiska landskap. Avhandlingen använder en mångsidig metodik inklusive 20 elitintervjuer, 10 fokusgruppsdiskussioner med 60 deltagare, arkivforskning samt deltagarobservation, och introducerar två nya begrepp: *rigid opposition* och *flexibel opposition*. Inledningsvis upprätthöll CHP en rigid opposition kännetecknad av identitetsbaserad polarisering. Över tid skedde emellertid en förskjutning mot en mer flexibel strategi där man bildade strategiska allianser och antog en mer inkluderande diskurs. Denna omvandling understryker att oppositionsstrategierna är anpassningsbara. Samtidigt som denna flexibilitet är väsentlig för att motverka autokratiseringsprocesser, riskerar den också att försvaga partiidentiteten hos oppositionen. Utöver detta undersöker avhandlingen hur CHP:s diskurs har utvecklats. Genom att jämföra valkampanjer och protester visar den hur CHP:s övergång till en inkluderande diskurs utmanade det styrande AKP:s polariserande populistiska narrativ, till skillnad från den tidigare exkluderande strategin vilken bidrog till politisk polarisering. Denna inkluderande diskurs spelade en avgörande roll för CHP:s framgång i lokalvalen 2019. Vidare undersöker avhandlingen CHP:s strategiska allianser och oppositionssamverkan, och granskar de motiv och utmaningar som CHP:s politiska eliter möter. Avhandlingen identifierar de primära utmaningarna som CHP stöter på när det gäller att upprätthålla sammanhållna oppositionsallianser och belyser hur dessa utmaningar påverkar autokratiseringsprocessen i Turkiet.

**Nyckelord:** Turkiet, oppositionspartier, autokratisering, val, demokratisk erosion, politiska partier, CHP

# 1 Introduction

The global political landscape has undergone significant changes since the early 2000s, with a rise in populism, polarization, and autocratization observed worldwide (V-DEM 2024). A prime illustration of this trend is Turkey. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has experienced a pronounced shift towards autocratization. This shift is marked by the centralization of power within the executive branch, coupled with a decline in democratic principles and the undermining of checks and balances. The research for this thesis—archival and field research based on elite interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation—was conducted shortly before Turkey's pivotal 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. These elections were widely perceived to be a potential turning point, either cementing authoritarian rule or ushering in a return to democratization. If the unified opposition parties secured a victory, Turkey could emerge as a case study in effective opposition strategies against autocratic regimes (Somer and McCoy 2023; Somer et al. 2022). While this was true, one observation that came out of this research is that an evaluation of the Turkish opposition based on a binary metric of success or failure would be misleading. Instead, it is empirically and analytically more insightful to analyze the role of the opposition within autocratic regimes as multifaceted (Somer and Tekinrk 2024).

The research question and main argument of the dissertation evolved over time, partly in response to insights gained during the research period. The dissertation originally focused on Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) under AKP rule between 2002 and 2023, and asked the question, "Why has the Turkish opposition failed to halt the process of autocratization?" While the current AKP government is undoubtedly the primary driver of autocratization, my research led to the realization that the opposition, whether purposefully or not, has also contributed to this trajectory within its varied political roles. Accordingly, the dissertation question expanded to include: "In what ways has the opposition, whether intentionally or unintentionally, affected the process of autocratization, whether by slowing it down or accelerating and deepening it?"

Many studies have portrayed the opposition either as a force resisting autocratization or as its victim. However, this thesis posits that opposition forces are central figures in the ever-evolving landscape of autocratization, the rules and dynamics of which are continually in flux. Opposition parties or actors are not merely passive participants; they are dynamic actors who adjust their strategies based on the prevailing conditions. Deliberately or inadvertently, they can both combat autocratization and fuel it. Have opposition parties in Turkey become instrumental in reinforcing autocratic rule through their discourse, policy decisions, and procedural actions, like contributing legislation that undermines democratic principles, or in the failure of their collaborative strategies with other oppositional forces? Understanding the role of different political parties in the autocratization process enables us to grasp the multilayered and multiplayer characteristics of politics, rather than solely focusing on the AKP as the main actor and the opposition as the reactor.

To understand the role of the opposition in the autocratization process, it is necessary to go beyond dichotomies such as failed or successful opposition, and autocratic ruler or democratic opposition. Hence, I aim to understand the opposition, their relations with the incumbent AKP, and their role in the autocratization process on a horizontal field. Jenny White (2018) argues that political life can be better understood as played out on a horizontal field where individuals and groups compete in complex and morally ambiguous ways. Inspired by White's argument, this thesis explores the shifting alliances, strategies, interests, and moral motivations of the main opposition party, CHP, rather than defining opposition and government dynamics as victim versus oppressor or as powerful versus vulnerable on a vertical axis. I intend to examine opposition actors within a horizontal political landscape, where political agents seek resources and protection to achieve their goals and, in the process, interact with one another in complex ways and in dialectic with the broader society. Viewed this way, it is the interaction that ultimately shapes the trajectory of autocratization in Turkey, rather than the success or failure of any particular party's strategy.

As White (2017) argues, Turkish politics is embedded in spindle autocracies. Instead of formal institutional rules, numerous informalities determine political relations within parties, between parties, and in their interaction with segments of society. Thus, changes in networks, leadership styles, the use of symbols, and specific performances may regenerate autocratic relations. Although the opposition claims to fight against autocratization, a closer examination of its informal and discursive practices may reveal deeper insights into the regime characteristics and political landscape of Turkey, specifically the complex role of the opposition in that landscape.

Rather than defining the autocratization of Turkey as a stable condition, this thesis addresses the dynamic characteristics of the regime. As Sözen (2019b) argues, although there was an authoritarian slide over the last decade of AKP rule, the party could not achieve an electoral majority. Consequently, the AKP tried to consolidate authoritarianism by suffocating and criminalizing opposition actors and forming alliances with different political actors. Turkey has experienced the selective criminalization and de-criminalization of different issues and groups, depending on the government's alliances at the time. In other words, both the ruling party's popularity and the opposition's position are dynamic and precarious. This approach allows us to elaborate both the opposition and the AKP as actors on the political field, each with its own (changing) motivations, structures, and identities, rather than defining them as "autocratic oppressor" and "oppressed opposition." This dissertation argues that opposition actors are a dynamic part of the political game, exacerbating, contributing to, and challenging the autocratization of Turkey. It explores this dynamic nature of the opposition in Turkey under AKP rule.

The methodologies used in each article of this compilation thesis are carefully chosen to effectively answer their specific research questions. Article 1, which examines the role of the CHP during critical political junctures, employs in-depth interviews, archival research, and focus group discussions. These methods allow for a thorough exploration of elite decision-making, political context, and voter perceptions. Article 2, focusing on the CHP's discourse and its influence on voters, employs discourse analysis and focus groups. Discourse analysis is vital for deconstructing political messages and their framing, while focus groups capture voter reactions. These methods help in understanding the impact of the CHP's narrative strategies, its differences, and potential shared stances with the AKP. This approach puts forward an inclusive understanding of strategic motivations, alliance dynamics, and firsthand observations of political interactions, ensuring a nuanced analysis of the CHP's positioning and strategies within the opposition. This combination of methods creates a holistic and detailed exploration of the CHP's multifaceted role in Turkish politics.

## 1.1 Chapter Outline

The introduction outlines the objectives of this dissertation, presents the research questions, defines the research limitations, and explains the logic behind dividing the dissertation into three papers. The following section

proposes a theoretical framework for this project within the context of existing literature, highlighting the concepts used throughout the dissertation and addressing the research gaps this study seeks to bridge. Subsequently, I give historical background, detailing Turkey's autocratization under AKP rule and the CHP's role during this process, as well as examining the party's history. This sets the stage for the three articles that constitute this dissertation. Each article asks a different but related research question. The next section details the methodology used in this project, the rationale behind chosen methodologies for each article, and discusses ethical considerations and limitations. This is followed by summaries of the main findings and the theoretical and methodological frameworks specific to the three articles. The final section discusses the overarching results, emphasizing both theoretical and practical contributions, and identifying potential areas for future research.

## 1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

This project aimed to explore the multifaceted role of opposition parties within the autocratization process by focusing on political actors and their decisions. In doing so, it presents an analysis of the autocratization process itself. Autocratization is a dynamic process (Sözen 2019b, 288) that involves the progressive deterioration of democratic values and institutions within a political framework. To comprehend the complexities of autocratization, it is essential to recognize its multiple dimensions. Strategies deployed by the AKP are designed to augment the power of the executive branch and constrain the opposition (Bermeo 2016; Sözen 2020). These initiatives are invariably supported by populist narratives. A considerable body of literature (Aytaç and Elçi 2019; Borsuk et al. 2022; Erçetin and Erdoğan 2023; Öztürk 2023; Yabancı 2018; Sözen 2020) has examined the AKP's use of populism. However, the counter-narratives and discursive strategies of the opposition within this milieu remain under-researched. As Turkey navigates this complex autocratic transition, the strategies and policies of opposition parties are vital to understanding the evolving political landscape.

This research project, carried out between 2021 and 2023 in Turkey, explored the following three questions, each of which is addressed in one of the articles that make up this dissertation:

- 1) Article 1 raises the question, “During critical political junctures that shaped the trajectory of Turkey's autocratization, what role did the



- main opposition party play? Did the CHP and the AKP share any political stances that reciprocally reinforced autocratic leanings?”
- 2) Article 2 asks, “How has the discourse of the CHP evolved under autocratization in Turkey, and how does it influence the polarizing narrative of the AKP?”
  - 3) Article 3 focuses on the question of “What factors drive the CHP to form alliances, how do these alliances contribute to opposition coordination and evolution under AKP rule, and how do the motivations and challenges faced by CHP elites impact the process of autocratization in Turkey?”

The compilation thesis is divided into three interconnected articles, each contributing to an in-depth exploration of the opposition's role in autocratization, focusing on the CHP. The first article lays out the theoretical groundwork, introducing new concepts such as rigid and flexible opposition, and examining the CHP's evolving strategies and motivations from 2002 to 2023. This foundational paper sets the stage for the entire thesis by establishing the primary arguments and conceptual frameworks that define the CHP's shifting strategies during critical junctures that resulted in the deepening of autocratization. It is strategically placed first to give readers a detailed understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and new concepts that are fundamental for grasping the subsequent analyses.

The second and third articles build upon this theoretical foundation by examining the practical manifestations of the CHP's opposition strategies. Article 2 focuses on the CHP's discourse during election campaigns and protests, exploring how the party's communication strategies have either challenged or fueled the AKP's polarizing populist narrative. This paper introduces the concepts of exclusionary and inclusive discourse to define CHP's discursive strategy. It underscores the role of opposition discourse in autocratization, showing a shift towards adopting an inclusive discourse under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership. Article 3 then examines the CHP's strategic alliances and pre-electoral coalitions, analyzing the motivations behind these alliances and their impact on opposition coordination and autocratization. It introduces the concepts of tenuous and strong alliance strategies. Together, these articles aim to give a detailed examination of the CHP's strategies and actions, offering insights into the complex interplay between opposition tactics and autocratization within Turkey's political landscape.

## 1.3 Limitation of the Thesis

It is important to address and acknowledge certain limitations that may impact the scope and interpretation of the findings.

To begin with, writing a compilation dissertation presents unique challenges. The specific needs of individual research papers can develop in divergent directions, potentially expanding beyond the initial research aims and questions. While this contributes to the richness and depth of the work, it also poses limitations for the researcher in delivering detailed overviews and a comprehensive discussion of each paper and in proposing exhaustively coherent conclusions (Demirel 2023).

Moreover, the publication process itself imposes various stages of review and editorial scrutiny, which can alter the original direction of the papers. This process often involves multiple checks and can be time-consuming due to varying publication procedures. As a result, the effort required to produce outputs is significantly greater than for a monograph thesis. However, the advantage of a compilation thesis is that published (or nearly published) articles in recognized refereed journals have undergone quality checks before the final defense. Additionally, published papers increase the impact of the research. Given the context and dynamism of related political debates, writing a compilation thesis on this topic enhances scientific research by boosting its dissemination and creating opportunities to influence public discussion.

On the downside, the thesis might lack coherence and a clear "red thread," and may also suffer from repetition of concepts and phrasing. Papers published in the earlier phases of the project could not benefit from the theoretical developments gained in later stages. For instance, although Article 1 was presented at a conference and submitted for publication earlier than Article 2, its publication took a considerable amount of time. As a result, I chose not to incorporate the conceptual framework of rigid versus flexible opposition in Article 2, but rather introduced it in Article 1. This has led to a potential lack of coherence among the three papers, a common issue in compilation theses. In this introductory chapter, I have aimed to rectify this by laying out a complementary framework.

On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on my research, affecting various stages of the project. Essential field trips and data collection were postponed due to restrictions, leading to delays in writing and publishing. Consequently, the papers based on field research, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, were limited to only three within the available timeframe.

Fourth, this thesis includes papers that offer a theory-generating exploration of the challenges faced by Turkey's opposition and their contribution to the intensifying autocratization process. The new theoretical concepts proposed in this thesis necessitate additional empirical validation through various case studies. Comparative analysis holds great importance for enhancing this theoretical insight and evaluating the wider relevance of the study's conclusions.

Notably, Turkey's dynamic political context has influenced the research. Significant events, such as the May 2023 and March 2024 general elections, occurred after the completion of the field research and main writing process. This thesis presents a long-term analysis of the opposition during the 21 years under AKP rule. However, the results of these later elections could not be included before the public defense. Given that some parts of the thesis are based on elite perceptions, it is evident that opinions may shift with the changing political context and results, posing a limitation for this research.

Finally, despite the comprehensive and multifaceted methodological framework employed in this thesis, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, focusing on an agency-driven perspective, while revealing insights into political dynamics, inherently prioritizes the actions and strategies of individual actors over broader structural factors. This may result in an underrepresentation of the systemic and historical influences on Turkey's political landscape. Additionally, the reliance on elite interviews, though bringing to light invaluable insights into the motivations and strategies of political elites, carries the risk of bias and subjectivity. Given that some participants were key actors in the political arena, they may present their perspectives in a manner that aligns with their interests or agendas, potentially skewing the analysis. Furthermore, elite interviews may not fully capture the diversity of opinions within the political landscape, as they primarily reflect the viewpoints of a select group of influential figures. The focus group discussions, despite delivering rich qualitative data on voter perceptions, are limited by their small sample size and the specific context of Istanbul, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader Turkish electorate. Lastly, participant observation yields immersive insights but remains inherently subjective and may be influenced by the researcher's own biases and interpretations. These limitations emphasize the need for a cautious interpretation of the findings and suggest areas for further study that could address these methodological constraints, without undermining the contributions of the research.

## 2 Situating the Project in Light of Previous Research

This section elucidates the theoretical foundations of the thesis by examining of key concepts drawn from existing literature. Beginning with a comprehensive exploration of autocratization and populism, I establish the theoretical framework of the thesis, particularly in the context of opposition dynamics. Through an examination of existing literature, I contextualize these concepts within Turkey's political landscape and highlight their nuanced application in specific contexts. Next, I introduce new conceptualizations—rigid and flexible opposition, alongside exclusionary and inclusive discourse, and tenuous and strong alliance—to deepen our understanding of opposition strategies under autocratization. Finally, I proceed to analyze opposition dynamics in Turkey, employing both existing and new conceptual tools to dissect the intricate interplay between the ruling AKP and the opposition within the evolving landscape of autocratic legitimization.

### 2.1 Explaining Autocratization

There is a consensus that in the last decade, Turkey has slid into authoritarianism. Scholars use different concepts to categorize Turkey's descent, such as full authoritarianism (Çalışkan 2018), competitive authoritarianism (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016), old versus new authoritarianism (Sommer 2016), and populist authoritarianism (Sözen 2019b).

Rather than focusing on the regime type and change, this thesis mainly examines the process of relative autocratization within and across regime types. Emphasizing autocratic regime change during AKP rule suggests that Turkey was a democratic country before the AKP. However, Turkey has struggled with democratization since its foundation in 1923 and throughout its history has not fully consolidated democracy, largely due to persistent political instability, military interventions, and significant issues related to the

lack of freedom of expression and civil rights problems. I use the concept of autocratization because this can occur both within democracies and autocracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Cassani and Tomini 2018). Using the concept of autocratization allows me to focus on regime change in Turkey and the role of the opposition as ongoing processes.

Identifying autocratization requires defining democracy. I will use the proceduralist approach to democracy formulated by Robert Dahl (1998). Dahl postulates that while competitive elections are the foundation of democracy, it is political and civil liberties that make these elections competitive (Sözen 2019a). A step away from any of these characteristics is referred to as autocratization (Sözen 2020). In other words, autocratization refers to a gradual process rather than a sudden breakdown. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) argue that, while various terms, such as the breakdown of democracy, or authoritarianism, are used to describe shifts away from democracy, the concept of autocratization differs in that it views such shifts as a matter of degree. That is, democracies can lose democratic traits to varying degrees long before or without fully breaking down. As explained above, Turkey has struggled to fully implement democratic principles since its foundation. Hence, autocratization is a useful term to describe both Turkey's uneven relationship with democracy since its founding and the extremely rapid decline of the last decade. Democratic regimes can be resilient to democratic breakdown even if autocratization has begun (Boese et al. 2021). This is why the concept of autocratization is particularly relevant in hybrid regimes like Turkey for identifying the dynamic processes between democracy and autocracy.

## 2.2 The Opposition under Autocratization

Political opposition is a fundamental aspect of any contemporary political system, playing a pivotal role in shaping its dynamics. It refers to individuals, groups, or political parties that challenge the authority, policies, or actions of the ruling government or regime (Smith 2016). In the context of this thesis, when discussing opposition, I primarily refer to political parties that are not in a position of government (Dahl 1975; Smith 2016; Apter 1962; Demirkaya 2019). The role of opposition is well-recognized in democratic contexts, but its significance and multi-dimensional role under autocratic regimes needs to be elaborated. To understand the dynamics of autocratizing regimes, it is imperative to critically analyze political opposition that ideally serves as a check on power, a catalyst for change, and a source of legitimacy.

In democratic systems, political opposition acts as a necessary check on the ruling party's power. It suggests alternative viewpoints, critiques government policies, and ensures accountability through various mechanisms, including elections, legislative debates, and media scrutiny (Stepan 1990). However, under autocratic regimes, where power is often concentrated in the hands of a single individual or a small elite, the opposition faces significant challenges. Nevertheless, its role remains pivotal, albeit in different ways (Gamboa 2023).

In autocratic regimes, opposition parties and activists serve as a counterbalance to the unchecked power of the ruling elite. By challenging the regime's authority, they help prevent the abuse of power and the consolidation of authoritarian rule (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). Additionally, opposition, even when marginalized, represents a voice of dissent and a potential alternative to autocratic rule. This representation is crucial in holding autocratic leaders accountable for their actions (Marquez 2016). Political history has shown that opposition movements can become catalysts for political change in autocratic regimes (Ong 2022; Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Furthermore, political opposition can draw international attention to human rights abuses and undemocratic practices within autocratic regimes. External pressure from the international community can significantly impact the behavior of autocratic leaders (Carothers 2006). Beyond the key roles played by the opposition under autocratic regimes, this project seeks to underline another significant but often overlooked role of the opposition: its contribution to the autocratization process. Throughout this research, I aim to explore how the opposition not only challenges autocratization and democratic legitimacy but also may play a role in potentially deepening autocratization. I ask whether the opposition might inadvertently bolster autocratic legitimacy through its actions, ideologies, and procedural engagement. This thesis emphasizes the multifaceted roles that the opposition plays during autocratization.

Analyzing political opposition is key for understanding the dynamics of autocratizing regimes. It offers insight into the resilience of autocratic rule, the vulnerabilities of regimes, and potential pathways to democratization. Autocratizing regimes often employ strategies to suppress the opposition, ranging from legal restrictions and co-optation to violence (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). Studying how the opposition responds to these challenges grants valuable insights into the adaptability and strategies of both autocrats and opposition actors.

## 2.3 Explaining Populism

Understanding populism is essential for analyzing the role of opposition under the autocratization process in Turkey, particularly given the dual nature of the ruling AKP as both an autocratic and populist party. The AKP has skillfully combined its efforts to consolidate power through executive aggrandizement—strengthening the executive branch's authority by legally diminishing checks and balances—with the effective use of populism and polarization to legitimize its actions. This strategy has allowed the AKP to maintain a hegemonic grip on Turkish politics for nearly two decades. Therefore, examining the concept of populism is essential for this thesis, as it furnishes a framework to understand how the AKP has consolidated power and the specific challenges faced by the opposition.

Despite its frequent use in recent times, populism remains a controversial concept in social sciences. Yunus Sözen (2017) argues that the disagreement over the exact definition of populism arises from both academic debates and its political usage. According to Sözen, populism is defined as the "other" by both the subject and object of the issue. Populists do not label themselves as such; instead, they use the term to criticize their opponents. Furthermore, since populism includes anti-intellectualism, the intellectual accumulation on the concept is weak, making its conceptualization challenging.

Sözen's (2017) classification of contemporary definitions of populism into four categories helps clarify the concept: populism as a political strategy, populism as an ideology, populism as discourse, and populism as a political style. Scholars who define populism as a strategy emphasize the relationship between the leader, rather than the political party, and the masses. Weyland, for instance, describes populism as "personalistic leadership that rests on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large masses of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland 2001). Scholars like Barr, Levitsky, and Roberts highlight the leaders' positioning on behalf of "the people" against the elites and the establishment (Roberts 2003; Barr 2009; Levitsky ve Roberts 2011, quoted in Sözen 2017, 12).

The definition of populism as an ideology is prominently associated with Cas Mudde. In his well-known article, "The Populist Zeitgeist," Mudde (2004) defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,'" and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. According to Mudde, populism is a thin-centered ideology, which means it addresses only a part of

the political agenda, lacking comprehensive views on economic or political systems and often coexisting with broader host ideologies. Thus, it can easily be combined with other ideologies such as nationalism, communism, and socialism. Margaret Canovan (2002) also agrees that populism is a thin-centered ideology, arguing that it is based on four interrelated concepts: the people, democracy, sovereignty, and majoritarian rule.

The conceptualization of populism as a discourse is primarily based on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. They emphasize the discursive and relational nature of populism, focusing on how political identities and power relations are constructed through processes of antagonism and discourse articulation. This approach argues that populism is not tied to any specific ideological affiliation; instead, it centers on a moral conflict and antagonistic relationship between "the good" and "the evil," manifesting as "the corrupted elite" versus "the pure people." According to Laclau (2005), populist movements typically mobilize around a "chain of equivalences," which involves articulating diverse demands and identities under a common signifier, such as "the people." This perspective can be understood within the framework of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

The concept of populism as a political style is primarily developed by Benjamin Moffitt. Moffitt argues that populism is not a single entity but rather a political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted across various political and cultural contexts (2016). His definition attributes a performative role to populism. Jan-Werner Müller also views populism as a political style but offers a more detailed definition. Müller (2016) suggests that populism can be understood as a form of moral identity politics, asserting that it is neither a genuine element of modern democratic politics nor a pathology resulting from irrational citizens. Instead, he views populism as a constant shadow over representative politics. For Müller, populists claim to speak on behalf of "the real people" against the establishment and elites, asserting that they represent the true voice of "the real people." Müller maintains, however, that criticizing the elites does not automatically qualify one as a populist. Populists also tend to be anti-pluralist, claiming an exclusive role as the legitimate representatives of the people while discrediting all other actors as illegitimate. Those who do not align with the populist narrative are excluded from being part of "the real people."

In this thesis, I will use Müller's definition to categorize populism in Turkey. Populism has been an enduring feature of Turkey's political landscape, evolving within a context shaped by top-down democratization, weak institutions, and a majoritarian system. The transition to a multi-party system in 1946 witnessed the emergence of populist sentiments, particularly within



the Democrat Party (DP), which positioned itself as the true representatives of the people against the perceived state elites (Kasaba 1993). Influential Turkish political figures from both the right and left wings, including Adnan Menderes, Süleyman Demirel, and Bülent Ecevit, employed populist rhetoric, elevating the act of voting and emphasizing the sanctity of the ballot as symbols of popular empowerment (Boyras 2020).

The AKP shares certain features with other populist parties in various regions, notably its reliance on a charismatic leader figure, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who portrays himself as the voice of the people against corrupted elites (Erçetin and Erdoğan 2018). This leader-centric approach echoes patterns observed in populist movements globally, where strong, personalized leadership serves as a focal point for mobilization and legitimization (Müller 2016). Furthermore, the AKP's utilization of populist rhetoric, often framing political discourse in terms of a binary opposition between "the people" and "the elite," aligns with broader populist strategies aimed at galvanizing popular support (Aytaç and Öniş 2014; Erdoğan et al. 2018; Erçetin and Erdoğan 2023), which will be explained in detail in the following sections. The AKP also exhibits distinct traits that reflect Turkey's unique political and cultural context. For example, the AKP's rise to power was deeply intertwined with its promotion of Islamic identity and values, appealing to a conservative base disillusioned with secularist elites (Yabancı and Taleski 2017; Yabancı 2023). Resorting to religious appeals is also a common practice among populists (Yabancı 2020).

## 2.4 Towards a New Conceptualization for Opposition Strategies under Autocratization

### 2.4.1 Rigid and Flexible Opposition

I introduce two new concepts to define opposition strategies: rigid opposition and flexible opposition. These concepts serve as analytical tools to better understand how opposition parties adapt to and navigate the continually changing political landscape during periods of democratic erosion.

Rigid opposition characterizes parties that adhere to a staunch ideological stance and limit their discourse and alliance strategies to those aligned with their specific ideology. This rigid approach constrains their adaptability and

responsiveness to changing political dynamics. Rigid opposition parties may find it challenging to forge alliances beyond their ideological boundaries, potentially limiting their effectiveness.

Conversely, flexible opposition refers to the approach taken by opposition parties that are willing and able to adjust their political strategies in response to changing circumstances. These parties demonstrate adaptability by forming diverse alliances and embracing inclusive discourses, regardless of ideological differences. This flexibility allows them to maneuver within the shifting rules of the political game as autocratization progresses. However, it is important to note that while flexibility can be instrumental in resisting autocratization, it also carries inherent risks, such as the potential for opportunism and the dilution of party identity.

As detailed in Article 1, the concepts of rigid and flexible opposition are not simply about establishing a permanent mode of success or failure in the face of growing autocratic tendencies. These ideas are designed to describe how opposition strategies are fluid and continually adjust in response to the shifting political climate. The critical point I intend to clarify is that opposition to autocratization does not fall neatly into extreme or mild categories. Instead, it encompasses a range of tactics that are continuously reshaped and refined. Such strategies can both challenge and unintentionally support the progression of autocratization. For instance, while flexible strategies may be advantageous in countering autocratic shifts due to their adaptability, their success is not guaranteed. The effectiveness of opposition strategies heavily depends on the specific circumstances of the political environment and the characteristics of the autocratization in question. Therefore, this framework of rigidity versus flexibility becomes more intricate when considered in the context of autocratization as an ongoing process.

What sets these concepts apart from other frameworks in the literature (Sommer and Tekinirak 2024; Gamboa 2017; Cleary and Ozturk 2022) is their ability to deliver a more refined understanding on opposition behavior (see Article 1 for a detailed discussion). Unlike traditional success-failure paradigms, flexible and rigid opposition present a dynamic understanding of opposition strategies. They recognize that opposition parties face complex choices, where adaptability can be both a strength and a vulnerability (Sommer and Tekinirak 2024). These concepts allow us to explore the intricate interplay between opposition parties and autocratic forces, shedding light on the diverse responses that opposition actors adopt as they navigate the turbulent waters of democratic erosion.

The introduction of the concepts of rigid and flexible opposition enriches the analysis of the CHP's opposition strategies and its complex role within the

context of Turkey's autocratization process. By introducing these conceptual frameworks, the study elaborates on the evolution of the CHP's approach amidst the changing political landscape. Initially, the characterization of the CHP's opposition as rigid underscored its role in intensifying polarization, unknowingly contributing to the consolidation of autocratic power by the AKP. However, the conceptualization of flexibility sheds light on the party's adaptive responses to shifting dynamics, particularly in the wake of diminishing influence within the state apparatus. This shift towards flexibility enabled the CHP to adopt a more inclusive approach, forging alliances and engaging with broader social concerns. The concepts of rigidity and flexibility enhanced the understanding of the complexities inherent in opposition behavior, highlighting both the potential benefits and risks associated with each approach. While flexibility created opportunities for broader mobilization and adaptation to changing circumstances, it also posed challenges such as the dilution of party identity and coherence.

#### 2.4.2 Exclusionary and Inclusive Discourse

I categorize discursive practices employed by the opposition as exclusionary and inclusive discourse. Exclusionary opposition discourse is characterized by a confrontational and divisive approach towards the ruling party or incumbent government. This type of discourse often employs polarizing rhetoric, framing political discourse in terms of "us" versus "them." This occurs when parties engage in negative campaigning, employing language and tactics that deepen societal divisions. Exclusionary discourse often aligns with the rigid opposition strategy, which prioritizes ideological purity over coalition-building, leading to fragmented and weakened resistance against autocratic forces. In essence, exclusionary discourse can unintentionally contribute to the polarization and authoritarianism it seeks to combat.

Inclusive discourse, on the other hand, adopts a more unifying and inclusive approach to politics. This type of discourse has a capacity to bridge social divisions rather than exacerbate them. Inclusive discourse can counteract the ruling party's polarizing rhetoric by emphasizing shared values and common interests. This discourse aligns well with the flexible opposition strategy, which prioritizes coalition-building and cooperation with other opposition forces to present a united front against the autocratic regime. Inclusive discourse recognizes the importance of winning over a broad spectrum of voters, including those who may have supported the ruling party in the past.

The concepts of exclusionary and inclusive discourse are fundamental for understanding opposition dynamics for several reasons. First, they help us understand the strategies and approaches that opposition parties employ in response to autocratization. They shed light on the choices these parties make in framing their political discourse and conducting their campaigns. The type of opposition a country experiences can significantly impact the trajectory of its democracy. This study shows that exclusionary discourse may inadvertently strengthen authoritarian tendencies. These concepts elucidate into how political discourse and strategies influence voter behavior. Inclusive discourse can mobilize a broader base of support, while exclusionary tactics may alienate potential supporters. However, as discussed in Articles 1 and 2, the use of inclusive discourse could potentially weaken the mobilization and cohesion of opposition party's base. On the other hand, adopting exclusionary discourse might lead to a loss of incumbent supporters but could simultaneously mobilize and rally the opposition's supporters.

### 2.4.3 Tenuous and Strong Alliance

In the dynamic and often volatile landscape of Turkish politics, I define alliance strategies of the CHP with two concepts: tenuous and strong alliances. These alliances reflect the varying degrees of cooperation and coherence among political parties striving to challenge dominant powers. Understanding these concepts is essential for analyzing the opposition's efforts to counteract the entrenched rule of the AKP, especially in the context of Turkey's shift to a heavily centralized presidential system lacking meaningful checks and balances (Tol and Korkmaz 2021) and the increasing autocratization under President Erdoğan. By examining the evolution from tenuous to strong alliances, this thesis delivers an analysis of the strategic adaptations and lessons learned by opposition parties in their quest to display unity.

A tenuous alliance is characterized by fragile cooperation among political parties that share a common goal but have significant ideological or strategic differences, leading to internal discord and a lack of cohesive strategy. In Turkey, this concept was evident after the 2011 elections when the CHP sought alliances to counter the dominant AKP. Notably, in the 2014 presidential elections, the CHP and MHP jointly nominated Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, but his right-wing, Islamist background caused significant internal strife within the CHP. This division, compounded by the presence of separate candidates from the pro-Kurdish HDP, resulted in a fragmented opposition. The 2017 shift to a hyper-presidential system, requiring a majority vote, further stressed the necessity of alliances. However, in the 2018 elections, the

opposition's failure to unite behind a single presidential candidate led to a dispersal of votes, facilitating Erdoğan's victory and underscoring the limitations of a tenuous alliance. Internal competition and a lack of strategic coherence weakened their collective stance against the AKP, thereby reinforcing AKP's power.

In contrast, a strong alliance denotes a robust partnership where political parties work closely together, overcoming ideological differences to demonstrate solidarity. This was exemplified in the 2019 local elections in Turkey, where opposition parties learned from past failures and adopted a coordinated strategy. By nominating joint candidates in key metropolitan areas and receiving implicit support from the HDP, they secured significant victories, including Ekrem İmamoğlu's win in Istanbul, which was confirmed with an even larger margin in a rerun election. These successes demonstrated the effectiveness of a strong alliance in challenging Erdoğan's perceived invincibility. Building on this momentum, the CHP spearheaded the formation of the "Table of Six," later the "Nation Alliance," for the 2023 elections. This coalition included a diverse range of parties united by the goal of defeating Erdoğan and proposing significant reforms, such as transitioning to a strengthened parliamentary system.

The Nation Alliance's strategic coordination in campaigning and resource sharing, along with nominating Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as the unified presidential candidate, highlighted the potential power of a strong, cohesive alliance. Despite their eventual defeat in the 2023 elections, this approach represented a significant conceptual and strategic advancement in Turkish opposition politics. It underscored the importance of unity and strategic coherence in forming effective alliances capable of challenging an entrenched autocratic regime. The transition from tenuous to strong alliances reflects a crucial evolution in the opposition's approach, emphasizing the need for unity and a shared vision to effectively counteract dominant political forces. However, this thesis draws attention to the necessity of examining the challenges of strong alliance model, particularly focusing on the 2023 election process, which could not be covered in this field research.

	<b>Rigid Opposition</b>	<b>Flexible Opposition</b>
<b>Ideological Stance</b>	Adheres to a staunch ideological stance; limits discourse and alliances to those aligned with their specific ideology.	Willing to adjust ideologies; embraces inclusive discourses and forms alliances regardless of ideological differences.
<b>Adaptability</b>	Limited adaptability and responsiveness to changing political dynamics.	Demonstrates high adaptability by adjusting political strategies in response to changing circumstances.
<b>Alliance Strategy</b>	Challenges in forging alliances beyond ideological boundaries.	Forms diverse alliances, maneuvering effectively within shifting political dynamics.
<b>Effectiveness</b>	Potential limitation in countering autocratization due to ideological constraints.	Potentially more effective in resisting autocratization by leveraging flexibility in strategy.
<b>Risks and Challenges</b>	Constrained by ideological rigidity, possibly leading to ineffectiveness in dynamic political environments.	Risks include potential for opportunism and dilution of party identity due to over-flexibility in political strategies and alliances.
<b>Discursive Practice</b>	<b>Exclusionary Discourse:</b> Characterized by a confrontational and divisive approach; employs polarizing rhetoric, framing political discourse in terms of "us" versus "them." Deepens societal divisions.	<b>Inclusive Discourse:</b> Adopts a unifying and inclusive approach; emphasizes shared values and common interests, capable of bridging social divisions.

**Figure 1:** Rigid versus Flexible Opposition, Source: Author

## 2.5 Analyzing Opposition under Autocratization in Turkey

The analysis of the CHP in Turkey serves as a pivotal case study in understanding the intricate role of the opposition within the context of autocratization. This thesis analyzes the CHP's strategic decisions and actions under AKP rule to explore the dynamics of opposition in a rapidly autocratizing nation. By doing so, it aims to shed light on opposition-ruling party dynamics in autocratizing countries beyond Turkey. This analysis moves beyond conventional narratives of opposition as merely victims of autocracy or resilient forces for democracy by shedding light on how opposition actors can both impede and inadvertently contribute to the progression of autocratization. The CHP's evolving strategies, marked by shifts between rigid and flexible opposition approaches, illustrate the complex and evolving role of opposition parties in challenging political landscapes.

### 2.5.1 Autocratization and Autocratic Legitimation under AKP Rule

The recent increase in the tempo of Turkey's autocratization has occurred gradually under a popularly elected government (Özbudun 2014; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Sözen 2020). According to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), the classic form of autocratization involves tactics such as illegal access to power, military coups, or foreign invasion. They point out, however, that the current wave of autocratization has emerged through harassment of the opposition, the narrowing of civil society liberties, control over the media and censorship, the gradual concentration of power in the executive organs, and the instrumentalization of the judiciary (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Sözen 2019a; V-DEM 2023). Previously, Turkey's experiment in democracy was interrupted by military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and the failed attempt in 2016 (White 2017, 29). However, over the last decade, the AKP's increasing control over the judiciary, media, and civil society, along with the deterioration of checks and balances via institutional changes, has hampered the ability of opposition forces to challenge the executive organ.

Under almost 22 years of AKP rule, the principles of democracy have degenerated as the ruling party's harm to political and civil liberties increased. According to data from respected institutions that measure democracy and freedom around the world, Turkey's rankings have been steadily declining. Turkey is classified as "not free" in terms of political and civil liberties,

according to the Freedom House (2023) report. Turkey's scores on the V-DEM (n.d.) electoral democracy index have been declining since 2006. Turkey has been categorized as one of the countries that experienced substantial autocratization (Lührman and Lindberg 2019, 3) in the last decade.

From its election in 2002 until 2007, the AKP pursued an agenda that emphasized democratization, enacted successful economic policies, and worked to meet the requirements for European Union accession. However, a notable shift took place in 2007, marking the beginning of a rapid increase in autocratization within the country. This transformation is evident in institutional changes and shifts in policy (Çalışkan 2018; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; and Somer 2019). The AKP has systematically bolstered the authority of the executive branch through a series of constitutional amendments. These amendments, discussed by Aytac and Elci (2019), had profound implications: In 2007, the amendments reshaped the electoral process for the president, moving away from election and appointment by parliament to direct popular vote. This change diminished the parliament's ability to act as a check on presidential power. Subsequently, in 2010, further amendments undermined the judiciary's independence from the executive and legislative branches, eroding the separation of powers. In 2017, another set of amendments established a hyper-presidential system with limited checks and balances, creating a personalized and centralized rule. This system rendered the parliament and state institutions dysfunctional and transferring extensive power to the person in charge of executive functions.

Turkey's recent increase in autocratization has occurred primarily due to the loss of institutional checks and balances. However, the government retains popular support, and institutional changes have been legitimized through popular support and, surprisingly, parliamentary support, sometimes even from the opposition. Legitimacy is needed both in democracies and autocracies for regime durability. Legitimacy is defined as "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society" (Lipset 1959, 86, quoted in Soest and Grauvogel 2017). The AKP's appeal to populist legitimation has allowed it to dismantle political checks and balances, replacing them with elections that position the public as the primary check on power. This system includes an institutional "check" on the popular vote, enabling the executive to replace opposition-elected officials with trustees (kayyum) from his own party. According to Somer (2016), political authority under Turkey's "new authoritarianism" is more personalized and mass-based. The AKP has always used the ballot box as a democratic tool, even when the party itself violated democratic values. Thus, relying solely on institutional aspects of autocratization is insufficient to explain autocratization dynamics. Sözen (2020) suggests that studying the interaction of ideas and institutions



during AKP rule is the best approach to understanding Turkey's autocratization process. The opposition's role in feeding these ideas and institutional processes used by the AKP to legitimize its own narrative are key elements that allow the AKP to justify its actions despite its autocratic measures. This thesis argues that the opposition played a significant role in normalizing the autocratic legitimation process while simultaneously creating strategies to tackle autocratization.

### 2.5.1.1 *Legitimation via ideas: populist narrative and polarizing discourse*

The AKP has skillfully combined its efforts to consolidate power through executive aggrandizement—the process of strengthening the executive branch's power by diminishing checks and balances through legal means—with the effective utilization of populism and polarization to validate its actions.

The AKP and its charismatic leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, frequently employ an "us" versus "them" dichotomy to justify their policies and undermine their adversaries within the opposition. The AKP, founded in 2001 by youthful adherents of the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*) movement inspired by Necmettin Erbakan's ideas, ascended to power in 2002 to become Turkey's ruling party (White 2013).<sup>1</sup> Under Erdoğan's leadership, the AKP positioned itself as the voice of the masses who had historically been marginalized from government and state bureaucracy by the Republican elites. Employing a populist approach, the party made a commitment to integrate these excluded masses into the government through AKP-driven policies. Erdoğan and the AKP asserted themselves as the sole rightful representatives of the Turkish nation, casting doubt on the legitimacy of any other political actors who dared to challenge their narrative.

Erdoğan's populist rhetoric has evolved to suit the changing political landscape. After the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, which prompted the declaration of a state of emergency and increased presidential powers from 2017 onward, the government effectively gained control over the military and

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<sup>1</sup> According to White (2013), National Vision (*Milli Görüş*), represents a contemporary Islamist movement rooted in Turkish authenticity and guided by Muslim ethical principles under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan advocated for the establishment of a Just Economic Order (Adil Düzen) aimed at eradicating socioeconomic disparities and corruption. His proposal included urging the withdrawal of the state from economic activities and instead promoting individual or small enterprise initiatives. *Milli Görüş* interlinked Islam with nationalism and manifested a pronounced chauvinistic and racist aspect grounded in Turkish identity, heritage, and blood ties (White 2013).

judiciary. Consequently, Erdoğan's populist narrative shifted its focus from the Islamist-secular divide to a broader theme of loyalty to the state and its perceived betrayals. Presenting himself and his party as the ultimate representative not only of the people and the nation but also of the state itself, he intensified criticism aimed at opposition parties, intellectuals, academics, and journalists. They were accused of colluding with foreign powers and domestic enemies, further widening the scope of condemnation. This transformation underscores the adaptability of populist appeals and institutional changes under populist governance. The CHP, a stalwart member of the opposition, was a constant target of the AKP's populist strategy. Initially, the AKP criticized the CHP for its alleged cooperation with the military and judiciary against the AKP. Subsequently, the narrative shifted, with the AKP accusing the CHP of aligning with "terrorist and foreign powers" against the national will. This ongoing targeting of the CHP underscores the enduring nature of political polarization and populist rhetoric in Turkish politics, while demonstrating the adaptability of its discursive content.

In addition to its majoritarian, populist tendencies, the AKP government has consistently employed political polarization as a governing strategy. As Somer (2019) argued, this polarization has contributed to the erosion of democracy in Turkey over the past two decades. While Turkey has long grappled with societal divisions broadly labeled right versus left, secular versus religious, and Kurdish versus Turkish identities, these cleavages have deepened during the AKP's populist rule, splitting the nation into pro-AKP and anti-AKP political factions. The categories themselves provide limited insight, as their definitions have evolved over time. For example, the government's vilification of the Hizmet movement, recognized as the Fethullahçı Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) by the Turkish state, has led to divisions among devout Sunni Muslims. Followers of the preacher Fethullah Gülen, once considered allies of the AKP, now find themselves persecuted by the state and branded as members of a terrorist group following their involvement in the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Political polarization, in essence, refers to the impact of political differences on social relationships. Societies become polarized when supporters of opposing political camps avoid engaging in friendly interactions at family gatherings, civic organizations, leisure activities, and workplaces, as highlighted by V-DEM in 2022. Data from V-DEM (n.d.) reveals that political polarization in the country has been on the rise since 2007.

Despite the deepening political polarization in the country, the opposition has long struggled to formulate depolarizing strategies. Nevertheless, my research indicates that the opposition has inadvertently contributed to the AKP's polarizing discourse by adopting a discourse and strategy that feeds the AKP's

populist narrative (Somer 2019; Ciddi and Esen 2014; Gürpınar 2022). Initially, the CHP's discourse was characterized by obstructionism and alarmism, focusing more on opposing the AKP rather than presenting alternative reform programs. This approach, notably during the 2007 elections, reinforced the AKP's portrayal of the CHP as an exclusionary party, unintentionally strengthening the AKP's populist narrative. In the 2007 campaign, the CHP emphasized protecting the Republic against the AKP, using slogans and advertisements that fostered fears of an Islamist takeover among secular voters. However, under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership since 2010, the CHP gradually shifted its discourse towards challenging the AKP's polarizing policies. The party began adopting more inclusive strategies, particularly on issues such as the Kurdish and headscarf debates, and emphasized democratization and equal citizenship. Despite these changes, the party struggled to fully depart from polarization, as seen in Kılıçdaroğlu's personal targeting of Erdoğan, which exacerbated anti-Erdoğan sentiments. In subsequent elections, particularly in 2019, the CHP's campaign strategies evolved further. Collaborating with other opposition parties and emphasizing inclusive messages like "Radical love" and "Everything will be alright," the CHP achieved significant electoral victories, especially in metropolitan cities like Istanbul and Ankara. These campaigns focused on local issues and positive agendas rather than engaging in polarizing debates, contrasting starkly with the AKP's fear-driven narratives. The success of the CHP in the 2019 local elections underscored the effectiveness of its inclusive campaign strategies and depolarizing discourse. By appealing to a broader spectrum of voters and emphasizing hope and unity, the CHP moved away from its previous exclusionary tactics. This shift not only contributed to the party's electoral success but also challenged the AKP's populist narrative by creating an alternative vision based on inclusivity and positive political language.

### 2.5.2 CHP-AKP Entanglement

As the founding party of the Republic, the CHP has always been associated with the early Republican regime's authoritarian legacy (Gürpınar 2022, 508). However, throughout its history, the party has undergone ideological changes (Bila 2020; Bora 2017; Gürpınar 2022). In the 1960s, the party adopted a center-left policy; in the 1970s, Bülent Ecevit's left populism dominated. Following the 1980 coup d'etat, which violently suppressed political liberties in the country, the CHP was closed, and new parties emerged. The CHP was able to reestablish itself in 1992 under the same name due to a change in the law paving the way for the reestablishment of closed parties. After 1995, under the leadership of Deniz Baykal, the CHP largely avoided ideological

discussions and relied on a leader-centered communication strategy. Under Baykal's leadership, the CHP positioned itself as a party that appealed to "laicist concerns" (Bora 2017, 591) against the rise of political Islam in Turkey. Baykal also amended party law to bolster the status of the leader, which had been constantly contested by various factions. However, the CHP has always contained diverse factions, supporting social democracy, Kemalism, center-left, and nationalism. A leadership change in 2010 transformed the party's strategy. Under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP adopted a flexible opposition strategy that involved forming alliances with other opposition parties and embracing an inclusive discourse.

Center-right parties in Turkey have consistently singled out the CHP as their primary adversary ever since the advent of the multi-party system. According to Bora (2013), nationalist-conservative political parties in Turkey drew their strength from anti-CHP sentiments. For Turkey's right-wing, the CHP stands as the embodiment of leftist ideology. When the CHP was in a weakened state, this presentation of the CHP by the right-wing served as a means to caricature and ridicule the left. Conversely, when the CHP wielded substantial influence, it was used to stoke fears about leftist policies. Accusations of CHP elitism and affiliation with bureaucratic elites have also been voiced by leftist parties that do not perceive the CHP as sufficiently aligned with their own principles (Selçuk 2023, 12). Türk (2013) asserts that the AKP seeks to maintain the CHP as its primary adversary, argued that this so-called "CHP mentality" fuels anti-CHP sentiments, thereby securing the AKP's place as the party committed to a different vision for the country. Consequently, the AKP strives to perpetuate the perception that the CHP obstructs the AKP's efforts to serve the people (Türk 2013). The AKP associates the CHP with elitism and instability. Indeed, one of the AKP's founding members, during interviews, acknowledged that the AKP harnessed anti-CHP sentiments and activities, especially between 2002 and 2010, to construct its own distinct identity.

Until 2010, the CHP adopted a rigid opposition strategy under the leadership of Deniz Baykal. This strategy was based on defining the CHP as the "guardian of the Republic" and compelled the party to form alliances within the state bureaucracy, judiciary, and military, as well as to restrict its ideological stance to debates regarding secularism. As my study shows, the CHP gradually adopted an inclusive discourse, albeit with significant retreats and setbacks. The CHP's actions and rhetoric contributed to the deepening polarization, prompting the AKP to adopt autocratic measures to protect itself against the CHP-dominated establishment, and aiding in the consolidation of the AKP's base.

With the party's leadership change in 2010 under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP's strategies to combat autocratization shifted. Kılıçdaroğlu's flexible

opposition welcomed conservatives and Kurds who had previously been alienated by the CHP. Over several years, the party formed both formal and informal alliances with other parties to combat autocratization and win elections.

One key discovery of this research is that CHP elites attribute the transformation of the party's strategy to a recognition that its influence within the state had dwindled, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt. This realization created a need to reach out to broader segments of society and prompted the adoption of flexible strategies such as forming alliances with other parties and embracing a more inclusive discourse to connect with a wider audience.

However, an excessive level of flexibility raised concerns about the erosion of the CHP's party identity. While flexibility can enhance popular support, it also risks diminishing the party's distinct identity and depoliticizing opposition parties by pushing them to avoid engaging with risky political topics. Strategies aimed at reducing polarization within a flexible opposition can pose challenges as well. According to Somer et al. (2021), efforts to depolarize may fall short of mobilizing and enhancing the enthusiasm of opposition supporters enough to overcome the incumbent. Additionally, such strategies could be perceived as too lenient, potentially legitimizing the divisive and antidemocratic actions of the incumbent (Somer et al. 2021).

As this thesis argues that the opposition is also a key dynamic actor in shaping autocratization, it is of paramount importance to consider several counterarguments. One argument concerns the effectiveness of the CHP's shift towards a more inclusive strategy under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership. Although elite interviews suggest that this shift was a deliberate choice for inclusivity, the complex dynamics within the party could indicate a more complicated situation. Questions might arise about the party's actual ability to adopt and execute this strategy extensively. Internal resistance or skepticism among party members or leaders could have weakened the strategy's effectiveness, suggesting that the real challenge might have been as much about the party's capability to enact change as the strategy itself. Moreover, the role of civil society and external entities in influencing the party's direction is significant, as these factors could shape or limit the party's decisions and actions.

Another critical counterargument centers on the relative influence of the opposition's strategy changes on the broader political context, particularly regarding autocratization. This perspective might posit that the driving force behind Turkey's democratic backsliding lies predominantly with the incumbent party's aggressive push towards autocratic governance. From this

viewpoint, the nature of autocratization is shaped more by the actions and policies of the ruling party than by the opposition's strategic adjustments. As a result, even significant changes in opposition strategy might have limited impact on altering the trajectory of autocratization, since the fundamental dynamics of democratic erosion are propelled by the incumbent's maneuvers rather than the opposition's responses.

This research, by acknowledging these counterarguments, highlights the multifaceted challenges opposition parties face in effecting change and the often overwhelming influence of incumbent powers on the direction of political developments. Consequently, the CHP itself was transformed, which both challenged and contributed to the autocratization process within the complex landscape of shifting power dynamics. The CHP's contribution to the deepening of autocratization in Turkey has been multifaceted. Initially, the party's unwavering adherence to ideological stances and limited discourse options, coupled with its reliance on the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy during Baykal's tenure, inadvertently encouraged the AKP's reliance on polarizing politics. Despite later attempts to adopt a more flexible opposition stance, the CHP faced challenges in effectively countering autocratization. The party's support for the removal of parliamentary immunities of pro-Kurdish deputies and its perceived hesitancy in responding to political arrests and suppressive measures further played into the hands of the AKP's autocratic agenda. Additionally, the initial inability of the opposition to form a unified bloc and intra-oppositional rivalries have been key factors contributing to the deepening of autocratization. This thesis argues that these challenges have hindered coordinated efforts against the ruling AKP, allowing autocratic tendencies to persist and consolidate. As an important actor in Turkish politics, the CHP, through its strategic choices and as a staunch member of the anti-AKP bloc since 2002, exemplifies dynamic opposition under autocratic rule. Yet my field research revealed that the CHP, with its strategies and elite decisions, has also played a significant role in the process of autocratization. On the one hand, the CHP attempted to limit autocratization; on the other, it either willingly or unwillingly contributed to the entrenchment of autocratic rule.

## 3 Research Design and Methodology

This section of the dissertation outlines the research design and the methodologies for data collection that contributed to each article. It details the diverse materials gathered, including elite interviews, archival research, and focus group discussions, and highlights the importance of employing various methodologies. Finally, I address ethical considerations pertinent to elite interviews and focus groups, focusing on issues such as access to participants, informed consent, and confidentiality.

### 3.1 Agency-based, Actor-driven Approach

This research takes an agency-based perspective, emphasizing the influence of actors' decisions on the course of the regime. Although considering structural and historical factors is essential for understanding Turkey's autocratization process, the pivotal role played by political actors in shaping this process cannot be overlooked. An agency-based, actor-driven research perspective uncovers the detailed complexities of political dynamics and granular insights that are often overlooked in broader structural analyses. Analyzing the strategies and motivations of different actors within the autocratization process also exposes the internal dynamics, adaptability, and effectiveness of opposition groups, making a more comprehensive understanding of the varied forms of political contestation possible. In other words, this thesis uses an agency-based approach that focuses on variable strategies and adaptations (that may or may not lead to desired outcomes) as opposed to an outcome-based approach that tries to determine which events led to success or failure.

### 3.2 Material and Data Collection

This thesis sheds light on the dynamic, multifaceted role played by the CHP in Turkish politics by focusing on insights from the actors involved and how their decisions were perceived by the voters. It examines the motivations behind elite decisions, the ideas conveyed through political discourse and performance in significant events, protests, and CHP election campaigns, using a comprehensive and multifaceted methodological framework. By integrating diverse methodologies, this research offers a more thorough understanding of the intricate dynamics that characterize Turkey's political environment. Each paper in this dissertation is a component of a larger research project and each investigates a different but related aspect of political strategies, discourses, and voter perceptions.

Following an agency-based approach, the research included the following methodologies: i) in-depth interviews with political elites; ii) focus groups with ordinary voters; iii) archival research based on web and newspaper scanning. In addition, I carried out participant observation in various public and closed meetings, rallies, and events organized by different opposition parties and coalitions during 2021-2023. This enabled a closer look at the unfolding political dynamics. Participation in these gatherings, including those featuring prominent leaders like Ali Babacan of the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA Party), Ahmet Davutoğlu of the Future Party (Gelecek) and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the CHP, facilitated a more direct and enriched understanding of the political dialogues, strategies, and voter perceptions in real-time. This approach not only facilitated a first-hand experience of the political ambiance but also allowed me to accumulate invaluable insights and explanations directly from the actors involved, enhancing the authenticity and breadth of the research findings. Additionally, I engaged in numerous roundtable discussions hosted by various civil society organizations, which included civil society representatives, intellectuals, and politicians from Turkey, offering valuable perspectives and debates on the strategies of Turkey's opposition and the counterarguments related to them.

Actor-based analysis and elite interviews are critical for understanding the strategies and roles of opposition actors in shaping and responding to autocratization processes, as they reveal the internal dynamics and considerations underlying strategic political decisions. Archival research adds context and substance to the analysis, presenting a panoramic view of the evolving political discourse and actions. Focus group discussions bridge the gap between political elites and the electorate, delivering a ground-level perspective on how political narratives and strategies resonate with diverse voter segments. Participant observation was crucial to this research as it allowed direct immersion into the political climate and facilitated the gathering of firsthand accounts and perspectives from the participants, thereby enriching the depth of the research results. The combination of elite



interviews, archival research, focus group discussions, and participant observations enables a holistic exploration of the roles and strategies of opposition parties. By intertwining these methodological strands, this research analyzes the multi-dimensional interplay between political strategies, voter perceptions, and overarching political transformations. This allows for a more holistic understanding of how political strategies and discourses are formulated, articulated, and received, and how they interact with and influence wider regime trajectories.

In my compilation thesis, I employ different methodologies across three articles to examine the role of the CHP in Turkey's political landscape, particularly in relation to autocratization under AKP rule. The rationale for using different methodologies for each paper is presented in the following paragraphs.

Article 1 adopts an agency-based approach to investigate the strategic choices of political elites within the CHP, focusing on their role in resisting or contributing to the autocratization process between 2002 and 2022. Methodologically, the study employs a combination of in-depth interviews, archival research, and focus group discussions. By conducting 20 interviews with experts, politicians, journalists, and scholars, and analyzing archival materials such as newspapers, speeches, and political rallies, I traced the decisions and motivations of CHP leaders during critical junctures. This approach is essential to understanding how these strategic choices influence regime trajectories and the broader autocratization process. Additionally, ten focus group interviews with 60 participants categorized by age and voting preferences revealed insights into voter perceptions and reactions to the opposition's actions and strategic choices. The use of these methods facilitates a broad examination of both elite decision-making and grassroots responses, highlighting the complexity and impact of political strategies in an internally complex party like the CHP.

Article 2 employs discourse analysis and focus group research to scrutinize the electoral campaigns and performances of the CHP. By examining campaign materials, such as posters and slogans from websites, newspapers, and books, the study aims to reveal the ideological positions and narrative strategies of the CHP. Discourse analysis is vital because it explores how political messages are constructed and the impact they have on the audience, not just in conveying ideas but also in persuading voters. The focus group discussions, involving 60 participants with diverse political affiliations, sheds light on voter perceptions and reactions to the CHP's campaign materials and discourse. This methodology is important for observing polarization and gaining insights into voter sentiment. Although focus groups have limitations in terms of generalizability, they provide valuable clues about voter attitudes

towards electoral campaigns, contributing to the paper's aim of understanding the effectiveness and reception of the CHP's political discourse.

Article 3 utilizes a triangulated research design incorporating elite interviews, archival research, and participant observations to explore the driving factors behind the CHP in forming alliances, examining their contribution to opposition coordination, their challenges, and the evolution of their alliance strategies amidst the backdrop of autocratization under AKP rule. The methodology includes twenty interviews with experts, politicians, journalists, and academics to gain insights into the decision-making processes of political elites. This approach is crucial because elite interviews grant unparalleled access to the strategic choices that shape transitions to and from democracy. Archival research complements the interviews by delivering historical context and substantiating the findings. Participant observation of public and closed meetings, rallies, and events organized by opposition parties and coalitions add depth and authenticity to the study. These firsthand encounters and interactions, including moderating panels and attending press meetings, grant a nuanced understanding of the motivations and actions of key political figures. This comprehensive approach is critical for uncovering the motivations that guide CHP political elites in coalition-building. It also identifies the primary challenges in maintaining cohesive opposition alliances and assesses how these challenges influence the process of autocratization in Turkey. Despite inherent limitations, such as the subjectivities of political actors, the combination of these methods enables a robust analysis of the evolving dynamics within the CHP and their electoral alliance strategies, ultimately aiming to diagnose the opposition's role in either combating or consolidating autocratization.

### 3.3 Elite Interviews

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of individuals including experts, politicians from the CHP and other opposition parties, former and current party cadres in decision-making organs, campaign advisors, prominent members, journalists, and scholars. Elite interviews were used in Article 1 and Article 3. Political elites play a pivotal role in shaping policies, institutions, and societal directions at critical junctures (Beamer 2002); hence, elite interviews serve as a fundamental component to explore the strategic choices of opposition parties. Through these interviews, insights into the motivations, intentions, and strategies of political elites are analyzed, elucidating the dynamic role of opposition in the autocratization process. However, it is also important to underline that some of the participants were

key actors in politics and had their own subjectivity and agendas. Nevertheless, the interviews provided an actor's view of political dynamics.

### 3.4 Archival Research, Newspaper Scanning and Secondary Sources

Extensive web archival research and secondary sources served to gather background information for the thesis and allowed me to define and explain critical junctures in the autocratization process in all three articles. Visual materials from YouTube were examined and used for background information. Article 2 focuses on electoral campaigns. Newspapers, websites, and secondary literature were used to analyze the CHP's campaign materials from 2002 to the 2019 local election (which is the last election analyzed in the timeline covered by this thesis 2002-2022). Since access to the CHP's archive is difficult, this study makes valuable information from this archive available to scholars wishing to study the CHP.

*Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet*, two newspapers with accessible online archives, were selected to locate the CHP's campaign posters. *Milliyet* was a mainstream newspaper until recently (its archive is accessible until 2008) and *Cumhuriyet* is a prominent publication closely aligned with the CHP since its founding. Consequently, its presentation of viewpoints and ideologies aligns with the CHP, allowing for thorough exploration of the party's discourse and campaign strategies. To compare and contrast, the AKP's campaign materials were also collected from both the AKP's websites and *Milliyet*. All campaign posters were coded in Excel to facilitate archival search. For the 2019 elections, additional sources were necessary as the CHP did not prefer to use newspaper advertisements, with the exception of a single poster. Therefore, supplementary campaign materials were retrieved from books authored by the CHP's campaign managers (Başsoy 2020; Başsoy 2021; Özkan 2019) and from the party's official website archives.

This method was instrumental in analyzing how political narratives were framed and in deriving the underlying ideologic stances and strategies of the CHP in electoral campaigns and political performances as they relate to CHP internal dynamics and the autocratization process.

### 3.5 Focus Group Discussions

Focus groups were employed to gain insight into voter perceptions and reactions to the political narratives and decisions made by opposition elites. This method was used in Articles 1 and 2. The discussions were structured to understand voters' interpretations and emotional responses to the political campaigns and slogans of the CHP, as well as their overall political preferences. A total of ten focus group discussions were convened, consisting of 60 participants in Istanbul, Turkey. Participants were selected through random sampling of political voters based on factors like voting preferences, age, and gender to foster diverse and inclusive dialogues. Focus group discussions were held in Istanbul by a professional research company with the Istanbul Political Research Institute's support. The company, Akademetre Research, facilitated finding participants. The participants were randomly selected from the company's phonebook list and contacted by the company via telephone.

The groups included supporters from various political alliances and parties, including the AKP, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), CHP, Good Party (IYI Party), Democrat Party (DP), Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and DEVA, ensuring that a broad spectrum of political ideologies and affiliations were represented. I organized participants into three distinct categories: the governing bloc, comprising voters of the AKP and its ally MHP; the opposition bloc, which included both CHP voters and those from other opposition parties; and a group exclusively for CHP voters. This division was crafted to ensure that participants could express their viewpoints in a relaxed environment, minimizing the risk of self-censorship that might arise in a more politically heterogeneous group due to high political polarization in the country. The pro-government groups provided information into the impact of CHP's policies and discourses on them. The group composed solely of CHP voters allowed for targeted discussions on the party's policies and how these are perceived by its electorate, thus offering a clear lens on the specific attitudes and opinions within this voter base. The mixed opposition group, on the other hand, created an opportunity to observe inter-opposition dynamics and reactions to the CHP's policies from a broader perspective. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the political dialogue and sentiment across various segments of Turkey's electorate (see the articles for more information about the distribution of participants in the focus groups).

Focus groups facilitate structured yet interactive dialogues, presenting the same series of questions to each group. These discussions were initiated by displaying slogans and visual materials from the CHP's election campaigns, probing participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about these

campaigns, and ascertaining whether they believed that these reflected the CHP's ideology or vision for Turkey. Additionally, participants were asked about the specific political campaign slogans they found memorable and successful. Images from significant CHP-linked events like the Republic Protests and the Justice March were discussed to understand participants' memories and emotions during these occurrences. This methodological approach was fundamental for understanding the dynamics of polarization and voter perceptions at the group level, revealing essential clues to voters' perceptions about electoral campaigns and ideological leanings. However, it is important to note the inherent limitations of focus group discussions. As they include only a small sample of people, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population. Nonetheless, these discussions provide a more profound understanding of voter perceptions and give nuanced insights into the interactions between different political affiliations and ideologies, contributing substantially to the understanding of the dynamics of autocratization in Turkey.

In conclusion, the methodological framework utilized in this research integrated diverse methodologies that uncovered an enriched and detailed understanding of the opposition's role in the unfolding process of autocratization in Turkey, shedding light on the intricacies of political strategies, voter perceptions, and ideological narratives within the broader political and societal context.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

A meticulous approach to ethical considerations was vital in conducting a research study that analyzed the socio-political dynamics of Turkey due to the authoritarian aspect of the current regime. The research carefully integrated ethical principles in every aspect of the methodology to ensure that the dignity, privacy, and well-being of participants were safeguarded, and the integrity of the research maintained. The Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved permission for this research.

First of all, interactions with participants, whether in elite interviews or focus groups, were conducted with the utmost care for their autonomy and well-being. The researcher ensured that the participants were fully informed and treated with respect, while also guaranteeing the preservation of their anonymity. Each participant was informed about the aim, purpose, methods, and implications of the research. I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time.

Focus group were conducted in Istanbul by a research company with the support of the Istanbul Political Research Institute. The company, Akademetre Research, facilitated finding participants, and ensured a secure place for the focus groups and access to techniques and equipment. In focus groups, written consent of the participants was taken. However, for elite interviews, obtaining written consent was not possible because, under an autocratic regime, signing such documents could jeopardize the safety and anonymity of political elites. Instead, oral consent was recorded for elite interviews. In situations where written consent could potentially expose participants to harm, given the autocratic political landscape, oral consent was deemed more appropriate, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and maintaining the ethical integrity of the research process. Due to the autocratic context of Turkey, voice recordings were also problematic for many political elites. Several interviews could not be recorded because of this issue, so the researcher took notes instead. In meetings open to the press, no extra permission was needed to use the statements. Special attention was afforded to ensuring that neither the researcher and nor the participants faced any vulnerability as a result of the prevailing political context in Turkey. There was a keen focus on maintaining a balanced and neutral representation of political views and mitigating any potential self-censorship or biases, thereby maintaining the integrity and reliability of the research findings.

Anonymization and pseudonymization of data were pivotal in safeguarding participant confidentiality and protecting sensitive information. All identifiable information during the transcription phase was removed, and pseudonyms were introduced, ensuring the protection of sensitive information and maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. Transparency and respect were ensured by providing participants with detailed information and clear explanations of every aspect of the research, fostering an environment of trust and ethical integrity.

I used a separate cell phone without internet access during the meetings to take voice recordings. A microphone and voice recorder were used during focus groups. Data security measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the collected data, with encryption to prevent unauthorized access and potential data breaches. The research emphasized data security, ensuring that every piece of information was handled with the utmost care and protection and reflecting the commitment to ethical research practices that is formulated in the protocols of Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

## 4 Summary of Research Papers

### 4.1 Article 1: The Role of the Opposition in the Autocratization Process: The Case of Turkey

Article 1 examines the dynamic role of the CHP in Turkey's autocratization between 2002 and 2022 under the rule of the AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, by focusing on the CHP's policies, decisions, and discourse at critical junctures.

The article is based on in-depth interviews with experts, politicians, journalists, and scholars, as well as extensive archival and field research. This produced a nuanced exploration of elite decisions within the CHP and gave insight into the logic and motivations behind their strategies and decisions.

The article proposes two new concepts, rigid opposition and flexible opposition, to explain the evolutionary dynamics of opposition strategies in autocratic regimes. Rigid opposition refers to a strategic position where political parties adhere strictly to their ideological positions and are unwilling to deviate from them. This rigid stance often limits their discourse and alliance strategies, as they are less open to engage with parties that have differing ideologies or policy preferences. Parties in rigid opposition tend to prioritize ideological purity over pragmatic considerations. In contrast, parties in flexible opposition are more adaptable in their political and discursive strategies. They are willing to adjust their positions and engage with a broader range of parties, irrespective of ideological proximity. Flexible opposition recognizes the dynamic nature of autocratization and the need to respond creatively to changing circumstances and shifting political dynamics.

The article argues that until 2010 the CHP adopted a rigid opposition style marked by strong identity-based polarization against the AKP. Over time, facing escalating autocratic measures by the AKP and after a string of failures, the CHP transitioned to a flexible approach involving strategic alliances and

inclusive discourse. This was an attempt to resonate with larger societal groups and to counter the AKP's consolidation. This flexibility, however, was not simply a transformation but a complex adaptation filled with inherent risks like identity dilution and potential reinforcement of autocratic policies. The article underscores that this strategic flexibility of the CHP was not purely democratic in nature; rather, it was largely a response to its waning influence within the state and lack of resonance with broad segments of society. The party began to forge alliances with varying political entities and adopt inclusive discourses. However, this apparent flexibility in opposition strategies did not necessarily translate into party coherence, and at times even mimicked or authorized the autocratic messages of the AKP, thus paradoxically contributing to the very autocratization they were resisting.

The article underscores the importance of strategic choices at critical junctures, which may influence long-term outcomes and set in motion a path-dependent process that potentially limits future options. The CHP's opposition strategy unfolded in three phases: i) 2007-2010, marked by intensifying political polarization and incidents where the CHP's rigid approach ii) 2010-2015, highlighting a phase of evolving, flexible strategies, leadership shifts, and an increased anti-AKP stance, including significant events like the 2013 Gezi protests; iii) Post-2015, characterized by heightened oppression of the opposition, especially after the July 2016 coup attempt, aligning with the shift to a hyper-presidential system.

The article also underlines that opposition parties are not merely victims of autocratization but dynamic entities in the political game. Their strategies, discourses, and decisions can significantly impact the political environment—either by limiting autocratization or, in certain circumstances, contributing to and exacerbating it. The study points to the importance of an optimal balance in flexibility and rigidity in opposition strategies to effectively counter autocratization without undermining party coherence or reinforcing autocratic norms unintentionally.

Finally, the article suggests the need for further research to comprehend the limits and pitfalls of strategic flexibility that could possibly undermine the opposition's essence and indirectly reinforce the ruling party's autocratic advancements. This aims to inject important nuance into the academic discussion of the role of the opposition in autocratization and contribute to a better understanding of democratic erosion observed globally.



## 4.2 Article 2: Opposing Autocratization in Turkey: From Exclusionary to Inclusive Discourse

Article 2 scrutinizes the evolving discourse and strategies of the CHP amidst escalating autocratization under AKP rule between 2002 and 2019. The article examines the party's development and restructuring over time and evaluates these changes in light of their effect on polarization and autocratization.

Analyzing political narratives, election campaigns, and public emotions from 2002 to 2019, the research leverages materials from newspapers, websites, books, and focus group discussions that illustrate how the CHP's discourses and strategies were transformed and perceived by voters. The article reveals that the CHP's discourse initially reinforced the AKP's portrayal of the CHP as defenders of the status quo, contrasting the AKP as proponents of change and inclusivity. However, under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership after 2010, this discourse underwent a transformation, shifting towards inclusive policies and countering polarizing tactics. This shift demonstrated the party's capacity for learning and adaptation. This transformation was not instantaneous but a cumulative result of internal revisions and reflections, marking a transition from divisive to unifying strategies.

The CHP's "Radical Love" campaign in 2019 symbolized this transformation, emphasizing depolarizing and inclusive discourse. This campaign secured victories in major metropolitan municipalities and illustrated the ability of opposition parties to succeed even in an uneven, authoritarian political landscape. Rather than being a dramatic overhaul, this alteration in strategy was a calculated culmination of the party's meticulous restructuring and ideological evolution. The success of this strategy and the party's ability to maneuver within the prevailing autocratic environment has ignited debates about their efficacy against populist leaders.

The opposition's transformation and strategies were part of a larger, intertwined fabric of political, institutional, social, and economic dynamics in Turkey. While the underlying motivations, internal conflicts, party structures, and inter-oppositional relationships were crucial, the opposition's ideas, elicited public emotions, performances, and discourses played an equally important role.

In conclusion, this article examines the nuanced, dynamic interplay between the opposition and the authoritarian regime in Turkey. It underlines the opposition's significance in shaping political narratives and dynamics, elucidating the CHP's evolution from a party that unwittingly reinforced the AKP's polarizing narrative to one that is redefining its strategies and

discourses in an effort to unite divergent ideologies and restore democratic values, though not always successfully. This study explores the intricate dance between opposition and incumbency, illustrating how each step, whether in sync or out of sync, has molded the political tapestry of a nation undergoing autocratization.

### 4.3 Article 3: Dynamic Opposition Alliances under Autocratization in Turkey: Republican People's Party (CHP) as a Moderator Party

The third article investigates the role played by the CHP in Turkey's autocratization process through its alliance strategies, focusing on how these strategies have influenced opposition coordination and evolution. Additionally, the article explores the motivations behind the CHP's engagement in coalition-building, the challenges faced in maintaining cohesive opposition alliances, and the impact of these challenges on the process of autocratization in Turkey.

Methodologically, the study utilized interviews with experts, politicians, journalists, and academics, alongside archival research and participant observation, providing insights into elite strategic choices and decisions integral to transitions to and from democracy. It analyzes how elite decisions within opposition ranks, as explored through interviews and archival research, impact political dynamics and strategies.

The article argues that shifting from a rigid opposition to a flexible opposition strategy under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership affected the CHP's alliance strategy. In the context of rigid opposition, a steadfast adherence to ideological stances and a limited range of discourse and alliance options prevailed. In contrast, flexible opposition is characterized by its adaptability, with parties demonstrating a willingness to adjust their positions and collaborate with a wider array of political entities, acknowledging the fluid nature of autocratization and responding to evolving circumstances.

Until 2010, the CHP was anchored in a rigid opposition strategy under Deniz Baykal. However, the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in 2010 ushered in a new era, steering the CHP toward a more flexible approach. The party opened its doors to conservatives and Kurds while forging both formal and informal alliances. Within the sphere of the CHP's flexible opposition, two distinct alliance models came to the fore: tenuous alliance and strong alliance. The

tenuous alliance strategy represents a fragile, superficial form of cooperation among political parties with common goals, characterized by internal divisions and a lack of deep collaboration. In contrast, the strong alliance strategy indicates a cohesive and robust collaboration, marked by deep cooperation, unity, and resource pooling to effectively pursue shared objectives, especially in elections or political campaigns. Collective action and coordination maximize the impact and effectiveness of such alliances.

This article analyzes the changing dynamics of opposition coordination in the face of autocratization. The transformation of the CHP from a rigid to a flexible opposition under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership emerged as a crucial influence on the formation of cross-ideological alliances. The birth of these pre-electoral coalitions was a direct result of the CHP's transformation and the shifting political terrain in Turkey, making coalitions necessary for survival. Nevertheless, the CHP's role as a mediator and moderator within these broad alliances triggered introspection about its own identity and political trajectory. In other words, flexibility raised concerns about depoliticization and identity loss in the opposition parties themselves.

The article also explores the issue that forming pre-electoral alliances might unwittingly contribute to autocratization. First, the unified opposition waited until the presidential system's second term in 2023 before uniting behind a joint candidate. This delay prolonged opposition disunity, allowing the autocratic regime to entrench itself further. The CHP's role as a mediator within the opposition alliance inhibited its organization and engagement with grassroots efforts to mount a robust opposition. Over-flexibility in accommodating diverse interests led to a loss of political identity for the CHP, hindering its effectiveness in mobilizing support and presenting a coherent vision to voters. Additionally, prioritizing institutional issues over substantive political vision failed to resonate with the public, impeding efforts to challenge the autocratic regime effectively. Internal rivalries and discord within the alliance, exacerbated by the CHP's attempt to balance diverse interests, further hindered effective opposition mobilization.

## 5 Discussion and further research

This thesis project began in 2018, a time when Turkey's opposition was defeated in the national elections. However, the opposition subsequently found renewed optimism through substantial victories in key municipal races, notably in Istanbul and Ankara, in the 2019 local elections. These victories challenged the prevailing perception of President Erdoğan's invincibility, leading to increased academic and global interest in Turkey's opposition and their strategies to confront populist autocrats. The research period ended just before the May 2023 general elections, when the Turkish opposition, bolstered by a large coalition known as the Nation Alliance, believed it had the perfect conditions to challenge autocratic rule.

Marquez (2020) has argued that economic challenges, fractures in the elite composition of government, and the unification of opposition forces are often indicative of circumstances in which the opposition can successfully challenge autocrats. Turkey appeared to fulfill these criteria before the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. The establishment of the DEVA Party and Future Party by former AKP figures Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu signaled potential breaks in the ruling coalition, further boosting the opposition's optimism.

The CHP assumed the role of a moderator party (Bora 2020) and forged a coalition across ideological boundaries, even attracting support from another opposition alliance called the Labour and Freedom Alliance (*Emek ve Özgürlük İttifakı*), led by the pro-Kurdish HDP and five other leftist parties who agreed to support the joint candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu. However, the 2023 elections proved to be a turning point, challenging the notion that the opposition's unity and strategic flexibility were sufficient to secure victory. Despite forming a broad coalition and adopting a more inclusive and flexible opposition strategy, the CHP and its allies fell short, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of their approach and the nature of opposition in autocratic settings.

This thesis posits that while tackling autocrats necessitates flexible strategies, there are inherent challenges and potential pitfalls associated with such an approach. In the case of the CHP, the quest for flexibility seemed to lead to a degree of demobilization and dilution of ideological clarity, factors that may have contributed to the electoral setback. The opposition's failure to capitalize on the favorable conditions suggests that flexibility, while crucial, is not a panacea and must be carefully balanced to avoid undermining the party's core identity and mission.

Another important contribution of this research is that it underlines the motivation and challenges behind elite decisions at critical moments when autocratic rule might be challenged. In interviews, CHP elites emphasized several key points. To begin with, they acknowledged learning from past experiences, portraying their struggles and successes as part of an ongoing learning process. Additionally, several CHP elites noted a key turning point as CHP transitioned from a state party to a "people's party". This historical shift for the CHP created new challenges that the party seems not to have been able to manage successfully. Despite changes in the motivations and objectives of CHP elites, the party encountered difficulties in mobilizing substantial portions of the population. A motivational gap among its top leadership and provincial organizations further hindered the CHP's appeal to broader segments of the population. Moreover, the CHP's strategy focused on increasing the overall opposition vote share, not just its own, thereby weakening its ability to strengthen and grow its own base.

This thesis underlines that political party strategies are not static: they evolve over time. However, there is often a delay between implementing positive changes, such as shifting from a rigid to a flexible strategy, and acquiring the necessary skills and actors to fully benefit from those changes. As a founding party of the Republic, the CHP commemorated its centennial anniversary in 2023. Throughout Turkey's multi-party history, the CHP has consistently been the target of right-wing populism and criticized either for being the party of elites or for being too leftist. Conversely, among left-leaning individuals, the CHP has often been criticized for not living up to its leftist ideals, particularly under the leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu, when it was accused of shifting toward the center-right (Selçuk 2023). For Kurds, the CHP symbolizes the Republican Kemalist approach that historically excluded Kurdish interests (Selçuk 2023). During election periods, I have also observed that many view the CHP as a safeguard for the Republic and democracy. Therefore, conducting an analysis of the CHP is of paramount importance not only for understanding Turkish politics but also for assessing the trajectory of autocratization in Turkey.

It is essential to note that this analysis is actor-based, and further studies are needed to examine the impact of structural factors such as intra-party dynamics, financial considerations, and party democracy. The thesis showcases the potential pitfalls of excessive flexibility, which may erode party identities. Although the 2023 election results were not included in this study, it is clear that flexibility can both enhance popular support and risk the depoliticization of political parties. The research suggests that while the CHP adopted more flexible strategies, its internal mechanisms remained rigid, leading to decisions that at times mimicked the autocratic narrative of the AKP. However, a deeper analysis of the results of the 2023 elections and the effectiveness of opposition strategies deserves further research. In addition, as emphasized in previous sections, it is essential to support this research with comparative case studies to advance its theoretical contributions, given that it includes theory-generating papers.

In conclusion, this thesis, in the form of three articles, aims to examine the role of the opposition in the autocratization process and challenge success-failure narratives when analyzing opposition strategies. It argues that opposition parties are dynamic actors in the process of autocratization and analyzes the experiences of the CHP, which has been Turkey's main opposition party under AKP rule. By doing so, it aims to set the stage for a deeper understanding of the complexities and potential pitfalls that opposition parties face when confronting autocratic rulers.

## 6 References

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