

# The Role of the Opposition in Autocratisation

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 28 May 2026 at 14.00 in Sal F413, Södra huset F, vån 4, Universitetsvägen 10 F.

### Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of opposition parties in autocratisation, 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 autocratisation through their discourse, policy decisions, and actions. By analysing 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 characterised by identity-based polarisation. 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 autocratisation, 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 polarising populist narrative, while the previous exclusionary approach contributed to political polarisation. 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 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 affect the process of autocratisation in Turkey.

**Keywords:** *Turkey, opposition, autocratisation, election, democratic erosion, political parties, CHP, hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism.*

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*To Prof. Mine Eder, whose knowledge, guidance, and resilience have illuminated the paths of countless students, and who has always stood by her students.*



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Seren Selvin Korkmaz  
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# List Of Articles

## **Article 1**

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## **Article 2**

Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2023. “Opposing autocratization in Turkey: from exclusionary to inclusive discourse.” *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 17(4), 343–364.

## **Article 3**

Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2026. “The Evolution of Opposition Coordination under Competitive Authoritarianism: The Moderator Party Paradox in Turkey.” Under review at *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. (A modified earlier version was published in Turkish as Korkmaz, Seren Selvin. 2024. “Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi ve İttifaklar Siyaseti.” *Doğu Batı* 110: 27–43.

# Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of opposition parties in autocratisation, 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 autocratisation through their discourse, policy decisions, and actions. By analysing 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 characterised by identity-based polarisation. 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 autocratisation, 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 polarising populist narrative, while the previous exclusionary approach contributed to political polarisation. 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 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 affect the process of autocratisation in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Turkey, opposition, autocratisation, election, democratic erosion, political parties, CHP, hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism

## 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, opposition/oppositionspartier, autokratisering, val, demokratisk erosion, politiska partier, CHP, hybridregimer, konkurrensauktorianism

# 1 Introduction

This dissertation is structured as a compilation thesis in accordance with the standards of Swedish higher education and the regulations of Stockholm University. It comprises a comprehensive summary chapter, referred to as the ‘Kappa’, consisting of nine interrelated chapters, alongside three scholarly articles. Of these articles, two have been peer-reviewed and published, while the third is currently under review. A modified version of the third article has been published in Turkish. All three contributions are based on original field research and empirical analysis. Hence, the main empirical analysis is provided in these articles in addition to the Kappa.

Since the early 2000s, a discernible wave of autocratisation has swept across the globe, hollowing out democratic institutions by centralising executive authority and re-engineering electoral arenas (V-Dem, 2024; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Nord et al., 2025). The “Democracy Report 2025” presents a grim outlook on the state of global democracy, indicating a deepening and spreading “third wave of autocratisation” that has been rising for at least 25 years. For the first time in over two decades, autocracies now outnumber democracies, and nearly three-quarters of the world’s population live under autocratic rule. Key democratic components, especially freedom of expression, are in alarming decline across numerous countries. While a smaller number of countries are democratising, this positive trend is significantly outweighed by the global regression (V-Dem, 2025; Nord et al., 2025).

Turkey is a paradigmatic example of this trend. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country has slid gradually from electoral democracy towards competitive authoritarianism (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016, Özbudun, 2014; Sözen, 2020; Somer, 2016). This descent has featured the systematic weakening of horizontal accountability (Gençkaya & Dunbay, 2024; Adar & Seufert, 2021; Oder, 2021), expanding constraints on media and civil society (Yeşil, 2018; Coşkun, 2020; Esen, 2025), and the consolidation of a majoritarian-populist style of governance (Öniş, 2019; Yabancı, 2023; Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023).

Hence, Turkey provides a crucial case study for understanding the dynamics of autocratisation and hybrid regimes.

While existing literature has extensively analysed the role of incumbents in autocratisation (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Boese et al., 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Cassani & Tomini, 2020), much less attention has been paid to the role of opposition actors within this transformation. Opposition parties are rarely analysed as active political agents whose strategic choices can shape, accelerate, or limit processes of autocratisation. They are often portrayed either as heroic resisters or powerless victims. This thesis challenges such binary framings and situates the opposition as a dynamic actor that both contests and co-produces autocratic rule, focusing primarily on the Republican People's Party (CHP) under AKP rule between 2002 and 2023. Accordingly, the study asks not only how opposition parties have resisted Erdoğan's authoritarian turn, but also how their own manoeuvres have at times reinforced it. Although the opposition includes a wide range of actors, including political parties, civil society organisations, and activists, this dissertation uses the term opposition to refer to political parties that are not in power.

Rather than assessing opposition behaviour through a narrow lens of success or failure, this study adopts a process-sensitive and actor-centred approach. It examines how opposition actors interpret changing political conditions, recalibrate their strategies over time, and manoeuvre within an uneven playing field. Based on Jenny White's (2017) portrait of politics as a "horizontal field" marked by moral ambiguity and fluid alliances, the thesis traces how the CHP recasts its ideological stance, forges or dissolves coalitions, and reacts to crises under competitive authoritarianism. The opposition is treated as a relational force that operates inside, responds to, and at times even helps legitimise the order it aims to challenge. Understanding the role of different political parties in the autocratisation 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. As White (2017) argues, Turkish politics is organised as spindle autocracies. Instead of formal institutional rules, political relations within parties tend to be hierarchical but based on personal relations with a high degree of informality, focused on loyalty and obedience to the leader rather than merit. Spindle politics governs relations between parties as well as their interaction with society. Thus, political networks, leadership styles, performances, and use of symbols for all parties tend towards hierarchy, informality, and personalisation, making them available for movement in any direction on the horizontal field of political life.

The case of Turkey offers a crucial example of how opposition strategies unfold on the horizontal field of politics under autocratic conditions. On the one hand, the country's recent trajectory encapsulates the global drift towards

autocratisation; on the other hand, it reveals opposition strategies capable of alternating between resistance and inadvertent reinforcement of the regime. The strategies and challenges of the main opposition party, the CHP, reflect broader dilemmas faced by opposition parties in hybrid regimes. By analysing the role of opposition agency in the autocratisation of Turkey, this thesis can contribute to comparative research on hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2006), opposition dynamism (Heibach & Transfeld, 2018; Kavasoglu, 2022), and the performative dimensions of political resistance (Moffitt, 2016; Ong, 2022).

This dissertation also highlights the interplay between populism and opposition strategy (Yabanci, 2020; Dinçşahin, 2012; Demiryol, 2020). It shows how opposition actors have appropriated, rejected, or reconfigured populist discourse as part of their struggle to remain electorally viable and morally credible. Hence, the thesis moves beyond unidirectional explanations of authoritarianism to offer a more nuanced account of how oppositional and governmental actors are co-constitutive forces within the autocratisation process.

This dissertation examines the CHP's changing strategic repertoire across three analytical axes: (1) strategic adaptation, (2) discursive flexibility, and (3) opposition coordination. These axes form the basis of a conceptual framework developed inductively from the Turkish case but with broader relevance for understanding opposition behaviour under autocratising regimes, particularly hybrid regimes. The concepts of rigid vs. flexible opposition, tenuous vs. strong alliances, and the moderator party are introduced as heuristic tools to analyse how opposition parties simultaneously respond to and shape the constraints imposed by authoritarian rule. The case of the CHP was analysed through a multi-method qualitative approach, including elite interviews, archival research, and focus groups, which were conducted shortly before Turkey's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.

Ultimately, this study offers both an empirical and a conceptual contribution to our understanding of Turkey's regime transformation as well as to the literature on opposition under autocratisation. By situating the Turkish case within broader comparative debates, the thesis opens new pathways for understanding the strategic, discursive, and institutional dimensions of opposition politics in the twenty-first century.

## Chapter Outline

This section guides the reader through the conceptual, historical, and empirical foundations of the dissertation. Chapter 1 introduces the objectives of this dissertation, presents the research questions, defines the research limitations, and explains the logic behind presenting the research as three journal articles. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological design, grounded in an actor-centred approach, using process tracing, discourse analysis, and qualitative fieldwork. Chapter 3 engages with regime typologies and the global literature on opposition under hybrid regimes, clarifying the thesis's conceptual anchors, such as autocratisation and competitive authoritarianism. Chapter 4 provides a historical account of the CHP's organisational and ideological evolution. Chapter 5 situates the Turkish regime's transformation under the AKP, analysing how populist discourse, majoritarian tools, and alliance-making reshaped the political field. Chapter 6 highlights the theory-generating contribution of the dissertation, introducing core concepts such as rigid-flexible opposition, strong-tenuous alliances, and the moderator party. These conceptual tools are developed through three interconnected articles: Article 1 introduces the rigid-flexible typology and traces the CHP's evolving strategies across phases of autocratisation; Article 2 examines the party's shift from exclusionary to inclusive discourse and its reception among voters; Article 3 theorises opposition coordination under authoritarian constraints, evaluating the logic of alliances and the role of the CHP as a moderator party. Chapter 7 briefly summarises each article, while Chapter 8 synthesises their findings to demonstrate how the CHP's strategic positioning not only responded to, but also co-produced, the trajectory of autocratisation. The final chapter concludes by reflecting on the empirical, theoretical, and comparative implications of the research.

## Research Questions

Using the example of Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, this dissertation investigates how political opposition actors respond to and interact with the process of autocratisation. Rather than treating the opposition as a monolithic or static force, the study explores the CHP across two decades of shifting opportunity structures, regime crackdowns, and internal disputes, and poses a single guiding question: *In what ways has the Turkish opposition,*

*whether intentionally or unintentionally, affected the trajectory of autocratisation—by constraining, contesting, or enabling it?*

To address this question, the thesis is organised around three interrelated sub-questions, each explored in one of the dissertation's articles:

1. Article 1 raises the question: “During critical political junctures that shaped Turkey’s autocratisation, how did the CHP recalibrate its strategic behaviour, and to what extent did its choices—such as candidate selection, institutional alignment, or symbolic positioning—enable or constrain authoritarian consolidation?”
2. Article 2 asks: “How has the CHP’s political discourse evolved under autocratisation, and how did its discursive strategies challenge or accommodate the populist and polarising narratives of the AKP that helped legitimise the AKP’s autocratic rule?”
3. Article 3 focuses on the question: “What motivated the CHP to form alliances with ideologically diverse parties, and how did the structure and durability of these alliances shape the opposition’s collective capacity to contest authoritarian rule?”

Taken together, the three articles contribute to a broader understanding of how opposition behaviour unfolds under hybrid regimes. The thesis argues that strategic choices made by the CHP, often under intense uncertainty and constrained agency, produced unintended consequences that shaped not only the party’s trajectory but also the regime’s capacity to adapt and persist. By theorising opposition as both a challenger and a co-producer of autocratisation, the study can contribute a more dynamic and relational model of opposition agency. This framework has implications beyond the Turkish case by offering conceptual tools for analysing opposition behaviour in other authoritarian contexts and hybrid regimes.

## Addressing Study Constraints

It is important to recognise certain limitations that may influence the scope and interpretation of the findings.

First, the empirical focus of the thesis is confined to the period between the beginning of AKP rule in 2002 and the presidential and parliamentary elections of May 2023. Although occasional interpretive references are made to post-2023 developments, the fieldwork, which includes elite interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, was completed before these events. For this reason, the analysis presents a longitudinal but temporally bounded account of opposition behaviour. As the first completed draft of this thesis was required to be submitted in June 2023, it also does not analyse the results of the 2023 elections but instead provides references to interpretations and analyses by other authors.

The scope of which parties are included in the study is similarly delimited. The thesis focuses on the CHP because it is the main opposition party with a unique institutional legacy, electoral base, and strategic role in shaping opposition alliances under AKP rule. Other parties (e.g., HDP/DEM, İYİ Party, DEVA, Gelecek, Saadet, and DP – see Box 1) are incorporated analytically insofar as they interact with or influence the CHP's coalition behaviour. However, a full comparative analysis of these parties goes beyond the design of this study.

Geographically, the field research privileges national-level political dynamics and urban opposition strategies. Focus group research was conducted exclusively in Istanbul. The city was chosen because of its demographic diversity, symbolic centrality, and electoral significance. Although this selection offers valuable insight into urban voter reasoning and discursive resonance, it also introduces an urban bias. This may limit the thesis's capacity to understand dynamics in peripheral or rural regions. Hence, focus group data is used to illuminate mechanisms of interpretation rather than to estimate representational prevalence. The data is also triangulated with archival sources (This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2).

Methodologically, the thesis draws on a combination of qualitative strategies: twenty elite interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation (2022–2023), and document/archival analysis. These methods are well-suited to uncovering meanings, temporal sequences, and strategic reasoning. However, they also carry limitations. Elite interviews are subject to selective memory and strategic narration, especially given the proximity of many respondents to the events in question (Richards, 1996). To mitigate this, claims are triangulated with ideologically diverse media sources, party documents, speeches, and additional interviews. Interview data is treated not as unmediated fact, but as insight into actors' self-understandings and justificatory frames.

Importantly, this study does not aim to produce causal estimates. It instead advances process-oriented explanations of how opposition strategies evolved and interacted with regime dynamics. Claims about the effects of strategic choices, such as candidate selection or alliance architecture, are framed as mechanism-based hypotheses grounded in process tracing and elite perception instead of statistical generalisations.

This thesis aims to develop a framework to understand opposition agency under autocratisation and to open new pathways for theoretical development. It introduces several conceptual frameworks to contribute to the existing literature, such as rigid vs. flexible opposition, tenuous vs. strong alliances, and a developed version of the moderator party concept. These concepts were developed inductively from the Turkish case and refined through engagement with comparative literature on opposition under authoritarian contexts. They provide an original framework for analysing opposition behaviour in limited settings by highlighting how strategic adaptation may simultaneously challenge and reproduce autocratisation. Their applicability to different cases (parties, regions, or regime types) remains provisional and necessitates further validation across varied contexts.

As with all research conducted in politically sensitive and dynamic settings (an issue that will be discussed further in the following section focused on methodology and ethical considerations), certain contextual limits must be acknowledged. First, Turkey's increasingly polarised political environment, legal pressures, and media capture have influenced access, candour, and public narratives, particularly in elite interviews. Second, 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 recognised refereed journals have undergone quality checks before the final defence. 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 dis-

semination and creating opportunities to influence public discussion. However, 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. In this introductory chapter, I aim to reconcile the earlier and later stages of the research by presenting a complementary framework that connects the theoretical advances developed over time. The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on my research, affecting various stages of the project. Essential field trips and data collection had to be postponed due to restrictions, leading, in turn, to delays in writing and publishing. Consequently, since the articles are based on field research, such as interviews and focus group discussions, three articles were able to be completed within this timeframe.

The next chapter turns to the methodological framework, including research design, data collection strategies, and analytical approaches employed to examine the evolving role of the CHP under competitive authoritarianism.

### Box 1. Major Political Parties in Turkey (2002 – 2023)

- **Justice and Development Party (AKP):** Founded in 2001 by former Welfare Party figures, among them Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Rose to power in 2002 on a pro-EU, reformist platform; has since evolved into a highly centralised, and autocratic political party ruling Turkey since 2002.
- **Republican People's Party (CHP):** Established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 and long the flagship of secular, centre-left politics. Under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu it formed the core of the anti-AKP opposition.
- **Nationalist Movement Party (MHP):** Far-right, ultranationalist party founded in 1969. Once sceptical of Erdoğan's constitutional projects and Kurdish opening, it forged a strategic pact with the AKP after 2016 and co-founded the People's Alliance with the AKP.
- **Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP):** Left-liberal, pro-Kurdish party created in 2012 as successor to a lineage of banned Kurdish movements. Champions minority rights, gender equality and decentralisation; faced closure proceedings and therefore contested 2023 elections under the Green Left Party (YSP) label. In 2023, it rebranded as the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), continuing the political and ideological legacy of the HDP under a new legal entity.
- **Good Party (İYİ):** Formed in 2017 by Meral Akşener after splitting from the MHP. Positions itself between civic nationalism and liberal conservatism; was a key pillar of the Nation Alliance.
- **Felicity Party (SP) :** Small Islamist party rooted in the *Milli Görüş* tradition. Ideologically close to the AKP yet often allied with the opposition since 2018.
- **Great Unity Party (BBP) :** Minor Islamist-ultranationalist party that routinely sides with the AKP–MHP bloc; electorally marginal but symbolically salient.
- **Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) :** Liberal-conservative break-away founded in 2020 by former economy minister Ali Babacan. Critiques democratic erosion and economic mismanagement under Erdoğan; joined the Nation Alliance in 2023.
- **Future Party (Gelecek Partisi) :** Founded in 2019 by ex-prime-minister Ahmet Davutoğlu after leaving the AKP. Advocates institutional reform but has yet to gain significant vote share. Joined the Nation Alliance in 2023.
- **Democrat Party (DP) :** Small centre-right party claiming the legacy of Turkey's 1950s Democrat Party. Provided symbolic ballast to the Nation Alliance.
- **Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) & Labour Party (EMEP):** Socialist actors active in the 2023 Labour and Freedom Alliance alongside the HDP; focus on labour rights, social justice and anti-capitalist policy.
- **New Welfare Party (YRP) :** Islamist party led by Fatih Erbakan, son of former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan. Joined the People's Alliance in 2023, courting traditional conservative constituencies.

## 2 Research Design and Methodology

This part of the dissertation presents the overall research design of the thesis, including the theoretical approach and data collection methods chosen for each article. The three articles are based on qualitative research methods, including participant observation, semi-structured elite interviews, focus group studies, and archival research. Analytical methods include process tracing and discourse analysis. The articles examine the strategic responses and transformation of the opposition during Turkey's deepening autocratisation by using intra-case comparisons to explore how opposition practices evolved across different periods. The methodological choices in each article were determined according to the research questions, gaps in the literature, and the theoretical framework of the research. This section also discusses the ethical considerations, data analysis strategies, and the integration of empirical findings.

### 2.1. An Agency-based, Actor-driven Approach and Analytical Tools

This research adopts an actor-centred approach that seeks to explain political action by examining how actors interpret and respond to the dilemmas they encounter, rather than relying on deterministic causal explanations. The analysis also incorporates the effects of structural relations and constraints. This section explains the research design, theoretical approach, and the analytical tools used in the dissertation.

Rather than explaining political change solely through institutional design, structural determinants, or macro-level regime outcomes, this thesis adopts an actor-centred, process-based analysis that focuses on the strategic reasoning of political actors. Structural conditions do not dictate a single course of action for political elites; instead, they offer a spectrum of possible strategies and choices (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022). Hence, this thesis treats opposition figures not merely as passive actors subject to oppression, but as actors capable of creativity, repositioning, and generating meaning even in a repressive political environment.

The theoretical foundation of this dissertation is primarily based on the temporally embedded conception of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). According to this model, agency consists of three intertwined dimensions: a) Iteration, which refers to the selective reproduction of past experiences and traditions; b) Projection, “the imaginative generation of possible future trajectories”; and c) Practical evaluation, or “the capacity to make contextual judgments in the face of contingencies” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 971–974).

Unlike reductionist rationalist explanations, this tripartite structure (which Emirbayer and Mische call the “chordal triad”) situates political action within the multidimensional relationship that actors establish with past experiences, future goals, and the constraints of the present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In the context of increasing autocratisation in Turkey, this model helps to explain how opposition actors draw on historical memory, envision future-oriented alternatives, and develop strategies under conditions of uncertainty, political crisis, and a changing institutional structure.

A second theoretical orientation that informs the methodological approach of this thesis, complementing the temporal perspective, is the interpretive political analysis tradition advanced by Bevir and Rhodes (2005). According to this approach, political actions are not merely the product of structural positions or rational preferences but rather emerge from actors’ belief systems, traditions, and their meaningful responses to the dilemmas they encounter. Bevir and Rhodes conceptualise political action as an “interpretation of interpretations” (2005, p. 3); that is, political practices can only be understood by examining how actors perceive the world and the frameworks of meaning within which they operate. Based on this, their concept of “situated agency” considers actors as subjects embedded in traditions but not fully determined by them, possessing the capacity to reinterpret and act when faced with dilemmas.

This approach is particularly useful in the Turkish context, where democratic institutions formally persist but are substantively eroding. In that context, understanding the discursive positions, alliance strategies, and political style of opposition parties like the CHP requires analysing the relationships that political actors maintain with their belief systems, their own goals, and historical traditions within a political field shaped by asymmetries.

Fligstein and McAdam’s (2011) theory of Strategic Action Fields (SAFs) addresses these asymmetries. They describe SAFs as meso -level social arenas based on a set of goals, rules, and sources of legitimacy, where actors (such as the ruling party and the opposition) compete for resources and positions. In

Turkey, this field is structured such that the ruling AKP holds a dominant position, while the opposition competes as a challenger. However, as argued in this thesis, these roles are not static but dynamic, continually shaped by the actors.

According to Fligstein and McAdam, to be effective in such fields, actors need to develop social skills such as empathising with other actors, building shared identities and frameworks, and formulating coalition-building strategies. The CHP's efforts to unite diverse social and ideological segments during the 2019 and 2023 elections are examples of this kind of skill. Such strategic actions often emerge in moments of crisis and can lead to the restructuring of the field. This thesis evaluates opposition strategies within the context of post-crisis repositioning, identifying such crises as critical junctures in autocratisation (such as the Gezi protests or the 15 July coup attempt) (Volpi & Gerschewski, 2020).

This multilayered, agency-based theoretical framework enables a historically embedded, relational, and discursive analysis of how opposition actors respond to autocratisation in Turkey.

Finally, it is also crucial to acknowledge critiques of existing theoretical frameworks. For example, Glynos and Howarth (2008) argue that Bevir and Rhodes's interpretive agency model places excessive emphasis on individual beliefs while insufficiently accounting for the formation of subjective positioning within structural hegemonic relations and discursive dislocations. This critique becomes particularly relevant in contexts like Turkey, where ideological polarisation and government interventions are intense. Therefore, this thesis analyses political agency not only through individual actions but also within the context of hegemonic struggles both within the party and in the political field, and attendant struggles over identity formation and discursive ruptures.

Consequently, in order to analyse how opposition actors respond to the process of autocratisation, this thesis adopts an understanding of agency that is situated, relational, and interpretive in nature. It approaches political actors not as isolated individuals but as subjects shaped by both past and present experiences, operating within historically and structurally defined contexts. These actors respond to changing political conditions and attempt to carve out room for strategic action. This theoretical framework informs the methodological choices of the study and makes it possible to explore how opposition actors construct and develop strategies in the face of authoritarian contexts.

The following section describes the specific analytical tools used in the dissertation. Process tracing and discourse analysis were chosen for their compatibility with the actor-centred approach presented above. Regime datasets such as V-Dem and the Regimes of the World classification are used primarily to situate Turkey within broader comparative debates on democratic backsliding. However, the empirical analysis of the thesis relies on qualitative and interpretive methods in order to capture the strategic choices and perceptions of political actors.

Process tracing is a qualitative method used to uncover and test causal mechanisms within a single case by systematically analysing sequences of events and decisions (George & Bennett, 2005; Mahoney, 2012; Bennett, 2010). It allows for the identification of temporally sequential developments and causal mechanisms in individual case studies. As Vennesson (2008) underlines, process tracing is designed to analyse how initial conditions translate into concrete outcomes within a specific historical and institutional context. By opening the “black box” of causality (Vennesson, 2008), it reveals how strategic subjectivity operates step by step, so it offers an ideal method for examining political actors operating in asymmetric and complex circumstances.

This thesis applies an interpretive approach to process tracing as developed in the qualitative research literature (Vennesson, 2008; Norman, 2015). This method does not just ask, “What happened?” It also asks questions such as, “What does that action mean for the actors?” and examines how political actors observe changes, make sense of important events, and plan their strategies. Causal mechanisms are not treated as fixed and external but are reconstructed as narratives shaped over time by actors’ beliefs, identities, and strategic reasoning (Vennesson, 2008; della Porta, 2008). This method is epistemologically consistent with the thesis’s actor-centred and context-sensitive understanding of political subjectivity. Instead of testing predetermined hypotheses, it seeks to uncover the processes of meaning-making, problem definition, and the discursive framing of political choices. This helps us to understand how the CHP transformed its strategies as the degree of autocratisation in the country increased.

In the first article, interpretive process tracing is used to analyse the CHP’s strategic and discursive transformation in order to understand its role in the autocratisation process between 2002 and 2022 and to determine the critical junctures of autocratisation. It examines how party leadership, discourse, and alliances were shaped in response to critical junctures such as the 2010 referendum, the Gezi protests, the 2017 constitutional amendment, and the 2019 local elections (discussed in more detail in the article). These critical

junctures are crucial in the making of strategic choices, because these are the moments when elite decisions are more likely to influence long-term institutional trajectories (Tomini et al., 2023; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Volpi & Gerschewski, 2020). It is also true that, while critical junctures increase the range of available options for actors, they also carry the risk of locking actors into path-dependent dynamics shaped by their earlier moves (Mahoney, 2001). In the Turkish case, this methodological framework helps to clarify how CHP elites adapted to an uncertain and contested political field and how they have sometimes challenged and at other times reinforced autocratisation. Using process tracing, the dissertation reconstructs these sequences of decisions and turning points by connecting interview evidence and archival materials to reveal how specific choices produced cumulative strategic effects.

In addition to process tracing, the dissertation also uses discourse analysis. In this thesis, discourse refers to the set of publicly articulated meanings, frames, and symbolic constructions through which political actors interpret political reality and seek to shape collective understandings of political events. It encompasses both the communicative practices of political actors and the broader systems of meaning within which these practices become intelligible. Narrative is used more specifically to refer to structured storylines through which political actors interpret political developments and communicate these interpretations to broader audiences. While such narratives may be articulated by specific political actors, they may also circulate within the political field as shared interpretive frames.

Political discourse is a crucial component of election campaigns and political communication in general. It serves as an important tool for establishing trust with voters (Weldes & Laffey, 2004), setting the agenda and framing issues (de Vreese, 2004), and mobilising different social segments (Angermuller et al., 2014). In this thesis, discourse is elaborated as a dynamic process of meaning production that operates in two fundamental ways: coordinative discourse and communicative discourse. Coordinative discourse refers to the interaction between policymakers, while communicative discourse connects political actors with the public (Schmidt, 2008, p. 303). The discursive strategies used by political actors shape how voters perceive issues, how they are emotionally affected, and what kinds of political responses they make. Hence, discourse is a crucial factor influencing voter preferences, participation levels, and political mobilisation. In the Turkish case, political discourse is often articulated through the leadership-centred communication style of President Erdoğan; however, references to AKP discourse in this thesis refer more broadly to the discursive repertoire produced by the party and its leadership.

Article 2 uses discourse analysis as the main analytical method but supplements it with focus group data to understand the impact of the CHP's discourse on party supporters. Discourse analysis explores how linguistic and symbolic practices generate political meaning and structure the field of possible action for social and institutional actors (Schmidt, 2008). This approach is particularly helpful in analysing how the CHP reconstructs its political identity by developing overarching narratives and communicating emotionally resonant messages. Discourse is conceived as a site of struggle where meanings are negotiated, political subjectivities are constructed, and hegemonic projects are legitimised or challenged (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1995; Howarth, 2000; Glynos & Howarth, 2008). According to this approach, political language is not considered a reflection of fixed and predetermined interests. It is, rather, a constitutive element of political action that both defines and limits its scope. I conducted the discourse analysis by systematically examining the language and imagery used in the CHP's campaign materials (see section 2.2.3 and Article 2) to identify recurring frames and emotional appeals. The analysis focused on how these elements constructed political identity, framed opponents, and conveyed moral and affective meanings. By comparing these patterns across electoral periods and against AKP materials, I traced shifts in the CHP's discursive strategy and its evolving narrative of opposition.

In hybrid regimes where democratic institutions are still formally present but political participation and symbolic and ideological spheres are heavily contested, discourse becomes a crucial arena in which both domination and resistance take place (this will be developed further in Chapter 3). Opposition parties that have limited access to mainstream media and institutional levers of power employ discursive strategies to challenge dominant narratives and develop alternative political imaginaries. Discourse analysis offers a useful analytical tool for tracing struggles over political affect and the construction of legitimacy. Article 2 examines the CHP's shift from exclusionary discourse to more inclusive and emotionally impactful narratives.

## 2.2 Data Collection

This section explains the data sources and empirical materials used in the thesis. To analyse the role of the CHP in Turkey's evolving autocratisation process, the thesis uses a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates

two main analytical approaches, process tracing and discourse analysis, supported by multiple data sources including elite interviews, archival research, and focus group discussions. In addition, informal participant observation at political events and civil society meetings provided contextual depth (see Section 2.2.4). Each method was selected according to its relevance to a specific dimension of opposition politics under autocratisation. These methods were not applied uniformly across all three articles but were chosen to suit the analytical aims and empirical needs of each article. While elite interviews and archival sources illuminate strategic decisions and discursive shifts at the elite level, they also shed light on broader transformations within the opposition and the evolving trajectory of the regime. Focus groups offer insight into how such strategies are interpreted by voters. Participant observation adds contextual depth and helps to identify the performative and relational aspects of political behaviour. The integration of these different data sources facilitates a multi-layered understanding of opposition strategy by focusing on political agency, electoral discourse, and voter perception in a polarised and shifting political environment.

### 2.2.1 Elite Interviews

Elite interviews are a valuable method for accessing the perceptions and justifications of individuals directly involved in shaping political outcomes (Beamer, 2002; Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). This is particularly important in regimes where formal processes may obscure informal dynamics and where strategic decisions are often made behind closed doors (Goldstein, 2002; Richards, 1996). Mahoney (2001, p. 112) also emphasises the significance of “strategic actor choices at key junctures” in comprehending the divergence of regime trajectories. In this dissertation, elite interviews were conducted to understand the motivations and reasoning behind the decision-making processes of opposition political actors during critical junctures and key moments as autocratisation deepened in the country. Given the dissertation’s actor-oriented framework and its reliance on interpretive process tracing, elite interviews are particularly well-suited to uncovering how political actors themselves interpret and justify their strategic choices.

Twenty semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of actors were conducted between 2021 and 2023: current (at the time of interview) and former CHP cadres, campaign advisers, opposition politicians from other political parties, former AKP members, journalists, and experts who closely follow the CHP (See Table 1). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure inclusion of key informants across ideological and

organisational lines. Interviews were conducted in person in Istanbul and Ankara, and each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure comparability while at the same time allowing flexibility to explore unexpected themes (Odendahl & Shaw, 2001). Questions were mainly focused on electoral strategy, alliance formation, leadership dynamics, discursive shifts, and internal party debates. Interview transcripts were analysed for the motivations and reasoning of the actors using thematic coding, which is a qualitative content analysis technique that involves identifying and categorising patterns, concepts, or recurring narratives across the dataset (Gibbs, 2007; Williams & Moser, 2019). The coding was guided by both theory-driven themes (e.g., strategic flexibility, polarisation, alliance bargaining) and inductive insights emerging from the data.

Elite interviews were used in Article 1 and Article 3. Article 1, which examines the evolution of opposition strategy across different phases of Turkey's autocratisation process, used elite interviews to identify the shift from rigid opposition to flexible opposition (see chapter 6 for concept definitions) and to understand how critical junctures influenced learning and recalibration by political elites. In Article 3, elite interviews provided insight into the motivations, dilemmas, and internal debates behind alliance -building.

While elite interviews carry methodological challenges such as selective memory, self-justification, or access limitations, these were mitigated through triangulation with archival materials and public statements. As Lilleker (2003) and Richards (1996) emphasise, combining elite perspectives with contextual data enhances both reliability and analytical richness, especially in studies of strategic political behaviour under authoritarian constraints.

<b>Interview No.</b>	<b>Affiliation / Role</b>	<b>Year</b>
1	CHP member with close ties to party leadership	2022
2	Former AKP, current DEVA Party member	2022
3	Academic	2022
4	Journalist	2022
5	Vice-Chair of the CHP	2022
6	Journalist	2022
7	Vice-Chair of the CHP	2022
8	Former Vice-Chair of the CHP	2022
9	Former member of the AKP	2023

<b>Interview No.</b>	<b>Affiliation / Role</b>	<b>Year</b>
10	Journalist	2022
11	Policy Advisor (worked with both the AKP and CHP)	2022
12	Member of Parliament, HDP	2022
13	Expert	2023
14	Former member of the AKP	2023
15	Provincial Chair of DEVA, former AKP member	2023
16	Former Vice-Chair of the CHP	2023
17	Former AKP member, senior representative of the Future Party (Gelecek)	2023
18	Former Vice-Chair of the CHP	2023
19	Senior CHP representative	2023
20	Founding member and former senior representative of the AKP	2023

Table 1: Details of Elite Interviews (To ensure the anonymity and protection of interviewees, no specific details such as exact dates, locations, or descriptions of current responsibilities are disclosed. The listed positions reflect the roles held by the interviewees at the time of the interview.)

### 2.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

This dissertation also employs focus group discussions (FGDs) to understand how opposition voters interpret and emotionally respond to political discourse used by the opposition and the incumbent. FGDs were mainly used in Article 2, which analyses the transformation of the CHP's discursive strategies and assesses how different voter groups perceived and received the party's messages. FGDs enabled me to examine how and whether discourse appeals to citizens and either fosters or challenges autocratic legitimacy (see chapter 5 for concept descriptions). This thesis views political meaning as socially constructed through interaction. As Wilkinson (1998) emphasises, the value of focus groups lies in their ability to generate dialogue between participants and allow researchers to observe how narratives are collectively reinforced or challenged. Stanley (2016) also argues that FGDs are particularly effective for tracing how everyday political reasoning is shaped by shared cultural logics and normative expectations.

Ten FGDs were conducted in İstanbul in cooperation with a professional research company called Akademetre. The FGDs were held in the offices of the company between August and October 2022. Participants were recruited through randomised selection from Akademetre's database and stratified based on age, gender, and self-declared political orientation (based on the party they had supported). In total, 60 participants joined the discussions. They were segmented into three group types: (1) pro-government supporters (AKP and MHP), (2) opposition supporters including CHP, and (3) only CHP supporters (See table 2). This division was designed to ensure homogeneity within groups, creating a psychologically safe space that encouraged honest discussion, while also enabling comparative insights across political camps (Hennink et al. 2011).

This segmentation strategy also allowed me to a) observe intra-opposition dynamics and ambivalence towards the CHP among opposition supporters outside the party; b) examine how CHP supporters interpret and emotionally invest in the party's discourse; and c) understand how pro-government voters perceive the political discourse and legitimacy of the CHP.

Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion guide. Participants were shown symbolic materials from CHP campaigns, including slogans from the *Radical Love* campaign of 2019, visuals from the *Justice March* of 2017, and archival footage of the *Republic Protests* of 2007, to initiate the discussion. Then, participants were asked about their familiarity with these events, whether they had participated, and what emotions, memories, or interpretations these events evoked. This stimulus-based design, inspired by Kern and Just (1995), helps reveal how affective schemas shape political interpretation. Although the FGDs allow for rich, in-the-moment data, they also come with limitations. For example, dominant participants sometimes influenced group tone, and politically sensitive topics occasionally triggered discomfort. However, these risks were mitigated through homogeneous grouping and attentive moderation.

In summary, focus group discussions were used to explore the micro-processes of legitimation, interpretation, and agency in Turkish opposition politics. The focus group method allowed the dissertation to move beyond the sender-receiver binary by uncovering how political meaning is co-produced at the microlevel. The discussions traced how citizens justify, question, or emotionally process political narratives in interaction with others, and revealed how people recalled political discourses or events.

<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Political Composition</b>	<b>Gender Composition</b>	<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Governing Bloc (People's Alliance)	AKP (3) + MHP (3)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6
	AKP (4) + MHP (2)	Women (3) + Men (3)	18–35	6
	AKP (4) + MHP (2)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6
	AKP (3) + MHP (3)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6
	AKP (3) + MHP (3)	Women (3) + Men (3)	18–35	6
	AKP (3) + MHP (3)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6
Opposition	CHP (2) + İYİ (2) + DP (1) + HDP (1)	Women (3) + Men (3)	18–35	6
	CHP (2) + İYİ (2) + DEVA (1) + HDP (1)	Women (3) + Men (3)	18–35	6
	CHP (2) + İYİ (2) + HDP (2)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6
	CHP (6)	Women (3) + Men (3)	36+	6

Table 2: The distribution of participants in the focus groups

### 2.2.3 Archival Research and Secondary Sources

In addition to elite interviews and focus groups, I conducted archival research in order to contextualise major political developments and trace how the CHP's strategies and discourse transformed under AKP rule. This included systematic analysis of newspaper ads, party brochures, and campaign materials, as well as a wide range of secondary sources. Insights from these materials enabled me to pinpoint critical junctures in Turkey's autocratisation process. Furthermore, they directly informed the sampling and question design of interviews and focus groups across all three articles.

Since Article 2 focuses specifically on the transformation of the CHP's discursive strategies, I collected a corpus of campaign posters, slogans, and speeches from both general and local elections. As I could not access the party archive, I used two online-accessible newspapers that regularly carried CHP advertisements during election cycles from 2002 to 2019: *Milliyet*, which is available online until 2008 and operated as a mainstream outlet during the period; and *Cumhuriyet*, whose editorial line has traditionally been closer to the CHP. Because the party's own digital archives are partial and at times inaccessible, I tried to overcome these limits through triangulation across alternative online repositories, political memoirs, and broader media content. For example, for the 2019 municipal elections, print advertising was used sparingly (Başsoy, 2020); hence, there was only one ad in the newspapers. In this case, I relied chiefly on the party's social media outputs and insider-authored campaign analyses, in addition to web sources (Başsoy, 2020, 2021; Özkan 2019). It is also important to note that, relative to the 2000s, the 2010s substantially improved access to internet-based campaigns and articles, facilitating data collection. While I have concentrated on CHP outputs in my analysis, I have also incorporated a targeted set of AKP materials to identify points of convergence and divergence in framing.

I manually collected more than one hundred visuals and slogans and coded them thematically (see 2.2.1 for definition) along two axes: (1) issue frames (such as justice, nationalism, service, victimhood, and unity) and (2) stylistic choices (such as populist tone, emotive language, and visual aesthetics). This approach allowed me to track shifts such as the emergence of the CHP's "Radical Love" campaign and to evaluate how symbolic politics was observable in the strategic repositioning of the opposition.

In Articles 1 and 3, I used archival research to reconstruct the broader timeline of opposition strategies and critical junctures of autocratisation. I scanned major online media outlets including Bianet, T24, and Medyascope to capture contemporary reporting on the opposition since 2020. This helped me to identify symbolic and rhetorical turning points, such as the CHP's recalibration on the Kurdish question and the political salience of the 2017 constitutional referendum. Video sources from YouTube, campaign rallies, speeches, and televised appearances served as supplementary evidence, helping to map trajectories, actors, and moments that shaped the opposition field.

## 2.2.4 Contextual Immersion and Observational Insights

Although I did not use participant observation as a core method in this study, I engaged in extensive contextual immersion throughout the research process. I attended public events, party rallies, and policy panels organised by opposition parties and civic platforms between 2020 and 2023. These included events hosted by the CHP, DEVA Party, and the Future Party (Gelecek), and included speeches and public gatherings led by prominent figures such as CHP leader (at the time) Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, DEVA Party leader and former AKP minister Ali Babacan, and Future Party leader and former AKP Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

I also participated in twenty closed roundtable discussions and policy forums organised by civil society organisations. Political party members, intellectuals, academics, and NGO representatives participated in those meetings. Although I did not collect systematic data during these meetings, I took detailed fieldnotes to document the framing of opposition strategies, narratives on democratisation, and contested interpretations of coalition - building. These immersive experiences provided valuable background information for the methodological preparation and analysis of this thesis. They also offered informal insight into the opposition's behaviour in real time and complemented the more formal data sources used in the dissertation.

## 2.3 Ethical Considerations

A rigorous approach to ethical considerations was crucial in conducting field research that analysed the socio-political dynamics of Turkey due to the authoritarian aspects of the current regime. The research carefully integrated ethical principles into every aspect of the methodology to ensure that the dignity, privacy, and well-being of participants were safeguarded, while the integrity of the research was maintained. The Swedish Ethical Review Authority gave 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. "Autonomy" in this context refers to the participant's freedom to make an informed decision about their involvement in the study, without any pressure, obligation, or consequence, which is especially important in autocratic contexts where political affiliation may carry risks. The researcher ensured that the participants were fully informed and treated with respect,

while also guaranteeing their anonymity. Each participant was informed about the aim, purpose, methods, and implications of the research. I emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time.

Focus groups were conducted in Istanbul by a research company, Akademetre Research, with the financial support of the Istanbul Political Research Institute. The company found participants and ensured a secure place for the focus groups to meet. In focus groups, written consent was obtained from the participants. However, for elite interviews, obtaining written consent was not possible. Because signing such documents could jeopardise the safety and anonymity of political elites under an autocratic regime. Instead, oral consent was recorded for elite interviews. Given the autocratic political landscape, in situations where written consent could potentially expose participants to harm, 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 I took notes instead. In meetings open to the press, no extra permission was needed to use the statements. Special attention was given to ensuring that neither the researcher 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 on the part of the researcher, thereby maintaining the integrity and reliability of the research findings.

Protecting participant confidentiality and sensitive data also requires data anonymisation and pseudonymisation. During the transcription process, all personally identifiable information was removed and pseudonyms were used to protect sensitive data and preserve participant confidentiality. Transparency and respect were ensured by providing participants with detailed information and clear explanations of every aspect of the research. All steps included these measures to create a research environment that fosters trust and ethical integrity.

I used a separate mobile phone without internet access to make voice recordings during elite interviews. During the focus groups, a microphone and voice recorder were used. Data security measures, such as encryption to prevent unauthorised access and potential data breaches, were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the collected data. The research emphasised data security and ensured that every piece of information was handled with the utmost care and protection, reflecting the commitment to ethical research practices formulated in the protocols of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Having outlined the methodological approach and data collection, the next section focuses on the theoretical framework, where I contextualise the dissertation within the broader scholarly literature.

## 3 Situating the Research in Light of Previous Literature

Based on theoretical debates and comparative cases, this chapter builds the analytical scaffolding necessary to examine the Turkish opposition's strategic behaviour within an increasingly authoritarian context. It situates the research within the broader literature on regime types, autocratisation, and political opposition under hybrid regimes. The first section defines Turkey's regime trajectory using the concept of competitive authoritarianism and the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology that classifies and measures political regimes. The second section discusses autocratisation as a process that complicates regime classification. The third section justifies the conceptual choices made—namely, competitive authoritarianism and autocratisation—and explains how they complement each other in analysing Turkey's political transformation. The final section turns to the literature on political opposition under hybrid regimes and emphasises the changing, multidimensional role of opposition actors who both challenge and, from time to time, inadvertently contribute to authoritarian consolidation.

### 3.1 Conceptualising and Measuring Regime Types

To analyse Turkish regime transformation and the role of the opposition within these dynamics since the early 2000s, this thesis adopts a framework that combines empirical regime classification with a conceptual lens. Specifically, it employs the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology (Lührmann et al., 2018), based on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset—a comprehensive cross-national project measuring multiple dimensions of democracy—to examine Turkey's empirical positioning within the spectrum of contemporary regime types. At the same time, it applies Levitsky and Way's (2002) conceptualisation of competitive authoritarianism to better understand the logic of political contestation, the strategic behaviour of opposition actors, and the dynamic interplay between formal democratic procedures and informal authoritarian practices. In the following sections, I will explain these concepts and measurements by focusing on the existing literature before I explain my own conceptual contributions

The classification of political regimes has been one of the most fundamental theoretical and methodological issues in political science. Regimes are generally examined based on criteria such as how power is acquired, how it transitions, and the opposition's capacity to act within these dynamics. In recent years, the evolving nature of regimes worldwide marked by democratic regression (V-Dem, 2025) has further influenced these debates on regime types and classifications.

Juan Linz and Robert Dahl introduced needed complexity into our understanding of regime types. Linz argued that authoritarian systems vary significantly beyond mere electoral procedures or ideological frameworks. He challenged the simplistic dichotomy of democratic versus totalitarian regimes and highlighted the complexity and diversity of authoritarian regimes. Linz (1975, 1990) differentiated among non-democratic regimes, such as totalitarian, authoritarian, and sultanistic, by emphasising distinctions in legitimacy, institutional structures, and transition dynamics. Dahl's concept of polyarchy (1971) broadened the understanding of democracy by adding institutional criteria, such as universal suffrage, fair elections, freedom of speech and access to independent information, the right to organise politically in opposition, and mechanisms ensuring government responsiveness and accountability to voters. According to Dahl, while competitive elections are the foundation of democracy, it is political and civil liberties that make these elections competitive.

In the 2000s, an increasing number of regimes formally met these institutional conditions but experienced significant democratic regression in practice. This has created the need for new conceptual frameworks. For example, Thomas Carothers' (2002) concept of "grey zones" refers to hybrid structures characterised by systemic democratic deficits that often evolve into durable authoritarian structures. According to Carothers, many third-wave democracies—referring to the group of countries that experienced democratisation during the global "Third Wave" starting in the 1970s (Huntington, 1991)—maintain formally democratic institutions but exhibit structural weaknesses in areas such as representation, accountability, and institutional effectiveness. He argued that these hybrid structures are not temporary transitional regimes but rather transform into authoritarian structures that become permanent over time.

This conceptual shift has also affected methodological debates on measuring regimes comparatively and systematically. For example, the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology developed by Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg (2018) offers an alternative approach to existing methods of regime measurement. They argue that existing methods portray some regimes as more

democratic than they actually are and insufficiently consider fundamental elements of a democratic regime, such as electoral fairness, the rule of law, and freedom of expression. This methodological problem, they argue, leads to conceptual and empirical inconsistencies.

The RoW approach (Lührmann et al., 2018, pp. 61–62) distinguishes qualitative (condition-based) and quantitative (degree-based) classifications. First, qualitative methods determine the minimum institutional conditions a regime must meet to be democratic. For example, while Cheibub et al. (2010) rely on criteria such as political uncertainty, irreversible transfer of power, and repeatability of elections, Boix, Miller, and Rosato (2013) consider direct or indirect elections of the executive branch and fairness of legislative elections as essential. However, Lührmann et al. (2018) argue that absolutising certain conditions risks misclassifying some repressive but competitive regimes as authoritarian or potentially labelling elections open to manipulation as democratic. Moreover, subjective coder assessments create potential measurement errors (Lührmann et al., 2018). On the other hand, quantitative approaches (2018, p. 62) classify regimes according to specific thresholds using continuous scales and democracy indicators, as observed in datasets like Freedom House and Polity. However, Lührmann et al. (2018) argue that the arbitrariness of such thresholds risks reducing conceptual depth to measurement debates. For example, the “partly free” category of Freedom House creates uncertainty about democratic classification, and the Polity project’s historical classification of regimes as “full democracies” despite lacking universal suffrage has also drawn significant criticism.

Under these conditions, the RoW typology offers (2018, pp. 63–64) an alternative to these problems by adopting a higher democratic threshold and by explicitly coding measurement certainty. It shows the probability that regimes fall within the “grey area,” along with statistical uncertainty ranges, based on indicators derived from the V-Dem dataset and based on Dahl’s institutional guarantees for democracy (1971). For example, some countries are coded as “low-bound electoral democracy” or “high-bound electoral autocracy,” indicating how close they are to either end of the democratic–authoritarian spectrum. The typology visualises this uncertainty through probability intervals, showing how confidently a regime can be placed within a specific category.

However, this methodological diversity in regime typologies brings significant conceptual and empirical inconsistencies, especially in the classification of regimes that are located in the “grey zone,” such as electoral autocracies or hybrid regimes. Schmid’s (2025) recent comparative study demonstrates that seven widely used regime typologies diverge both

theoretically and empirically when it comes to identifying “pseudo-democratic” autocracies. The research shows that these datasets often code the same regime in contrasting ways, and this creates severe limits in the generalisability of empirical findings across studies. Schmid argues that many of the conclusions in the literature on electoral autocracies only hold for specific conceptualisations and measurement strategies; hence, he highlights the need for greater precision in the selection and use of regime classifications. Schedler (2002) also argues that these grey zones—described by him as “foggy zones”—of authoritarianism with elections make it difficult to classify hybrid regimes.

Because of the methodological problems of other measurements described above, I use the V-DEM typology to categorise the regime type of Turkey in this thesis. V-DEM is based on the RoW typology and includes both quantitative data and Dahl’s procedural approach. The RoW typology identifies four regime types: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy. This classification examines not only the existence of elections but their fairness, freedom, and the genuine protection of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and association. Furthermore, it considers not only de jure structures but also de facto processes.

Closed Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Democracy	Liberal Democracy
<i>No de-facto multiparty, or free and fair elections, or Dahl's institutional prerequisites not minimally fulfilled</i>		<i>De-facto multiparty, free and fair elections, and Dahl's institutional prerequisites minimally fulfilled</i>	
No multiparty elections for the chief executive or the legislature	<i>De-jure</i> multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature	The rule of law, or liberal principles not satisfied	The rule of law, and liberal principles satisfied

Figure 1: Regime Classification of RoW Typology used by V-DEM. Source: Lührmann et al., 2018

Based on V-Dem data, Turkey falls into the ROW category of electoral autocracy post-2013 due to a gradual but significant decline in democratic standards.

Turkey under the AKP has undergone a gradual transformation in its regime type. Scholarly debates on how to categorise Turkey’s regime continue. For example, recent discussions have begun to explore the possibility of a transition toward full autocracy, especially after the 2023 elections,

considering the increasing suppression of opposition figures. While different concepts have been used to describe Turkey's authoritarian turn, there is broad scholarly agreement that the country has become increasingly authoritarian over the past decade. These conceptualisations include competitive authoritarianism (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016), full authoritarianism (Çalışkan, 2018), old versus new authoritarianism (Somer, 2016), and populist authoritarianism (Sözen, 2019b). This study adopts the framework of competitive authoritarianism to explain the incremental and competitive nature of Turkey's regime transformation and the opposition's role within it.

To understand the political transformation of Turkey's landscape and opposition, it is necessary to focus not only on institutional structures but also on how these structures function and what norms guide them. Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasise that democracy is institutionalised not only through the existence of elections but also through political actors' internalisation of democratic processes. Democracy becomes established at the point where all actors accept it as "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5). This necessitates assessing the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism not only through formal criteria but also at the behavioural and constitutional levels, referring to how democratic principles are embedded in a country's constitutional practice. Accordingly, this thesis employs an agency-based approach to understand the role of individual actors in political transformation and autocratisation.

Schedler (2002, 2015) argues that electoral authoritarian regimes maintain the external appearance of democratic legitimacy through regular elections, while at the same time they systematically violate main democratic procedures. According to Schedler (2006), electoral autocracies use elections as tools for both legitimacy and control. Although they are held regularly and the opposition can often participate, elections are distorted by extensive manipulation and structural inequalities. The media is monopolised, and the opposition is suppressed. Elections are designed to ensure that incumbents cannot lose power. He describes this situation as legitimising authoritarianism through the ballot box (Schedler 2002, pp. 48–49). That is, elections serve not to facilitate democracy, but rather to consolidate authoritarian power. Schedler (2002) suggests that regimes within this grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism should be analysed based on election quality. His concept of the "chain of democratic choice" (2002, p. 47) identifies seven interconnected conditions necessary for meaningful elections (empowerment, choice, information, inclusion, freedom, integrity, and irreversibility). Violations of these links vary in degree. The deeper the breaches, the further a regime slides from competitive authoritarianism toward full autocracy. In this sense, the "grey zone" includes regimes that already compromise parts of the chain, even if not every link is entirely broken.

The concept of “competitive authoritarianism” that I use in this thesis (see section 3.3) was introduced by Levitsky and Way (2002). They argue that in competitive authoritarian regimes, democratic institutions formally exist, opposition parties operate legally, and elections allow for a theoretical possibility of power transition. However, when it comes to practical conditions, they severely disadvantage the opposition. Incumbents use state resources, judicial mechanisms, security bureaucracies, and media dominance to systematically distort political competition. In other words, democracy’s institutional façade remains, but political processes are neither fair, free, nor equal. Levitsky and Way specifically developed this concept to analyse regimes in Latin America, post-Soviet states, and Africa, and recently updated it in 2020 to analyse an increasing range of competitive authoritarian regimes. In this study, they categorise Turkey as an example of a new wave of competitive authoritarian regimes that did not emerge from weak democracies but rather decayed from more established democratic systems (see section 3.3 for this thesis’ approach). This new pattern is happening in countries with stronger initial institutions like relatively independent judiciaries and vibrant civil society, unlike earlier cases in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. The authors suggest that this form of erosion of democracy required such strategies as constitutional manipulation, populist mobilisation, and plebiscitarian appeals.

This description of democratic erosion from a more established democratic system better fits the Turkish example. The AKP in Turkey employed populist discourse and used anti-elite resentment to establish parliamentary majorities, skew the playing field, and progressively eliminate constraints on executive power in a manner described by Levitsky and Way as the subtle but effective toolkit of competitive authoritarianism in stronger states where formal institutions remain, but informal practices hollow out democratic competition from within.

As explained above, these concepts of electoral authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism overlap in describing hybrid regimes. However, their analytical focus differs. Levitsky and Way underline the strategic asymmetries and institutional manipulation that characterise distorted competition, whereas Schedler emphasises the instrumental use of elections to generate authoritarian legitimacy. Schedler conceptualises “electoral authoritarianism” as an overarching category that includes two subtypes: “competitive authoritarianism,” where elections remain genuinely contested despite manipulation, and “hegemonic authoritarianism,” where competition has largely disappeared. This distinction is crucial because it allows us to situate regimes like Turkey’s along a continuum rather than treating them as static,

as I also used in my theoretical approach. In this framework, electoral authoritarianism describes the structural logic of the regime while competitive authoritarianism captures the degree and quality of competition within it.

The conceptual framework of competitive authoritarianism is particularly helpful to analyse Turkey's regime trajectory under the AKP. First, Turkey continues to hold regular multiparty elections and maintain formal democratic institutions, but these arenas are systematically manipulated by the ruling party. Second, elections still involve meaningful uncertainty, as demonstrated by the opposition's victories in key metropolitan areas in 2019 (and later in 2024). This distinguishes Turkey from fully authoritarian or façade electoral regimes. In other words, the "competition" within the system remains a critical factor that theoretically provides the potential for regime change. This provides a more nuanced understanding of incremental regime change that allows for the intervention of individual political actors.

The "electoral autocracy" category in the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology integrates these frameworks by underscoring elections and multiparty competition alongside systematic violations of democratic standards. Indeed, the RoW authors explicitly base their typology on concepts (including electoral autocracy) introduced by Schedler and Levitsky and Way (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 63). Thus, these frameworks complement rather than contradict each other: RoW offers a macro-level typology, while competitive authoritarianism allows for a nuanced exploration of strategic behaviour and institutional dynamics within electoral autocracies.

## 3.2 The Autocratisation Process

Although this thesis uses the concept of competitive authoritarianism to characterise Turkey's regime type in the later stages of the period under study, the analytical focus is on autocratisation; that is, the gradual process of eroding the country's democratic institutions and norms (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Autocratisation proceeds incrementally rather than through sudden democratic breakdowns. It generally happens through legal mechanisms that weaken core institutions, such as judicial independence, media pluralism, and opposition freedoms. Autocratisation means that democracy can decline within regimes that retain formal democratic features, and that this

deterioration can happen both within democracies and autocracies (Cassani & Tomini, 2020; Boese et al., 2021).

This thesis analyses the unfolding of autocratisation as a strategic and contested process where political actors—whether democratic or authoritarian—may contribute to institutional erosion. Emphasising autocratic regime change during AKP rule might suggest that Turkey was a democratic country before the AKP, but Turkey has struggled with democratisation since its foundation in 1923. Throughout its history, it 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. Hence, understanding autocratisation as a process allows a more dynamic understanding of how regimes like Turkey evolved over time and how opposition actors responded to changing constraints in the political field.

Understanding autocratisation requires a definition of democracy. As in the RoW typology, I adopt the procedural framework proposed by Dahl (1998), who emphasises that competitive elections must be coupled with civil and political liberties to be meaningful. A regression in any of these dimensions constitutes democratic erosion. A step away from any of these characteristics can be seen as autocratisation (Sözen, 2020). These are steps in a process leading from one regime type to another, and as a process, it lends itself to the investigation of political culture and strategies, turning points, and the roles of individuals.

Turkish politics, arguably, demonstrates autocratisation (See section 5 for a detailed analysis). Reforms in the early 2000s aligned with EU democratisation goals, but the trajectory reversed after 2007. The thesis identifies key turning points, such as the 2010 constitutional referendum, the 2013 Gezi protests, and the collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2015, which marked a return to security-oriented politics following the resumption of armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. This shift was followed by the 2016 coup attempt and a constitutional amendment in 2017 that institutionalised the presidential system. During this period, the government consistently undermined checks and balances, restricted media freedoms, and reshaped the judiciary.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) argue that while various terms like “the breakdown of democracy” or “authoritarianism” describe shifts away from democracy, the concept of autocratisation 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 ever, fully breaking down. Turkey has struggled to fully implement democratic principles since its foundation.

Hence, autocratisation 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 against democratic breakdown even after autocratisation has begun (Boese et al., 2021). This points to the importance of studies like this that consider political strategy and culture over the full horizontal field of play, rather than as a vertical struggle between authoritarian and democratic forces. In particular, my study shows that both democrats and autocrats may be inclined toward authoritarianism and, in their strategies, may foster effects contrary to their stated desired outcomes.

Competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2002, 2010, 2020) best describes the current regime structure, whereas autocratisation explains how Turkey arrived at this point. These concepts are not mutually exclusive but analytically complementary. The former captures structural characteristics; the latter emphasises dynamics of change. The opposition strategies analysed in the following sections and in the articles that make up this compilation thesis emerge from this dual reality: political actors operate in a regime that retains some democratic forms while undergoing continuous authoritarian transformation. That is why opposition responses must be understood not only in relation to an existing regime type but in light of the evolving process that shapes their opportunities, limits, and strategic choices.

### 3.3 Explaining Conceptual Choices

The concept of competitive authoritarianism offers a framework that considers both the existence of elections in Turkey and the absence of fair conditions. While the concept of electoral authoritarianism includes similar dynamics (as explained in Section 3.1), it emphasises authoritarian regime structure and is less nuanced regarding the degree of competitiveness. In Turkey, although opposition parties, the media, and civil society have been suppressed, they have not disappeared entirely. While the likelihood of a change of government is slim, it is technically possible. In other words, Turkey stands on a threshold between authoritarianism and democracy, and the most accurate concept to define this threshold is competitive authoritarianism, in line with the usage of Esen and Gümüşçü (2016), which describes regimes where electoral competition exists but is heavily skewed in favour of incumbents, rendering the playing field uneven rather than entirely meaningless.

Another concept that is often used to analyse the Turkish case is democratic backsliding. This concept can be defined as a deviation from the inherent normative values of an existing democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Wolkenstein, 2023; Bermeo, 2016; Little & Meng, 2024). However, in Turkey, the problem is not merely the decline of democratic norms but the systematic replacement of these norms by authoritarian practices. The issue is not simply democratic erosion but the transformation of one regime type into another. In this respect, “backsliding” incompletely reflects the extent of the transformation, while the concept of autocratisation allows me to make a more holistic analysis of the institutional, political, and social dimensions of this transition. Similarly, the concept of de-democratisation (Salmanoğlu, 2025; Hintz, 2024; Eslen-Ziya & Kazanoğlu, 2020) is generally used to describe the disintegration of the institutional elements of democracy, but it produces a narrative of normative collapse rather than a process-focused explanation. In contrast, a focus on autocratisation allows for a step-by-step tracing of the multilayered workings of the process. In this respect, it conceptualises authoritarianism not as a rupture but as a cumulative regime transformation sometimes progressing in grey areas. As mentioned earlier, this thesis does not treat Turkey as a full democracy before 2002.

The explanatory power of these concepts for the Turkish case becomes even clearer when considering the unequal political competition evident in the post-2010 period, with media monopolisation, judicial pressure on the opposition, and structural injustices in electoral processes. For example, the fact that elections are still held regularly may portray the regime as formally democratic to outside observers. However, the systematic manipulation of these elections in favour of the government, the use of state resources in a system that has evolved into a party-state, the de facto marginalisation of the opposition, and the disappearance of judicial and media oversight reveal the extent to which this formal democracy has been undermined.

This conceptual choice, in terms of both conceptual clarity and factual consistency, provides the most appropriate analytical framework for understanding Turkey’s political transformation and for evaluating the opposition’s strategies in response to this transformation. It provides a robust analytical framework that captures not only the structural constraints imposed by the regime but also the evolving strategies of opposition actors navigating this increasingly authoritarian landscape. This dynamic will be examined in the following sections.

## 3.4 Political Opposition under Hybrid Regimes: Between Democratic Resistance and Authoritarian Reproduction

### 3.4.1 Understanding Political Opposition in Hybrid Regimes: Why It Deserves More Attention

Political opposition is a fundamental component of contemporary political systems and plays a crucial role in shaping their 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 this thesis, however, the term “opposition” is used in a more specific sense to refer primarily to political parties that are not in government (Dahl, 1971; Apter, 1962; Demirkaya, 2019).

In democratic systems, opposition parties perform clear and vital functions: they hold governments accountable, offer alternative policy visions, and structure meaningful electoral competition (Dahl, 1975; Smith, 2016). Helms (2023) reviews political opposition across electoral democracies and hybrid regimes and argues that although Dahl, in his work on polyarchy (1975), correctly highlighted that the lack of an opposition party may indicate a deficiency in democracy, the emergence of electoral autocracy as the predominant contemporary authoritarian regime has complicated the picture. As explained in the previous sections, the presence of an opposition party is today not a sufficient indicator of a democratic system. Hence, Helms (2023) suggests that while opposition parties are a core feature of established democracies, it is also crucial to examine their role in hybrid regimes where democratic institutions exist alongside authoritarian practices. He draws this conclusion based on three observations: (1) the predominant focus of existing literature on political opposition in established democracies; (2) the tendency of studies on electoral authoritarian regimes to concentrate on the mechanisms and strategies of power; and (3) the recent surge in interest regarding opposition parties, which has led to their recognition as significant components of resistance against the regime (Helms, 2023).

However, this approach may overlook the fact that opposition parties are not only resisting actors but also participants that contribute to the legitimization and durability of these kinds of regimes. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that in hybrid regimes, opposition parties occupy a different role in a more precarious political landscape. These actors face a significant paradox: although they frequently embody the principal force opposing autocratisation, their involvement in a manipulated political framework, as well as their

strategies, may facilitate regime legitimisation and stabilisation (Albrecht, 2005; Turovsky, 2014).

This thesis comprehends the opposition as relational, examining it as a political agent that is intrinsically linked to the regime itself. As Helms (2021, p. 570) observes, “genuine political opposition, with varying features and goals, exists across diverse regime types.” Opposition parties may lack legislative veto power but still exercise influence via various means like extra-institutional tactics, coalition-building, and cross-party collaboration or alliances. Opposition actors constantly adapt their tactics to changing circumstances. Heibach and Transfeld (2018), in a study focusing on the Yemeni opposition, conceptualise this characteristic of opposition as “opposition dynamism,” which means an internal and evolving capacity of opposition actors to reconfigure their organisational structures, redefine goals, and adapt conflict strategies in response to both authoritarian constraints and shifting political opportunities. I use the term “dynamic opposition” in a similar way to explain opposition behaviour that changes depending on dynamic autocratic conditions. Rather than accepting opposition parties as static institutions, this approach conceptualises them as actors that operate across institutional, discursive, and societal domains, employing a dynamic set of evolving strategies.

This thesis aims to contribute to this growing literature on opposition under hybrid regimes by addressing the dimensions that have received limited attention, as elaborated in the following sections. In addition, understanding how opposition actors exercise agency within these constraints has become essential for comprehending the broader political dynamics of hybrid regimes, as many studies focus on either incumbents or the opposition strategies used to tackle them. Therefore, it is crucial to examine opposition parties not solely as weak or ineffective actors in authoritarian contexts but also to analyse their strategic choices. Their choices often create unintended consequences that shape their behaviour and impact regime trajectories as well.

Importantly, this thesis does not assume that opposition actors are inherently motivated by a commitment to democratic deepening. While much of the normative literature conceptualises opposition parties as democratic counterweights to executive power, their political motivations may be more diverse and context-dependent. Opposition actors may challenge incumbents for reasons related to ideological identity, electoral competition, organisational survival, or the defence of established institutional arrangements, rather than an explicit commitment to democratic consolidation. In the Turkish case, the CHP historically combined elements of democratic contestation with the defence of certain state-centred priorities and identity-based concerns. Recogn-

nising this ambiguity is therefore essential for understanding the role of opposition actors under hybrid regimes. Rather than assuming that opposition parties automatically function as democratic correctives, this thesis conceptualises them as relational political actors whose strategies may simultaneously constrain, accommodate, or inadvertently reinforce processes of autocratisation.

### 3.4.2 The Multidimensional Role of the Opposition under Hybrid Regimes

The operations and strategies of opposition parties under hybrid regimes and during the autocratisation process are complex and multidimensional. In competitive authoritarian regimes, political competition occurs under skewed regulations, within weakened institutions, and amidst established executive supremacy (Bermeo, 2016). These constraints force opposition actors into complex strategic calculations about how to maintain relevance and effectiveness while avoiding complete co-optation or elimination. The strategic repertoire of opposition actors varies as they make different choices between participation and boycott, protest and negotiation, or direct contestation and tactical accommodation (Gamboa, 2017; Buttorff, 2019). Each choice carries significant risks and potential benefits. The optimal strategy often depends on regime characteristics, opposition resources, and broader political circumstances.

Opposition parties and activists can serve as a counterbalance to the unchecked power of the ruling elite in competitive authoritarian regimes. For example, they can help prevent the abuse of power and the consolidation of authoritarian rule by challenging the authority of the regime (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). Even when marginalised, the opposition represents a voice of dissent and a potential alternative to autocratic rule. This kind of representation is crucial because it holds autocratic leaders accountable for their actions (Marquez, 2016). History has witnessed that opposition movements can become catalysts for political change in autocratic regimes (Ong, 2022; Bunce & Wolchik, 2011). Furthermore, political opposition can draw international attention to human rights abuses and undemocratic practices exercised in autocratic regimes. In some cases, external pressure from the international community may significantly impact the behaviour of autocratic leaders (Carothers, 2006).

Beyond these key roles, this thesis underlines another significant but often overlooked role of the opposition: its contribution to the autocratisation process and the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. Opposition actors may

simultaneously challenge and reinforce authoritarian rule, depending on their strategic choices, their position within political institutions, and the co-optation capacity of the regimes. In this thesis, I analyse the strategic choices of opposition actors to understand the role of the opposition in autocratisation. In the next section, I refer to examples from comparative literature to understand the multidimensional roles opposition parties can play under hybrid regimes.

### 3.4.3 Comparative Perspectives on Opposition: Diverse Pathways and Outcomes

Cross-national comparisons reveal how institutional context, opposition strategy, and regime characteristics interact to produce diverse outcomes and how opposition parties play a multidimensional role. The case of post-communist countries in the 1990s as well as the recent trajectories of Malaysia, Hungary, and Poland serve as crucial examples of opposition resilience under autocratisation. The forms and durability of such resilience varied across contexts, shaped by a combination of institutional legacies, political opportunity structures, and the strategic choices of opposition actors.

Bunce and Wolchik (2010) provide crucial insights for comprehending the conditions under which opposition parties can succeed in contesting competitive authoritarian regimes. In their comparative analysis of eleven elections in post-communist Europe and Eurasia from 1998 to 2008, the authors investigate the reasons behind the success of certain opposition forces in overthrowing authoritarian incumbents (e.g., Slovakia in 1998, Serbia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004) and the failure of others (e.g., Belarus in 2006, Azerbaijan in 2005). They assert that structural elements such as regime capacity, economic performance, and levels of repression can only partially explain these disparate outcomes. Instead, a key factor appears to be the agency of opposition actors reflected in their ability to work together, come up with new ideas, and appeal to citizens from different political backgrounds. Successful opposition movements used a “toolkit” of strategies, such as getting behind one candidate, starting big national campaigns, organising turnout drives and parallel vote counting, and building civil society networks at home and abroad. These were not impulsive responses but “deliberate, detailed, coordinated, and planned actions” (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, p. 77) intended to create opportunities within limited contexts. In this perspective, opposition actors do not merely exploit opportunities; they create them. This perspective corresponds with the theoretical framework of this thesis, which

conceptualises the opposition in Turkey not as a static entity limited by the regime, but as a strategic, dynamic actor capable of adjusting its rhetoric, alliances, and electoral conduct. The 2019 municipal elections, in which the Turkish opposition achieved significant victories despite systemic disadvantages, exemplify this dynamic. A blend of coalition-building, symbolic reframing, and organisational adaptability enabled opposition forces to contest the ruling bloc in manners reminiscent of the electoral breakthroughs identified by Bunce and Wolchik.

The 2018 electoral breakthrough in Malaysia can be viewed as another effective opposition transformation within a competitive authoritarian context (Ufen, 2020). The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition of opposition forces became successful in the 2018 elections because it brought together people who used to work for the government and long-time reformers who made strong connections with civil society, and created powerful narratives about corruption and bad government in the country. Ufen (2020) contends that the ideological coherence of the opposition coalition and its strategic utilisation of subnational governance experience facilitated its ability to challenge regime narratives and present credible alternative leadership. Removing polarising figures made the group more cohesive, and this helped PH develop a clearer reformist agenda and stay away from ideological splits that would have caused problems. The coalition was able to “undermine the regime propaganda aimed at an allegedly incapable opposition” (Ufen, 2020, p. 180) because it was deeply rooted in both civil society networks and effective local governance. It also built local legitimacy through service provision and administrative competence. According to Ufen, this victory of PH was more than just a win at the polls. In fact, it was the result of years of strategic learning, coalition-building, and institutional grounding in a hostile political environment. It showed how opposition forces can change authoritarian contexts from the inside when they work together and have a clear strategy. The Malaysian case was frequently cited in strategic meetings of Turkish opposition parties that I attended prior to the 2023 elections and was widely discussed in elite political circles due to its striking similarities with the Turkish opposition, particularly in terms of effective local governance and coalition-building capacity.

Opposition capacity to create resistance strategies is also related to institutional variations within regime dynamics. For example, by analysing the similar cases of Hungary and Poland, which have experienced autocratisation under Orbán and Kaczyński, Ilonszki and Dudzińska (2021) show how institutional differences can significantly affect opposition potential under competitive authoritarianism. In Hungary, the Fidesz government has weakened the opposition. Although the opposition is formally present, it practically became powerless since Orbán used constitutional supermajorities,

manipulated electoral laws, and suppressed independent civil society. In Poland, more open political competition was maintained despite similar illiberal pressures. Opposition control of the Senate, the use of presidential vetoes, and an active protest culture provided vital levers for institutional resistance for the opposition. While this institutional contrast was central to Ilonszki and Dudzińska's argument in 2021, it has since been reinforced by political change. In Poland's October 2023 elections, the opposition coalition led by Donald Tusk successfully defeated the incumbent Law and Justice (PiS) party, putting an end to eight years of increasingly autocratic governance (Szczzerbiak, 2023). Hence, institutional arrangements that constrained executive dominance and allowed space for opposition coordination also paved the way for an opposition victory in 2023.

These cases collectively demonstrate that opposition actors under certain conditions can change political trajectories through various strategies in hybrid regimes. Nonetheless, the literature also highlights a more contradictory issue discussed in this thesis. Opposition parties may occasionally support regime legitimacy and stability by strengthening authoritarian rule, either willingly or unwittingly. Opposition participation in hybrid regimes carries significant risks and can produce outcomes that strengthen rather than weaken authoritarian rule. Participation in regime-managed institutions can inadvertently legitimise autocratic structures. This occurs especially when opposition actors are perceived as token competitors or rule-abiding participants in hollow democratic procedures (March, 2009; Armstrong et al., 2020) and not as true representations of an alternative.

In Egypt under Mubarak and Russia under Putin, opposition parties have been instrumentalised as tools of regime maintenance, absorbing societal frustration and diffusing pressure for more fundamental change (Albrecht, 2005; Turovsky, 2014). Although the level of autocratisation differs, this dynamic reveals the sophisticated nature of contemporary authoritarianism, which relies not only on traditional repression but on "controlled inclusion" and strategic elite management.

In his analysis of Egypt under Mubarak, Albrecht (2005) demonstrates how regimes can maintain control through "highly inclusive authoritarianism." In this style, the regime integrates opposition actors, civil society organisations, and even judicial institutions into systems of managed pluralism. These "imitative institutions" (Albrecht, 2005, p. 393) often serve to reinforce authoritarian rule by legitimising the regime and channeling dissent into controlled and ultimately harmless formats. In that kind of setting, opposition participation can provide authoritarian governments with democratic credentials while ensuring that real power remains concentrated in executive hands.

While opposition participation can reinforce the regime trajectory, it can at the same time challenge it or prepare opposition actors for a regime change scenario. As Helms (2021, p. 577) asserts, even in very limited situations, opposition actions “can make all the difference.” Loidolt and Mecham’s (2016) study of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood during Mubarak’s regime provides an example of this dynamic. The Muslim Brotherhood used their limited platform strategically to get more public attention and to gain popular support. They were able to show how the regime was repressing them despite the fact that they were working in a weak and mostly symbolic parliament. The authors call this a “participatory equilibrium,” which means that opposition groups could gain politically even if their legislative efforts failed, as long as they made the regime publicly reject popular policies.

These findings contest the prevailing notion that involvement in authoritarian legislatures signifies futile engagement with meaningless institutions. Instead, skilled opposition actors can use symbolic arenas to show how the regime is failing, get people on their side, and stay politically relevant even when they do not have formal power. Because of this, examining the opposition from a single perspective will not reveal the complexity of the interactions among opposition groups in hybrid regimes.

Turovsky’s (2014) research on the regional politics of Russia illustrates how an electoral victory may trap opposition leaders in networks of patronage and elite co-optation. He asserts that securing victories in local elections frequently subjects opposition figures to heightened pressures that promote compliance rather than resistance, thereby diminishing their autonomy. In Russia, many successful opposition politicians over time shift from contestation to collaboration with the regime. It demonstrates how sophisticated authoritarianism maintains itself not only through repression but through the gradual domestication of dissent. Although it is beyond the analysis of this thesis, further studies might examine the impact of winning local elections on the Turkish opposition. Turovsky’s Russia example provides a crucial lens to understand the Turkish context.

To conclude, opposition actors in hybrid regimes or under autocratising conditions cannot always be easily classified as either resistant actors or collaborators. These actors operate within a multidimensional strategic landscape where their strategies, actions, and participation can simultaneously challenge and reinforce authoritarian governance. Their influence is contingent on the attributes of the regime, the organisational capacity of the opposition, strategic decisions, and the overarching political context.

In this thesis, I focus on the strategic choices of opposition actors to explain the role of the opposition in the autocratisation process of Turkey. Examining and understanding the opposition under hybrid regimes is essential for studying autocratisation and for recognising possible origins of both resistance and a role in authoritarian comeback. As hybrid regimes expand worldwide and autocratisation intensifies, the formulation of more advanced theoretical frameworks for examining opposition behaviour becomes increasingly essential.

## 4 The Historical Trajectory of the CHP (1923–2002)

This thesis examines the contemporary policies of the CHP under the AKP government from 2002 to 2023 in order to understand its role in the recent autocratisation process in Turkey. As background for the analysis of the current period, this chapter examines the CHP's ideological foundations, leadership transitions, and broader position within Turkish politics over time. Undemocratic political practices, its ideology, state-party entanglement, alliances with other parties, and the personalised centrality of political elites characterised the CHP and Turkish political life from the beginning.

Centre-right parties in Turkey have consistently singled out the CHP as their primary adversary ever since the transition to a multi-party system in 1946. According to Bora (2013), nationalist-conservative political parties in Turkey derived their strength from anti-CHP sentiment. For Turkey's rightwing, the CHP stands as the embodiment of leftist ideology. Leftist parties, on the other hand, do not perceive the CHP as sufficiently aligned with their own principles (Selçuk, 2023, p. 12) and accuse the party of elitism. The AKP benefits from maintaining the CHP as its primary adversary (Türk, 2013), in that anti-CHP sentiments inform a representation of the AKP as the party committed to a different vision for the country.

The CHP is a crucial institution in Turkish politics as the oldest political party in the country and because of its foundational role in shaping the nation's political structure. The history of the CHP is closely intertwined with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. For a prolonged period, the party functioned not only as a political organisation but also as the intellectual and institutional base of the regime. The historical development of the CHP is essential to understanding the formation of Turkey's political landscape and its reconfiguration over time beyond the mere evolution of a political party.

The party was formed with the establishment of the republic in 1923, but its origins trace back to Turkey's War of Independence. Many of those who would eventually form its cadres had been Ottoman modernisers (Bila, 1999; Uyar, 1998). This historical continuity rendered the CHP not just an experienced power broker but also the implementer of a modernisation initiative that influenced the state's foundational ideology and was constructed

as a top-down mandate for social change. Throughout the single-party era of the Republic, the CHP was synonymous with the state. This delineated the parameters of the party's relationship with society, its conception of representation, and its ideological inclinations.

The significance of the CHP extends beyond its foundational character. Following the shift to a multi-party system in 1946, the party alternated between government and opposition at various times (Selçuk, 2023), necessitating a redefinition of its political identity and the re-establishment of its relationship with voters during this process. Similarly, transformations in Turkey's political landscape significantly influenced the CHP's ideological direction and organisational tactics. These changes include military interventions, constitutional reforms, the emergence of centre-right and Islamist politics, the changing dynamics of the Kurdish issue, identity politics, and structural changes such as the transition to a hyper-presidential system.

During its founding period, the CHP had to accommodate the diverse demands of society and, over time, enhance its organisational adaptability. The "Left of Centre" initiative (which will be explained below) and the pursuit of a social democratic identity from the 1960s onwards exemplified these early efforts. However, in the post-1980 era, organisational discontinuity and the weakening of its connection with the voter base compelled the party to confront the need for redefinition.

Throughout different historical periods, the party has been shaped by its internal dynamics, the prevailing institutional framework of the state, the struggle for ideological supremacy, and political competition. The history of the CHP is marked by continuities and institutional legacies. This chapter explores how the CHP's identity and ideological orientation, as well as its relationship with society, have been continually redefined in response to internal dynamics and external ruptures.

The objective of this historical overview is to illuminate the persistent tensions that continue to influence the party's strategic dilemmas today. This chapter establishes the essential framework for understanding the CHP's positioning during the AKP era by examining these transformations through the prism of leadership changes, institutional restructuring, and ideological recalibration.

The following sections examine the CHP's historical trajectory through six key periods. I begin with the single-party era (1923–1946), during which the CHP functioned as a state party and institutionalised the foundational principles of the Republic. The second period (1946–1960) is characterised by

the party's ambivalent adaptation to multi-party competition and its early experience as an opposition actor. The third period (1960–1980) saw the CHP's transformation into a reform-oriented social democratic party. During the fourth period (1980–1992), organisational rupture and legacy fragmentation followed the 1980 military coup. The fifth period (1992–2002) witnessed the challenges of re-establishing the party's political relevance and its struggles to update its ideological positioning in an era marked by identity politics. Finally, the last section briefly outlines the post-2002 trajectory of the CHP under AKP rule, which will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

#### 4.1 The Single-Party Era and the Founding Authority (1923–1946)

The history of the CHP is also related to the institutional and ideological formation of the modern state in Turkey. The party was officially established in 1923 and emerged as the foundational party of the Republican regime in Turkey (Uyar, 1998; Bila, 2020). The CHP's origins can be traced back to the War of Independence of Turkey, which began in Anatolia in 1919, and to the Defence of Rights associations (*Müdafaa-i Hukuk Cemiyetleri*) established under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Selçuk, 2023). This continuity provided the CHP with a source of legitimacy and a foundational identity. Consequently, the party emerged not merely as a political organisation but as the proponent of the new regime, the executor of its founding ideology, and the principal force shaping the institutional framework of the state.

The political role of the CHP during this period extended far beyond the function of a political party in a democratic framework. It was almost completely integrated with the state apparatus and operated in direct connection with institutional structures such as the bureaucracy, military, and judiciary (Bila, 2020; Tunçay, 2015). The merging of the party and the state enabled the centralisation of decision-making processes and paved the way for the exclusion of political pluralism and competition. In this era, the main components of the state and political life, such as the structure of parliament, the electoral system, local government regulations, and bureaucratic appointments, were all shaped under the direct control of the CHP. The AKP, the current ruling party, in power since 2002, often refers to this historical fusion of party and state in the first years of the Republic in response to

criticisms regarding its own entanglement of political and state institutions. In the early years of its rule, the AKP also used the CHP's one-party rule to portray the CHP as the embodiment of the entrenched elitist establishment it sought to challenge. (This will be elaborated in Section 5.)

The ideological orientation of the CHP during this early period was systematised through the adoption of the Six Arrows in 1931, which are also known as the six principles of Kemalism. Jenny White (2014, p. 3) defines Kemalism as the founding ideology shaped by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of Turkey's War of Independence and the country's first president (as well as the founding leader of the CHP), who envisioned a culturally unified, secular, and Western-oriented society. (It is also important to note that Kemalism has been subject to multiple interpretations both during the early Republican period and in the subsequent decades [Bozarslan, 2018, p. 277; Bora, 2017].) In this model, state institutions, especially the military, were assigned a protective role to safeguard the principles of Kemalist democracy. The six principles represented by the six arrows on the CHP's party emblem are Republicanism, Populism, Nationalism, Secularism, Statism, and Revolutionism (Toprak, 2009). These principles became the foundational reference points for both the party's political direction and the ideological trajectory of the state. The principle of Populism aimed to construct an egalitarian discourse that rejected class distinctions. Statism sought economic development through public initiatives in a context where the private sector was underdeveloped. Secularism was implemented as a radical programme of secularisation that involved the removal of religion from the public sphere (Kili, 2003).

This period was characterised by efforts to establish a new national identity and modern state institutions in the aftermath of empire and war. This process followed a state-led, top-down approach, which contributed to long-standing challenges in the Republic's history, particularly the state's exclusionary stance towards Kurdish citizens and devout Muslim communities. Scholars and critics (Mardin, 1973; Tunçay, 1981; Bora, 2017) have argued that the CHP's relationship with the public during the single-party period was shaped by an elitist and top-down understanding of modernisation. Political participation was limited, and the people were often seen not as active political agents but as subjects to be guided and educated by the state (Bora 2017, p. 132). The relationship between the state and society was marked by a paternalistic mentality. This was summarised by the phrase "for the people, despite the people" as a critical interpretation of the state's approach, which encapsulates the idea that the state claimed to act in the interest of the people (Bora, pp. 127–129).

The CHP's goal of creating a homogeneous national identity during the nation-state-building process represented a break from the multilingual, multi-ethnic Ottoman heritage (White, 2014, pp. 30–32). The CHP government's approach to Kurds and other minorities, such as the Alevis, was centralised, assimilationist, and security-oriented (Bozarslan, 2018). This intensified after a number of uprisings that were brutally put down. In the long term, these policies caused the party to lose social legitimacy in the heavily Kurdish regions of eastern and south-eastern Anatolia and laid the historical foundations for the unresolved Kurdish issue.

In the 1930s, the CHP tried to spread its ideological orientation to society through institutions such as People's Houses, party inspectors, and Village Institutes (Bora, 2017, p. 132). While the People's Houses functioned as tools for modern citizenship education, party inspectors established a political control network extending from the centre to the provinces. Despite the existence of mechanisms to direct local demands upwards, communication was primarily top-down (Alpaslan & Aydın, 2015).

By 1945, internal and external dynamics put pressure on the single-party regime. The transition to multi-party political life was facilitated by the desire to align more closely with the West in the face of the Soviet threat, the rise of demands for democracy at the international level after World War II, and domestic social discontent. Turkey officially transitioned to multi-party politics with the elections held in 1946, despite the fact that they were conducted under unfair circumstances (Bila, 2020). This process represented a difficult transition for the CHP as it moved from its status as a founding power to that of an opposition party.

As the founding party of the modern Turkish state, the CHP shaped the political regime of Turkey, as well as social hierarchies and the construction of citizenship during the 1923–1946 period (Bila, 2020; Bora, 2017). As mentioned above, the legacy of this period deeply affected the CHP's relationship with larger segments of society, its ideology, and its representation. At the same time, this founding legacy continued to serve as a reference point that sustained the party's political legitimacy for many years.

## 4.2 Transition to Multi-Party Politics and Adaptation to Opposition (1946–1960)

For the CHP, the 1946–1960 period was a time of transition during which its historical role began to shift and its institutional identity was seriously tested. This period represents the party's first experience of evolving into an intra-system opposition. The CHP was confronted with political competition for the first time in the 1946 elections (Uyar, 1998). In the 1950 elections, it experienced one of the most significant turning points in its history by handing over power to the winning Democrat Party (DP) (Yıldırım, 2023; Saç, 2023). This transition should be interpreted not only as a change in government but also as the beginning of the dissolution of the party-state integration of the early Republican period and a redefinition of political legitimacy in Turkey.

Although the 1946 elections were meant to mark a transition to multi-party politics, in practice, a genuinely free and fair electoral process was not realised. In addition to limiting the DP's preparation for the election, the CHP unilaterally scheduled snap elections. The elections were held using an open voting/secret counting method, and the use of state resources to favour the ruling party severely undermined fair political competition (Bila, 2020, p. 83; Demirel, 2024; Özenç, 2019). Despite this, rising support for the Democrat Party was the first clear indication of growing public dissatisfaction with the CHP. This discontent, especially towards a party that had long been identified with the state, became increasingly visible among rural constituencies and religiously conservative voters.

The 1950 elections went down in history as the first in Turkey in which a genuine transfer of political power occurred. The Democrat Party came to power with an overwhelming majority, while the CHP moved into opposition for the first time in decades (Yıldırım, 2023). This development created a historic shock for the CHP and compelled the party to reconsider its political identity, the social segments it represented, and its relationship with the regime. A continuity in political mindset was especially apparent among the party elites, many of whom struggled to adapt to the new political atmosphere. The CHP continued to perceive itself as the founder and natural owner of the system, and for a long time it interpreted the people's decision to elect another party as a temporary deviation or mistaken judgement (Yıldırım, 2023).

During this period, two fundamental tendencies emerged within the party. The first was the elitist-modernist faction, which sought to remain at the centre of

the system and regarded the Democrat Party as an actor with questionable legitimacy. The second was a more pragmatic faction that recognised the need to re-establish ties with society and advocated restructuring in line with the demands of opposition politics (Ahmad, 2007). Under the leadership of İsmet İnönü, the CHP attempted to strike a careful balance between these two tendencies. İnönü relinquished his position as the “National Leader” after 1950, acknowledged the legitimacy of multi-party politics, and played an important role in the institutionalisation of democratic opposition. In the lead-up to the 1957 elections, the CHP under İnönü’s leadership pursued a course that prioritised staying within the system and upholding democratic norms (İnan, 2015). However, one of the most crucial problems the CHP faced during this period was its inability to reconnect with the public.

The party had pursued a modernising and statist line for many years. As a result, it developed a distant relationship with voters, particularly with rural populations, conservative voters, and groups oriented around religious values. According to Tanıl Bora (2016, p. 574), until the second half of the 1950s, the CHP’s efforts to reconnect with the public were largely limited to symbolic gestures. The Democrat Party, by contrast, succeeded in establishing a closer relationship with these segments. It built a broad electoral base by adopting the public’s rhetoric, addressing everyday concerns, and employing religious symbols as a source of political legitimacy. The CHP, in turn, remained a centralist organisation that maintained a top-down approach and struggled to adapt its capacity for political representation.

The party’s failure to rebuild its relationship with society prevented it from performing effectively as an opposition party. Throughout the 1950s, the CHP appeared weak in comparison to the Democrat Party, both in terms of political discourse and organisational capacity. Although its efforts to defend democratic values against the authoritarian tendencies of the Democrat Party were occasionally effective, it continued to be perceived as an elitist opposition constrained by its attachment to the state-centric political tradition.

A certain tendency towards transformation became visible within the CHP in the lead-up to the 1957 elections. The party’s younger cadres developed new communication techniques and staged rallies that facilitated direct engagement with the public (Demirel, 2009; Ahmad, 2007; Bora, 2017). This signalled a shift towards a more participatory and populist approach, emphasising direct contact with citizens and social concerns, which later evolved into the mass-oriented and centre-left orientation that became more pronounced with the rise of CHP leader Bülent Ecevit after 1960. However, during this period, the party still projected the image of a centrist actor

operating with a “regime protection” reflex, rather than pursuing genuine ideological transformation.

By 1960, the authoritarian tendencies of the Democrat Party government had triggered a serious political crisis in the country. After winning their third election in 1957, the DP increased restrictions on press freedom, suppressed the opposition, and intervened in universities, provoking widespread public unrest. In response to these developments, the military staged a coup on 27 May 1960. The CHP’s stance following the coup was controversial. Although it did not explicitly endorse the intervention, a significant segment of the party elite regarded the process as a form of “democratic restoration”. The CHP played an active role in drafting a new constitution and restructuring the political system after the coup (Saç, 2023).

In other words, the period from 1946 to 1960 saw a painful and contradictory process of transition for the CHP from a founding power to an opposition party. On the one hand, the party sought to preserve its position as the regime’s foundational actor; on the other hand, it attempted to adjust to the demands of democratic representation and a changing society. In both cases, it fell short and was unable to find an appealing popular stance. Its organisational structure remained centralised and elitist, and its discourse continued to reflect the state-centric tradition rather than a genuinely popular appeal. The CHP’s limited societal embeddedness and inability to articulate an inclusive vision would leave a lasting imprint on the party’s identity and reappear in later phases of its evolution.

### 4.3 The Search for Social Democracy and the Left-of-Centre Turn (1960–1980)

The 1960–1980 period marks a radical transformation in the history of the CHP in parallel with transformations in the country. During this period, the party redefined its ideological and social orientation in addition to reorganising its institutional structure. The CHP took significant steps to transform itself from being the representative of the state into becoming a party of the people.

The 1961 Constitution initiated after the 1960 coup d'état was a liberal document that enabled the expansion of the political sphere in Turkey (Parla, 2016; Sevinç, 2010). Democratic gains such as unionisation, the right to strike, university autonomy, and freedom of the press paved the way not only for the diversification of the political system but also for the more direct reflection of social demands in the political arena (Sevinç, 2010). This constitutional order created a framework within which the CHP could reposition itself politically by incorporating civil and political rights (Bila, 2020, pp. 93–94). The CHP's involvement in writing the new Constitution helped the party restore its identity as a pioneer of democratisation, in contrast to the Democrat Party's increasing suppression of dissent. Some argue, though, that the CHP's role in drafting the Constitution also reinforced its position as a state party and represented a step back from its attempt to become a party of the people (Bora, 2017, p. 575).

The turning point of this period was shaped by the 1965 elections and the ideological debates that followed. The success of the Justice Party (successor to the DP) in the 1965 elections signified the reconsolidation of the centre-right. It also triggered an identity crisis within the CHP. This crisis led the party into a deadlock in terms of both its representative capacity and ideological orientation: the CHP could neither fully position itself as a left-wing party nor function as a centrist party flexible enough to compete with the centre-right. To differentiate itself from the centre-right and respond to increasing leftist demands in society, the CHP began to discuss “Left of Centre” ideology. The “Left of Centre” approach was first brought onto the agenda after the 1965 elections by such influential figures in the party as Bülent Ecevit, Turan Güneş, and İsmail Cem. In 1965, the party's iconic leader, İsmet İnönü, stated that the CHP's political stance was “left of centre” (Bora, 2017). This discourse was both an attempt to distance the party from its authoritarian-modernist identity during the single-party era and a response to the growing leftist wave in Turkey, particularly represented by the rise of

the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP). "Left of Centre" referred to a political affiliation that advocated social justice but pursued reformist transformation rather than revolutionary change (Boyras, 2020, p. 35). It acknowledged class inequalities while proposing solutions within the framework of the existing system (Erçetin & Boyraz, 2023). In fact, this ideological repositioning allowed the CHP to begin establishing more direct ties with the urban working class, public-sector employees, intellectuals, and the younger generation.

The second President of the Republic and a key figure in the Turkish War of Independence, İsmet İnönü was defeated by Bülent Ecevit in the CHP congress of 1972. Ecevit's rise to leadership elevated a transformed "Left of Centre" affiliation into a political strategy (Ahmad, 2007). Ecevit's populist and labour-oriented rhetoric was captured in the slogan, "those who work the land, those who use the water". It significantly transformed the party's traditional elitist image. At the time, leftist ideas were highly prevalent in Turkey (Bila, 2020, pp. 118–125; Boyraz, 2020). During this same period, the party's organisational structure was also transformed. The CHP moved away from its previous bureaucratic model and strengthened its grassroots organisation in neighbourhoods and workplaces.

This strategy had a direct impact on the party's electoral performance. The CHP emerged as the leading party in the 1973 general elections and formed a short-lived coalition government in 1974 with the National Salvation Party (MSP) (Görücü, 2020; Ahmad, 2007). This coalition revealed both the CHP's political flexibility and its limitations. Although the CHP under Ecevit had embraced a leftist discourse, it was compelled in practice to partner with a right-wing conservative party in order to form a government. This decision was criticised by the party's left wing, and the coalition quickly collapsed due to the deep ideological contradictions between the two parties. Although the CHP increased its votes in the 1977 elections, it was still unable to secure a parliamentary majority sufficient to govern alone.

Another fundamental issue that the CHP faced during this period was the deepening of polarisation in the country. In the second half of the 1970s, political violence increased in Turkey, right-left conflicts spilled over into the streets, the economic crisis deepened, and unmanageable political instability emerged. During this period, the CHP tried to institutionalise the "Left of Centre" line on the one hand. On the other hand, it could not sufficiently demonstrate its capacity to be a governing alternative capable of managing the political crisis. Despite Ecevit's personal charisma and the strong relationship he established with the people (Bora, 2017; Boyraz, 2020), the CHP was

inadequate in terms of organisational and programmatic solutions in this unstable environment.

By the end of the 1970s, the political centre had almost completely collapsed. Political polarisation in the streets paralysed the functioning of the parliamentary system (Bora, 2017; Bila, 2020). Another military coup took place on 12 September 1980, with lasting effects on the Turkish political system. The coup targeted not only existing political parties but also broader structures of social opposition (Ahmad, 2007). The CHP was closed down and its leaders were banned from political activity. All of the party's assets were confiscated.

As a result, the 1960–1980 period was a challenging but creative era in which the CHP attempted to evolve from its founding state identity to a populist and social democratic one. The “Left of Centre” initiative and Ecevit's connection with the public enabled the party to become a mass party. However, the CHP could not fully institutionalise this process because of the instability of the political system, deepening polarisation in the country, and its limited organisational capacity. Nevertheless, this period marked the first time the CHP demonstrated its potential as a party capable of garnering broad electoral support through class-based representation and responsiveness to social demands. This legacy would serve as an important reference point for the party during its post-1980 reconstruction.

#### 4.4 Political Interruption and the Fragmentation of the Centre-Left (1980–1992)

Following the military coup of 12 September 1980, all political parties in Turkey, including the CHP, were shut down; unions, associations, universities, and the press came under severe pressure; and the political sphere was radically restructured. Politicians, including CHP leader Bülent Ecevit, were subjected to political bans (Bila, 2020, pp. 128–130). The closure of the CHP was an ironic result of its historical role: the military-bureaucratic structure that had once created the party effectively dismantled it and established a new political order.

The 12 September military regime imposed severe political restrictions. The 1982 Constitution drafted after the coup d'état significantly curtailed both individual and collective rights and further limited political competition. The re-establishment of political parties was banned until 1983, and any new parties formed thereafter required direct approval from the military administration. This process disrupted the institutional continuity of political parties in Turkey.

During this period, the CHP was legally deprived of its right to political representation. However, its political legacy persisted through various factions and leaders (Bora, 2017, p. 587). In 1983, the Social Democrat Party (SODEP), which in 1985 became the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP), emerged by absorbing many of the CHP's leftist and social democratic cadres. Simultaneously, the People's Party (HP) was founded to represent another faction within the CHP. The Democratic Left Party (DSP) was established by Raḥşan Ecevit, Bülent Ecevit's wife. After his political ban was lifted, Bülent Ecevit took over leadership of the DSP, which continued to play a significant political role until the 2000s (Atağenç, 2023).

This fragmentation led not only to an organisational rupture but also to an ideological one. The SHP attempted to adopt a social democratic line and made efforts to update the "centre-left" discourse in the new period by building ties with social democratic parties in Europe. However, this discourse had limited impact in the face of rising neoliberal policies, identity-based politics, and shifting voter behaviour after 1980 (Bila, 2020, pp. 139–143; Doğan, 1985; Kömürçü, 2023). In the second half of the 1980s, issues such as the Kurdish question and the political representation of Alevi identity created new challenges for the centre-left. The SHP achieved notable success in the 1989 local elections, demonstrating that the centre-left had regained potential for political power. However, it was unable to sustain this momentum for long.

In the post-1980 period, the CHP's successors, particularly the SHP, made limited attempts to cooperate with the Kurdish political movement in the early 1990s. However, this fragile alliance soon collapsed amid rising state repression and internal party tensions. The episode revealed the enduring limits of the SHP's willingness, as well as its capacity, to reconcile identity-based pluralism with its Kemalist heritage and resulted in the alienation of Kurdish constituencies, a situation that continues to affect the CHP today (Kömürçü, 2023; Bora, 2017).

## 4.5 Re-establishment, Party Mergers, and the Crisis of Representation (1992–2002)

Following the legal amendment that allowed the re-establishment of political parties, former CHP members revived the party in 1992. Initially, the CHP attempted to reassert its historical identity under Deniz Baykal, who led the party intermittently between 1992 and 2010. However, it failed to articulate a compelling response to the shifting dynamics of Turkish politics (Bora, 2017; Bila, 2020; Yılmaz, 2023).

The fundamental problem that the CHP encountered shortly after reopening was the fragmentation of the centre-left. The SHP, which had claimed to represent the social democratic identity after 1980, and the DSP, which rose under the leadership of Ecevit, had attracted much of the CHP's traditional voter base. This fragmentation created divisions not only at the organisational level but also at the ideological and representational levels. While the SHP attempted to follow a political style compatible with European social democracy, the DSP adopted a more populist, leader-centred, and nationalist orientation (Selçuk, 2023; Atagenç, 2025). The CHP, by contrast, experienced an identity crisis, possessing strong historical legitimacy but lacking political momentum.

In 1995, the CHP and SHP merged under the name of the CHP. The new party, under Baykal's leadership, was plagued by internal frictions. At the heart of these tensions lay the Kurdish issue. The SHP had taken a symbolic step towards embracing ethnic representation by nominating prominent Kurdish political figures in the 1991 elections as a result of cooperation with the Kurdish HEP. However, these kinds of moves unsettled the traditional CHP constituency, which was deeply anchored in secularism and committed to the principle of a unitary state. Following the merger, these divergent perspectives were forced to coexist within the same party, which left the CHP unable to forge a coherent political strategy (Bila, 2020).

The second half of the 1990s marked a period of intensified identity-based polarisation in Turkish politics. Secularism and Islamism emerged as central fault lines. Short of a direct coup, the military imposed a number of measures to stop the rise of political Islam and put pressure on an Islamist party in government to step down. The objective was to reinforce military-bureaucratic oversight of politics, as had been the rule during the early Republic (Bila, 2020; Bora, 2017). During this period, the CHP emphasised its secular identity, but in doing so, struggled to build connections with broader social groups. The party's discourse was often marked by an elitist and exclusionary tone that alienated both conservative voters and younger generations. The

party's central dilemma during this time was its ongoing crisis of representation (Turan, 2006; Uysal, 2011; Bora, 2017).

While the party adopted a stance defending the founding values of secularism, the republic, and the state, it failed to reformulate these values in line with changing sociological and political realities. In particular, the deepening social inequalities caused by neoliberal policies prevented the party from formulating a social democratic agenda that directly addressed the needs of the working class, the poor, youth, and women. This vacuum was filled by the Democratic Left Party (DSP) under Bülent Ecevit's charismatic leadership. The DSP became the largest party in parliament, and Ecevit returned to power as prime minister.

The 1999 general elections marked a critical rupture in the CHP's institutional legacy. The party failed to pass the 10% electoral threshold, receiving only 8.7% of the national vote (YSK n.d.), and was excluded from parliament for the first time in its history.

The newly formed AKP came to power in 2002 by offering a populist-conservative alternative to the discredited political establishment. The CHP became the main opposition party (See Table 3). It increasingly came to define itself through a defensive neo-nationalist frame and positioned its identity less around programmatic renewal and more as a counter-force to the AKP's conservative-religious roots (Yılmaz, 2023).

In conclusion, the CHP's historical development from 1923 to 2002 demonstrates a continuous conflict between its state-centric foundations and its intermittent efforts at social and ideological reform. Despite moments of reform, the party remained constrained by several enduring weaknesses: internal polarisation, an elitist and centralised organisational structure, a limited capacity for grassroots mobilisation, and a failure to appeal to rural, conservative, and Kurdish constituencies. The CHP's inability to clearly define its ideological identity and its ongoing leadership problems made it even harder for it to change in a political landscape that was changing quickly. These structural and ideological shortcomings, rooted in the party's formative relationship with the state and its top-down conception of representation, continue to shape its behaviour and strategic dilemmas under the AKP era, which will be examined in the next chapter.

Political Party	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Notes
Justice and Development Party (AKP)	34.28%	363	New party; won majority of seats despite ~1/3 of the vote
Republican People's Party (CHP)	19.38%	178	Main opposition; only other party to pass 10% threshold
Independents	~1.00%	9	Mostly candidates of pro-Kurdish party
True Path Party (DYP)	9.54%	0	Centre-right; failed to enter parliament
Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)	8.36%	0	Previously in coalition government; lost all seats
Young Party (Genç Parti)	7.25%	0	Cem Uzan's populist movement
Democratic Left Party (DSP)	1.22%	0	Incumbent party; collapsed after economic crisis
Motherland Party (ANAP)	5.12%	0	Coalition partner; failed to survive the threshold
Felicity Party (SP)	2.49%	0	Successor of banned Welfare Party; Islamist roots
Others (combined)	~10%	0	Other minor parties

Table 3: 2002 Turkish General Election Results  
Source: Supreme Election Council of Turkey (YSK)

## 4.6 Post-2002 Transformations and the CHP under AKP Rule

Under AKP rule, which continues at the time of this writing, the CHP experienced three leadership periods that significantly influenced its ideological trajectory, organisational structure, and oppositional strategies. Under Deniz Baykal, the party adopted a secularist stance that prioritised identity-based opposition over programmatic development, which I call *rigid*

*opposition* (see chapter 8). This approach, marked by organisational centralisation and ideological rigidity, limited the party’s capacity to respond to growing socio-economic grievances. This strategy hindered the party’s appeal to different segments of society, including young people, working-class, and Kurdish voters. The era of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s leadership (2010–2023) marked a shift towards a flexible strategy of discursive inclusivity and strategic pragmatism (see chapters 6 and 8).

In 2023, Kılıçdaroğlu was replaced as CHP leader by Özgür Özel. Under Özel’s leadership, the party emerged on top in the 2024 local elections by securing crucial metropolitan municipalities and numerous other big cities in the country. Özgür Özel aimed to revitalise the CHP’s organisational base and reconnect with the electorate through informal coalition-building and grassroots mobilisation. While this thesis does not systematically analyse developments after 2023, the analytical lens developed here would be useful for analysing the period of Özel’s leadership.

Table 4 below summarises the key periods, leadership changes, and political strategy of the CHP within its historical trajectory. Understanding this trajectory is important for analysing the strategic choices and limitations the party faces today. This historical background lays the foundation for the subsequent sections, in which I examine how the CHP positioned itself as an opposition party during the AKP era, its leadership preferences, and its ideological transformation amid the country’s autocratisation process. In the chapters that follow, I explore in greater depth how the CHP has strategically responded to changing political contexts, and in what ways these responses have countered or contributed to deepening autocratisation in Turkey.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Leader</b>	<b>Leadership Features and Strategic Orientation</b>	<b>Electoral Status / Outcome</b>
1923–1938	Mustafa Kemal Atatürk	Founding leader; single-party rule; top-down secular and modernist reforms (Kemalism)	Ruling party (no electoral competition)
1938–1972	İsmet İnönü	Transition to multi-party politics; Cold War statism; cautious democratization	Lost power in 1950; led opposition for two decades
1972–1980	Bülent Ecevit	“Left of centre” shift; labor-oriented populism; mass party building	Electoral success (1973, 1977); coalition governance

1980–1992	(Party banned after 1980 coup)	Legacy carried via SODEP–SHP–DSP; centre-left fragmentation	No electoral participation under CHP name
1992–1995	Deniz Baykal (1st term)	Party reestablished; attempted to reclaim historical legitimacy	Organisational rebuilding; fragmented centre-left
1995	Hikmet Çetin	Briefly served	Led party to congress; did not contest leadership long-term
1995–1999	Deniz Baykal (2nd term)	Returned to leadership; increasingly nationalist discourse; secularist rigidity	Failed to dominate centre-left; ideological tensions
1999–2000	Altan Öymen	Took office after Baykal’s second resignation; brief term marked by ideological drift	Short-lived leadership; limited strategic impact
2000–2010	Deniz Baykal (3rd term)	Strong secularist opposition to AKP; centralized leadership; neo-nationalist framing	Re-entered Parliament in 2002; symbolic but narrow base
2010–2023	Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	Inclusive discourse; cautious engagement with identity politics; institutional alliance-building	Major local victories (2019); presidential loss (2023)
2023–present	Özgür Özel	Post-defeat renewal; grassroots focus; generational transition; informal alliance strategy	Won major cities in 2024 local elections (35 cities including İstanbul, Ankara, etc.)

Table 4: Leadership Trajectory of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), 1923–2025

## 5 From Populist Promise to Consolidating Autocratic Legitimation: AKP Governance (2002-2023)

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The party positioned itself as a centre-right, reformist, and pro-European party. It promised democratisation, economic growth, and the inclusion of previously marginalised conservative and devout citizens in public life. During its first term (2002–2007), the AKP pursued structural reforms, accelerated EU accession talks, and expanded Turkey’s economic growth. This phase provided legitimacy for the party both domestically and internationally (Çalışkan, 2018; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Somer, 2019). However, this early phase of reform-oriented governance did not result in a deepening of democratic consolidation. Instead, it was followed by a distinct shift in the AKP’s political orientation, marked by increasing autocratisation and democratic backsliding, especially after 2007, which was driven by domestic political rivalries and the institutional conditions of Turkey’s political system that allowed the executive to centralise power.

Turkey’s autocratisation has unfolded gradually under a popularly elected government (Özbudun, 2014; Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Sözen, 2020; Somer & Tekinırk, 2024). Classic forms of autocratisation involve tactics such as illegal seizure of power, military coups, or foreign invasion. However, the current global wave of autocratisation has emerged through more subtle means: harassment of the opposition, the narrowing of civil society space, media control and censorship, the gradual concentration of power in the executive, and the instrumentalisation of the judiciary (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Sözen, 2019a; V-Dem, 2023; V-Dem, 2025). Turkey’s previous experiences with democracy were interrupted by military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, as well as a failed coup attempt in 2016 (White, 2017, p. 29). Over the last decade, however, the interruption of democracy occurred mainly under an elected government. The AKP has steadily increased its control over the judiciary, media, and civil society. Institutional reforms have undermined the system of checks and balances, considerably diminishing the ability of opposition forces to contest the executive (Somer & Tekinırk, 2024; Yabancı et al., 2025; Riedl et al., 2024).

Turkey's democratic principles have been significantly eroded as restrictions on political and civil liberties have deepened over the course of nearly 24 years of uninterrupted rule by the AKP. Turkey's democratic rankings have steadily declined. Freedom House (2025) continues to classify Turkey as "not free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties, underlining that Turkey is among the countries that have experienced the sharpest democratic decline over the past decade. Turkey's scores on the V-Dem electoral democracy index (see Section 2) show substantial autocratisation (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Nord et al., 2025; V-Dem, 2025). This autocratisation process has been marked by the weakening of judicial independence through executive-led restructuring of the courts and the silencing of critical media via regulatory pressure and ownership takeovers. The AKP frequently justified these institutional reforms by appealing to public will and majoritarian legitimacy, a tendency that will be analysed in the subsequent sections.

## 5.1 Manufacturing Autocratic Legitimacy: Populist Narratives and the Undermining of Institutions

The primary driver of Turkey's autocratisation has been the loss of institutional checks and balances (Sözen, 2019a). Nevertheless, the AKP has continued to benefit from popular legitimacy. In both democracies and autocracies, legitimacy is an essential factor in regime durability. According to Lipset (1959, p. 86), legitimacy refers to "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" (quoted in Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

To maintain its legitimacy, the AKP has combined institutional change with populist strategies, positioning the people as the ultimate source of political authority. (The AKP's populist legitimisation tools are discussed in the following sections.) This populist form of legitimisation has enabled the party to dismantle democratic structures while sustaining majoritarian consent. However, such majoritarian logic often coexists with mechanisms that undercut electoral accountability. For instance, the government has repeatedly replaced elected opposition mayors with state-appointed trustees (*kayyum*) and justified these interventions through claims of national security or administrative necessity. As Somer (2016) notes, political authority in Turkey's "new authoritarianism" is more personalised and mass-based than in

previous eras. Thus, while the AKP has continuously invoked the ballot box as the primary source of democratic legitimacy, it has simultaneously undermined the pluralist norms and institutions that sustain democratic rule.

As Sözen (2020) argues, the interaction between ideas and institutions under AKP rule must be examined to fully understand the nature of the regime transformation. Institutional explanations alone are not sufficient to understand the dynamics of autocratisation in Turkey. While legal-institutional transformation played a critical role in the erosion of democratic checks and balances, the AKP's consolidation of power cannot be understood without considering the populist discursive strategies that accompanied these reforms.

This thesis follows a similar approach. I argue that the opposition in Turkey has developed its own strategies to challenge autocratisation, but it has also contributed to the normalisation of the AKP's autocratic legitimacy by engaging with and adapting to the institutional and symbolic frameworks created by the ruling party. I examine how the opposition (the CHP) has contributed, either willingly or inadvertently, to the process of autocratisation in Turkey. For that reason, before analysing the CHP's role in this dynamic, it is crucial to outline how the AKP has legitimised its autocratic attempts and how the broader process of autocratisation has unfolded in the country.

## 5.2 Institutional Transformation, Political Interventions and Authoritarian Consolidation

### 5.2.1. Autocratisation through Constitutional Engineering: From Institutional Reconfiguration to Executive Empowerment

During its time in government, the AKP systematically expanded the authority of the executive through a series of constitutional amendments (Aytac & Elci, 2019; Özbudun 2014). According to Oder (2021), this trajectory can be described as anticonstitutionalism, a process in which democratic backsliding occurs not through overt rejection of constitutional norms, but via their instrumental reinterpretation. In other words, the party systematically undermined liberal-democratic guarantees by formally adhering to constitutional processes.

For example, a 2007 constitutional amendment changed the method of electing the president. It was decided that the president would be elected by popular vote instead of by parliament. This weakened one of the key checks on executive power within the parliamentary system. This shift marked the beginning of a broader transformation of Turkey's institutional balance. A constitutional referendum in 2010 deepened this trajectory by curbing judicial independence (Oder, 2021). Various amendments changed the structures and appointment mechanisms of key judicial institutions. The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), an organisation responsible for appointments, promotions, and disciplinary measures within the judiciary, and the Constitutional Court were rendered increasingly susceptible to executive influence after these amendments (Esen, 2025; Gençkaya & Dunbay, 2024). In the following years, the judiciary gradually lost its autonomy, and doubts regarding its role as an independent check on power intensified as it became instrumentalised for political control (Esen, 2025).

Another crucial attempt at institutional reconfiguration by the government was the transition to the “Presidential System of Government” following the 2017 constitutional referendum (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017; Sözen, 2019b; Gençkaya & Dunbay, 2024; Oder, 2021). This new model can be referred to as a hyper-presidential system (Özsoy Boyunsuz, 2016) that ensures the concentration of an extraordinary degree of power in the hands of a single individual: the president. The new system abolished the office of the prime minister and weakened the role of the legislative branch. This transformation, which was met with massive criticism from the CHP and large segments of the opposition, effectively dismantled the separation of powers, eroded parliamentary oversight, and rendered the system highly centralised and personalised, with minimal institutional checks and balances (Adar & Seufert, 2021; Özsoy Boyunsuz & Esen, 2020). Gençkaya and Dunbay (2024) call this process “de-parliamentarisation”, in which the legislature’s role was gradually reduced to a passive body incapable of effectively legislating or overseeing the executive. The increased use of omnibus laws, the elimination of oral questions, and the indirect transfer of budgetary authority to the executive all contributed to the systematic erosion of parliamentary functions under the AKP.

The constitutional amendments of 2007, 2010, and 2017 should be understood not as isolated interventions but as sequential components of a coherent project of regime transformation (see Table 5). As Gençkaya and Dunbay (2024) explain, this “flawless constitutional engineering” resulted in the systematic de-institutionalisation of parliamentary democracy and the consolidation of executive dominance. Riedl et al. (2024) argue that one of the central methods of democratic backsliding under the AKP government has been the gradual subordination of the legislative branch to the executive (see

also Özsoy Boyunsuz & Esen, 2020). The AKP systematically transferred legislative authority to the executive through a series of legal and constitutional amendments by capitalising on its cohesive parliamentary majority. In addition, the party has effectively used plebiscitary tools such as referendums to ensure the legitimacy of its actions and normalise executive dominance under the guise of the democratic will of the people. Yılmaz (2020) argues that in this new order, elections no longer function as mechanisms of democratic competition that enable the alternation of power but as rituals of approval of the leader's authority. The erosion of judicial independence was further advanced through court-packing strategies, while restrictive laws were deployed to suppress independent media outlets and the opposition.

Although the CHP opposed these constitutional amendments in both 2010 and 2017, it struggled to develop a sufficiently effective strategy to counter them. During the 2010 referendum, the CHP adopted a legalistic and proceduralist discourse that failed to resonate with the broader public. In contrast, the AKP effectively used polarisation and populist discourse to appeal to large segments of society (see section 5.3).

The constitutional reform package gained broader legitimacy not only through populist discourse but also by receiving significant backing from liberal intellectuals and public figures who framed these reforms as essential steps towards democratisation, particularly because they were perceived to weaken military tutelage and expand civilian authority (Öztürk & Başer, 2017, p. 6). Alemdaroğlu and Erensü (2018) argue that the AKP's strategy was not a linear shift from reform to repression but a deliberate blend of both. Legal reforms were used to meet EU or IMF requirements, but they were also used to consolidate executive power and weaken opposition spaces. Oder (2021) also argues that the 2010 amendments, initially framed as judicial reforms, marked a turning point in what she defines as judicial capture. This duality allowed the AKP to garner elite support even while laying the institutional groundwork for authoritarian rule (Bakiner, 2017; Alemdaroğlu & Erensü, 2018). This alignment contributed to the reforms' wider societal acceptance.

For example, Ergun Özbudun, in his article from 2011, described the 2010 amendments as important steps towards democratisation that would reduce the military's influence over politics. However, while he acknowledged the opposition's concerns about the AKP's growing control over the judiciary, his later analyses reflected a change in this interpretation, describing the AKP as moving towards autocratisation (Özbudun, 2014, 2015). In these articles, Özbudun's depiction of the CHP reflected the dominant interpretations of the time, which portrayed the party primarily as a custodian of the Kemalist status quo. He underscored the CHP's inadequacy in formulating a convincing democratic alternative or effectively countering the AKP's institutional

erosion, highlighting its limited capacity to move beyond a defensive posture rooted in ideological continuity (see section 8 for my analysis of this).

In contrast to the 2010 referendum, the opposition, particularly the CHP, was more visibly mobilised in the 2017 referendum. A broader and better coordinated “No” campaign emerged. The authoritarian nature of the regime had become more widely recognised. Nevertheless, the opposition’s efforts to challenge the referendum’s outcome were undermined by inadequate coordination on ballot box security and ineffective use of post-election appeal mechanisms. As a result, the opportunities to block or reverse the establishment of the new hyper-presidential system were severely limited.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Reform / Intervention</b>	<b>Democratic Impact</b>	<b>Conceptual Framing in Literature</b>
2007	Popular election of the President	Weakened parliamentary oversight; strengthened executive legitimacy through direct public vote	Plebiscitary populism, executive empowerment
2010	Judicial restructuring (HSYK and Constitutional Court)	Undermined judicial independence; enabled executive influence over the judiciary	Judicial capture, hyperlegalism
2016	State of emergency and rule by decree	Bypassed parliament; institutionalised executive control over judiciary, media, and academia	Legal grey zones, governing by exception
2017	Presidential system introduced by referendum	Abolished prime minister’s office; centralised power in the presidency; weakened checks and balances	Hyper-presidentialism, de-parliamentarisation

Table 5: Crucial episodes of executive empowerment through legal-institutional change in Turkey under the AKP

## 5.2.2 Rule of Law in Action: Judiciary and Media as Authoritarian Instruments

While the constitutional amendments laid the foundation for judicial dependence on the executive, their consequences became more visible in the following years. The reforms that were initially framed as steps towards judicial independence gradually enabled the executive to assert greater control over the judiciary. After the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP announced a state of emergency that lasted until 2018. Through 32 emergency decrees, The AKP structurally subordinated the judiciary and mobilised it as a punitive apparatus against dissent (Yılmaz 2020), using it to eliminate the members of the Gülen movement, formerly a close ally of the AKP but later designated by the Turkish government as the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) and accused of organising the coup d'état attempt (Kadioğlu, 2021). Numerous judges and prosecutors affiliated with FETÖ were dismissed through Statutory Decrees (KHKs) issued under the state of emergency (Kadioğlu 2021), and their positions were subsequently filled predominantly by individuals loyal to the executive. This led to a profound erosion of judicial neutrality in political matters. This restructuring enabled the executive branch to increasingly instrumentalise the judiciary as a tool to suppress opposition and consolidate authoritarian control (Esen, 2025).

Oder (2021) describes this process as judicial politicisation, in which the judiciary is no longer a neutral arbiter but becomes a “battlefield of political games”, and its composition and rulings are shaped by partisan interests rather than constitutional norms (see also Kadioğlu 2021). This transformation was accompanied by what Yılmaz (2020) calls strategic legalism, the deliberate use and distortion of legal mechanisms not to uphold the rule of law, but to expand executive power and suppress dissent. Esen (2025) argues that over-reliance on the judiciary to constrain executive power in hybrid regimes is a perilous strategy because it often provokes backlash in the form of intensified assaults on judicial autonomy.

Another key step in de-democratisation was the removal of parliamentary immunity from opposition MPs via the 2016 constitutional amendment. This marked another crucial juncture in Turkey’s authoritarian trajectory (See Article 1 and Section 8) by facilitating the judicial targeting and arrest of politicians from the pro-Kurdish HDP in particular. This dissertation argues that the CHP’s support for the amendment at the time indirectly legitimised the politicisation of the judiciary and exposed strategic weaknesses within the opposition (Gençkaya & Dunbay, 2024; see also Article 1 and section 8).

It should be noted that the media's transformation into a punitive tool cannot be separated from the erosion of judicial independence. As Esen (2025) underlines, the AKP's consolidation of power was facilitated by its dual capture of the judiciary and the media. The party transformed the media into an instrument of control and marginalisation of dissent in public discourse by systematically securing media capture via ownership transfers, censorship, and judicial intimidation (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017). The 2018 acquisition of Doğan Media Group by Demirören Holding resulted in the unification of mainstream media under a single voice in support of the government. Political pressure was also exerted through regulatory bodies such as the Press Advertising Institution and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) (Kadioğlu, 2021). While the Press Advertising Institution restricted the distribution of state-funded advertisements to pro-government publications, RTÜK levied disproportionately high fines on outlets that were critical of the government (Balamir-Coşkun, 2020).

Meanwhile, critical and independent journalism was either pushed to the margins or restricted to unstable online spaces. Journalists were prosecuted under anti-terror laws or vague penal code provisions such as Article 301, resulting in widespread pretrial detentions (Kadioğlu, 2021).

The use of the judiciary to prosecute dissenting journalists demonstrates how media governance under the AKP has relied equally on legal repression and economic sanction. Yeşil (2018) argues that this dual-track system of discipline aimed to neutralise various segments of the anti-AKP bloc, such as Gülenists, secularists, and Kurds. After 2016, the AKP also extended its strategy into the digital sphere. Emergency decrees granted the government extensive powers over telecommunications infrastructure and online content regulation, and the government used this authority to monopolise the flow of information in both traditional and digital arenas.

Government strategies involved mass closures of media outlets, expropriation of assets without judicial oversight, and mandatory use of state-controlled transmission networks (Yeşil, 2018). The CHP has maintained a normative stance in favour of media freedom throughout this process. However, as will be shown below and in the following articles, the party was not able to mobilise a strong public backlash.

### 5.2.3 Instrumentalising Elections: How Authoritarian Governance Undermines Democratic Contestation

The erosion of institutional checks and the instrumentalisation of legal mechanisms in Turkey have not remained confined to constitutional or judicial reforms. They have also extended to the electoral sphere (Kadioğlu, 2021; Sözen, 2019b). Elections bolster the AKP's legitimacy. Due to institutional and legal interventions, they have become an uneven playing field. The AKP government has systematically undermined the conditions necessary for free and fair elections. The monopolisation of media access during election cycles, the partisan use of public resources, and the controversial decisions of the Supreme Election Council (YSK) are the most striking indicators of this transformation. For example, when the 2019 election for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality resulted in a victory for the CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, that election was cancelled by the YSK. As Yılmaz and Turner (2019) argue, this case signalled the erosion of institutional independence but also "totally destroyed the myth of 'free and fair election' in the country." The decision to re-run the cancelled election reinforced the perception that elections are deemed legitimate only when the ruling party wins. Such interventions transformed elections into a regime-sanctioning mechanism (Sommer, 2019; Esen, 2025). As will be discussed below and in the three articles in this dissertation, the opposition's choice to accept the re-run also helped the normalisation of these autocratic interventions.

Democratic principles have also been seriously violated in post-election processes. Elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish HDP were systematically removed from office, and state-appointed trustees (*kayyum*) were installed in their place. In some cases, winning HDP candidates were disqualified, and the runner-up AKP candidates were certified as the elected mayors. These dismissals were often justified through tenuous terror-related allegations supported by vague or classified evidence. The AKP's growing control over the judiciary facilitates the reshuffling of judicial panels and the transfer of politically sensitive cases to ensure favourable rulings (Tepe & Alemdaroğlu, 2021). In other words, electoral victories are nullified through securitised discourses that portray elected representatives as threats to national unity rather than legitimate actors. Bedirhanoglu (2021) calls this the systematic criminalisation of Kurdish political participation. This dissertation discusses the CHP's inability or unwillingness to oppose this criminalisation of Kurdish actors, which has resulted in the eventual criminalisation of larger segments of the opposition, including the arrests of CHP mayors.

This process reflects an authoritarian strategy that disregards the electorate's will and seeks to exclude opposition forces from the political arena (Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). Tepe and Alemdaroğlu (2021) define this as “post-election capture”, a strategy through which authoritarian regimes reverse unfavourable electoral outcomes while preserving the procedural façade of democracy. Although the government framed the post-2016 trustee regimes, marked by the removal of elected mayors and their replacement with state-appointed trustees, as an attempt to preserve national security and fight terrorism, this has turned into a broader political and administrative tool. Trustee governance has enabled the central government, the AKP, to assert control over municipal budgets in areas controlled by other parties, redirect local resources and public services towards its own supporters, and disseminate an ideological agenda aimed at the depoliticisation and marginalisation of Kurdish identity. Tutkal (2022) argues that this evolution represents a shift from a securitarian justification to a centralised governance model in which public services and economic benefits are controlled directly by the executive, undermining democratic local autonomy.

As mentioned above, such practices were initially confined to Kurdish-majority areas, but were then applied to CHP-led municipalities. Municipalities governed by the CHP have faced increasing pressure through mechanisms such as Ministry of Interior-led inspector investigations, cuts in municipal funding, and legal reforms curtailing the authority of local administrations. As a result, the opposition finds itself under siege not only in the realm of electoral competition but also in terms of its administrative capacity to govern.

The Kurdish political movement has faced intensified repression, especially after its rise in the 2015 national elections. The heavy targeting of the HDP has significantly eroded both political representation and freedom of expression. The AKP has deliberately instrumentalised the Kurdish Question—referring to long-standing political and cultural demands of the Kurdish population for recognition and equality—to reassert control over the security apparatus and sustain nationalist mobilisation as part of its broader authoritarian project (Yılmaz and Turner 2019). On its part, the CHP has adopted a very cautious discursive stance against the government's repression of the Kurdish political movement. This distance created a trust problem for the party with the Kurdish electorate and contributed to an environment in which authoritarian practices became normalised. As Bedirhanoğlu (2021) notes, the invisibility of state violence against Kurds and the normalisation of their criminalisation as part of a nationalist ideology fostered a political context in which even opposition actors hesitated to resist, thus inadvertently contributing to regime consolidation. This cautious positioning reflects what Somer (2019) calls the “opposition's dilemma”, a condition in which

opposition actors oscillate between confrontation and accommodation in a polarised regime, often defaulting to pro-status-quo behaviours.

As I will discuss in detail in section 8, the passive stance of the CHP towards the government's repression of the HDP has facilitated the routinisation and socialisation of authoritarian practices. The opposition's limited capacity to counteract these dynamics reflects the broader deterioration of democratic accountability mechanisms. Political and civic actors now operate under judicial repression and in constrained political space (Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). Moreover, the regime's persistent association of the HDP with terrorism not only delegitimises Kurdish political representation but also obstructs the formation of a broad-based pro-democratic coalition by placing the CHP in a strategic bind (Tepe & Alemdaroğlu, 2021).

#### 5.2.4 Assessing the Institutional Transformation

The transformations discussed above have fundamentally transformed both the structural and symbolic functions of democratic institutions in Turkey. Under the AKP, formal institutional continuity has masked a profound erosion of substance: elections are held, but the conditions of competition, media access, and ballot integrity are persistently undermined, creating a competitive authoritarian regime (See section 3). In this limiting environment, the CHP has continued to participate in elections, seeking to carve out space within the authoritarian framework. While such participation can be seen as a strategy of democratic resistance, in some ways it has also contributed to the normalisation of an increasingly autocratic institutional order. The CHP's responses, ranging from silence to selective confrontation, reflect the broader dilemma of opposition politics in hybrid regimes in which parties attempt to resist authoritarian drift without the full capacity to reverse or reshape it.

Turkey's autocratisation has unfolded through the systematic reconfiguration of legislative, judicial, and local governance mechanisms. However, institutional redesign alone cannot fully explain the AKP's capacity to maintain its legitimacy and mobilise support. The regime's endurance is also due to its ideological strategy. The party has effectively used populism as a means of redefining political and national identity as well as the boundaries of legitimate dissent. In response, the CHP has struggled to develop a coherent counter-discourse to populism. At times, it has resisted populist polarisation by emphasising institutionalism and democratic norms; at others, it has reproduced similar moral and exclusionary narratives, particularly around nationalism and secularism. This ambivalence reflects the party's complex relationship with populism, one of the dynamics that lies at the core of my analysis in the following sections.

## 5.3 Populist Legitimation and the Politics of Ideas under AKP Rule

Autocratisation in hybrid regimes cannot be understood solely through formal institutional change; it is also sustained by ideas that shape perceptions of legitimacy and political belonging (Sözen, 2020). This section analyses how the AKP has used populist discourse, emotional appeals, and symbolic politics to legitimise its authoritarian transformation. I argue that while institutional changes have played a crucial role, ideas have provided the moral and affective glue that binds institutional transformations and societal narratives together. The AKP has redefined legitimacy, recast dissent as a threat to national unity, and restructured citizenship in part through the effectiveness of its populist political style.

### 5.3.1 Populism as Governing Strategy: Narratives, Polarisation and Leadership

This section argues that populism under AKP rule has operated both as a rhetorical strategy and a governing logic that fuses moral narratives, symbolic leadership, and the strategic exclusion of dissent.

Populism remains a contested concept, reflecting both its diverse academic interpretations and its politicised usage (Sözen, 2020). As Sözen notes, disagreement over the definition of populism stems from the fact that it is used as an accusatory label rather than an identity claimed by political actors, and because its anti-intellectual features have limited theoretical accumulation. Within this broader debate, the literature has developed several distinct approaches to conceptualising populism. One approach conceptualises populism as a political strategy centred on the relationship between a personalistic leader and largely unorganised mass constituencies, often bypassing established institutional intermediaries (Weyland, 2001). A second approach defines populism as a “thin-centred ideology”, meaning an ideational framework that is too limited to provide a comprehensive political programme on its own and therefore attaches itself to more encompassing ideologies, that constructs society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and maintains that politics should reflect the *volonté générale* of the people (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). A third perspective conceptualises populism as a discursive logic through which

heterogeneous social demands are articulated into an antagonistic political frontier between “the people” and their adversaries (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005). Finally, another strand of scholarship interprets populism as a political style characterised by performative leadership, crisis narratives, and affective appeals that seek to mobilise supporters through emotionally resonant communication (Moffitt, 2016).

In this dissertation, populism is primarily understood within the analytical framework proposed by Müller (2016), who conceptualises populism as a moralised and anti-pluralist conception of politics. According to Müller (2016), populists draw a moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, with the former cast as the sole legitimate representatives of the general will. What distinguishes Müller’s approach from broader definitions is that he does not treat populism merely as a moralised opposition between the people and the elite. He further argues that populism contains an inherently anti-pluralist claim: populists deny the legitimacy of competing voices, opposition, and societal diversity by asserting that only they truly represent the people. In this sense, populism is not simply anti-elitist but also normatively opposed to pluralism. This morally divisive and anti-pluralist logic aligns closely with the AKP’s political ideology since the late 2000s.

To understand how the AKP legitimised its autocratic policies, it is essential to begin with its strategic use of populist discourse and leadership performance. The AKP, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has relied on populist discourse and performance to legitimise its transformation of Turkey’s institutional structure and the AKP’s and his own expanding authority. Erdoğan has translated populism into a highly personalistic leadership model, in which he positions himself as the sole representative of the nation’s will, while discrediting dissenting voices as traitors or foreign agents. Beyond representing the nation, Erdoğan’s leadership has taken on sacralised qualities that Yabancı (2020, p. 778) described as a “messianic” leadership style (Yeşil, 2020), in which the leader is not merely a political figure, but a historical saviour.

The AKP’s populism can be seen as a continuation of Turkey’s longer tradition of populist mobilisation. Influential leaders from the left and the right, such as Adnan Menderes, Süleyman Demirel, and Bülent Ecevit, have historically relied on the rhetoric of “the national will” to challenge state elites and rally popular support (Kasaba, 1993; Boyraz, 2020). The AKP has extended this legacy, but it has created a fusion of religious conservatism with majoritarian nationalism and embedded populist practices into the institutional and legal framework of governance.

There is extensive scholarly research on the AKP's populism. Elçi (2019) analysed 569 parliamentary group speeches between 2011 and 2019. He identifies varying degrees and forms of populist discourse among Turkey's major political actors. Erdoğan scored highest in all three dimensions of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook (a clear-cut division between good and evil). Dinçşahin (2012) emphasises that post-2007 AKP discourse entrenched a binary worldview of a morally virtuous people versus a corrupt elite by relying heavily on anti-institutional narratives targeting the judiciary, bureaucracy, and military elites and invoking majoritarian claims to legitimacy. Yabancı (2023) identifies what she calls Erdoğan's "missionary politics", which refers constantly to existential crises, conspiracies, and national salvation. These narratives elevate political engagement to a sacred mission, which can effectively mask governance failures and mobilise loyalty through emotional urgency (Moffitt, 2016; Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023). Erçetin and Erdoğan (2023) examine the systematic use of "fear" reproduced in AKP discourse through narratives of victimisation and blaming that construct a dichotomy between a morally pure "us" and an evil, culpable "them." They argue that this emotional binary reinforces group identity and serves as a powerful tool of persuasion and political control. Yabancı (2023) and Demiryol (2020) argue that blending religious conservatism and majoritarian nationalism helped the AKP create broad ideological appeal among disenfranchised rural and urban constituencies.

The AKP has used its populist discourse to legitimise its marginalisation of the opposition. Especially during crisis periods such as the 2013 Gezi protests, the 2016 coup attempt, and the transition to a presidential system in 2017, the AKP portrayed the opposition as enemies of the people and the nation. This performative antagonism contributed to the deepening of political polarisation and justified exceptional legal measures. It also shaped the institutional playing field in ways that hampered opposition parties' access to media, funding, and fair competition. The AKP's use of populism should thus be understood not only as discursive but also as a mode of governance.

Over time, Erdoğan's populism shifted from challenging secular state elites to targeting a broader range of actors, including academics, journalists, and opposition politicians, by labelling them as internal or external threats. Especially after the 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent consolidation of control over the military and judiciary, it can be observed that the AKP's discourse evolved a more securitised and aggressive tone. Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) argue that this shift signifies a convergence between populist rhetoric and statist authoritarianism, with Erdoğan asserting not only that he speaks for the people, but also that he represents the state.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that, in addition to its ideological appeals, the AKP strategically employed material distribution and clientelist networks to consolidate its rule. Although the economic dimensions are beyond the scope of this thesis, I will briefly mention how the party utilised economic populism to appeal to larger segments of society. The AKP effectively reallocated economic rents through public-private partnerships and mega construction projects (Öniş, 2019). Institutions like the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ) and the Wealth Fund became key instruments for channelling resources to regime-aligned business actors and reinforced the party's dominance through both material and symbolic means.

Doğan (2016) and Kutlay and Öniş (2020) argue that the AKP provided social assistance, housing, and employment opportunities, often in return for political loyalty. This helped the party cultivate a strong bond with lower-income urban and rural constituencies. These voters also gained symbolic recognition and cultural empowerment through association with the ruling party, in addition to becoming economically dependent on AKP networks. Öniş and Kutlay (2020) call this a “paradox of right-wing populism”, an anti-elite discourse coexisting with elite-centred economic governance. This model helped the AKP create a new pro-regime economic elite, especially in construction, energy, and media. At the same time, it ensured the integration of the urban poor and conservative middle classes into the political mainstream through cultural recognition and redistributive programmes.

In line with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) conception of populism as a discursive articulation of heterogeneous social demands, the AKP has succeeded in forging a “chain of equivalence” among grievances linked to identity, marginalisation, and economic precarity. Clientelist practices were instrumental in sustaining the loyalty of the people. The AKP expanded access to social assistance, housing, and employment via municipal patronage networks. These material benefits were often accompanied by an affective discourse of recognition: being seen, heard, and valued by the political elite (Kutlay & Öniş, 2020). This affective bond distinguishes AKP-style clientelism from more transactional forms in the sense that it creates a deeper emotional connection with historically excluded groups. Hence, large segments of society, including conservative voters, the Anatolian bourgeoisie, and urban subalterns, felt represented and empowered through this narrative (Doğan, 2016; Kutlay & Öniş, 2020). This capacity to merge material redistribution with symbolic inclusion became central to the AKP's hegemonic strategy during the 2000s to ensure and maintain its legitimacy for more than 20 years in power.

Furthermore, conservative Muslim identity was represented as the authentic representation of the Turkish nation in the AKP's discourse surrounding cultural and moral hierarchies. This narrative delegitimised rival identities as remnants of a discredited elite or foreign agents. This discourse was also accompanied by Erdoğan's paternalistic tone. Paşa et al. (2001) argue that many Turkish citizens value leaders who embody not only power but also empathy and care. Erdoğan's image as a leader who attends funerals, cries with victims, and provides personal aid strengthened the AKP's populist appeal. Aslan (2021) similarly argues that Erdoğan's public emotionality, particularly his crying, has functioned as a political tool to sustain credibility and proximity to the people despite his increasing power and privilege. He managed to create the sense of "I am like you".

The symbolic power of voting also reinforced this relationship. The AKP has always framed voting as a patriotic act and an expression of popular sovereignty against elites. In Turkey, participation in elections is very high (around 85–90%), and people view the ballot as the only effective channel through which they can exert political agency. That is why this kind of framing resonates deeply with voters. As with the Democrat Party in the 1950s, with its slogan of "Vote is honour", and later populist leaders such as Demirel and Ecevit, Erdoğan capitalised on this emotional connection to the ballot box (Kasaba, 1993; Aydın & Taşkın, 2015). Meanwhile, the CHP's inability to create an inclusive narrative and engage with marginalised communities contributed to the AKP's populist consolidation. Until the 2010s, the party was unable to reconfigure its discourse and policies to appeal to broader constituencies.

To conclude, it can be argued that the AKP's success lay in its capacity to articulate a narrative of national renewal grounded in both economic delivery and cultural representation. The party merged neoliberal governance with populist mobilisation. Indeed, this combination is one of the crucial factors in the durability of AKP governance despite economic and political challenges throughout its rule. While populist discourse helped frame political antagonisms, the AKP's strategy of polarisation extended these binaries into institutional structures and societal practices. This further consolidated power by deepening societal divides and shaping the political behaviour of both allies and opponents. The following section will examine these dynamics.

### 5.3.2 Polarisation as a Governance Tool: Institutional and Discursive Effects

Political polarisation has long been a structural feature of Turkish politics, rooted in cleavages such as secular versus religious, left versus right, and Turkish versus Kurdish identities. However, under AKP rule it has been increasingly transformed into a deliberate strategy of governance. The AKP has systematically used polarisation to delegitimise dissent, energise its base, and justify authoritarian encroachments on democratic institutions (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 33). As McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018, p. 16) explain, this type of polarisation occurs when a wide range of social differences increasingly align along a single, moralised divide, whereby individuals perceive politics in binary terms of “Us” versus “Them.” Such alignment collapses cross-cutting identities, suppresses intra-group differences, and produces mutually exclusive camps, leading to the transformation of political opposition into an existential threat rather than a legitimate alternative.

Somer (2019) contends that polarisation under the AKP is connected with the wider phenomenon of democratic erosion. The party has cultivated a dichotomous political field by framing the political landscape as a battle between the guardians of the “national will” and their supposed domestic and foreign enemies. In that framework, opposition parties, civil society actors, and other dissenters are framed as parts of a singular, “hostile” Other that threatens national unity and public security (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023; Demiryol, 2020).

Yeşil (2020, p. 432) argues that Erdoğan’s famous declaration, “Your brother Tayyip belongs to the black Turks,” is a paradigmatic instance of this dualism. It frames the political field as a struggle between the authentic, pious poor “black Turks” and the secular, Westernised urban elites and institutional actors commonly labelled as “white Turks”. This strategy produces a securitised and moralised conception of politics that leaves little room for pluralism and delegitimises opposition actors. This fits with McCoy and Somer’s (2019) identification of pernicious polarisation as a deep-seated political and cultural rift in which a single, identity-laden cleavage eclipses all others, fraying cross-cutting ties and making compromise—or even neutrality—increasingly untenable.

The AKP repeatedly weaponised crises to sharpen this divide, turning the 2013 Gezi uprising, the 2015 collapse of the Kurdish peace process, and the 2016 failed coup into staging grounds for an evermore polarising politics. Erdoğan used emotional performances to reinforce the narrative that Turkey and Erdoğan himself are under constant existential threat. Aslan (2021) argues

that these emotional displays were instrumentalised to justify the government’s suppressive responses and the labelling of dissent as treason. Turkey’s increased polarisation can be observed in V-Dem’s polarisation index, with peaks during crises in the AKP era (V-Dem, 2022; V-Dem, 2025, Table 6).

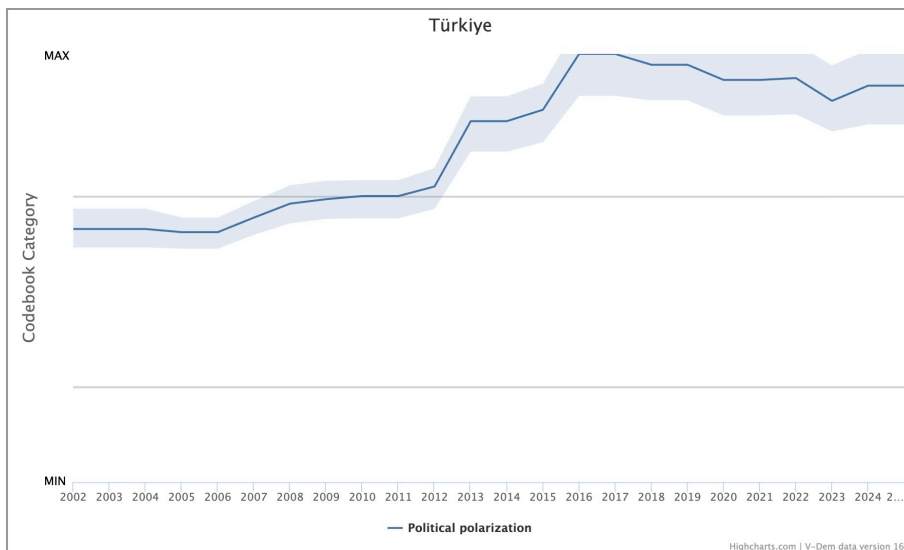


Table 6: Polarisation in Turkey (2002–2025), Source: V-Dem

Polarisation is also reflected in institutional reforms. With the introduction of electoral alliances, the AKP institutionalised a binary structure: the People’s Alliance (AKP and MHP) versus the Nation Alliance (CHP, İYİ Party, and others). This system is designed to consolidate electoral strength for the AKP. However, it can also be argued that this two-bloc system further entrenched societal divisions.

The strategic deployment of polarisation, which is both performative and rhetorical, has extended beyond party competition and penetrated civil society, academia, the media, and even familial relations. According to Yabancı (2020), political participation in Turkey has increasingly resembled a “mass spectacle”, where rallies, slogans, symbols, and rituals create a sense of emotional belonging and moral clarity, which further contribute to the deepening of binary divisions. The V-Dem report (2022) indicates that political polarisation in Turkey negatively affects social trust, civic cooperation, and access to public services.

The opposition has not been a passive observer in this process. In earlier periods of AKP rule, the CHP's alarmist rhetoric supported the AKP's narrative that it was the victim (See section 8 and Articles 1 and 2). The party portrayed the AKP as an existential threat to the Republic and mobilised its secular base using fear-based appeals. This discourse reinforced the AKP's portrayal of itself as the embattled voice of the majority against elitist guardianship. As Selçuk et al. (2019) argue, personal targeting of Erdoğan by opposition leaders actually helped to consolidate his charismatic authority and fed into the "siege mentality" among AKP supporters. Under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership, the CHP gradually recalibrated its discursive strategy and adopted a more inclusive and conciliatory tone (See Article 2). For example, the 2017 "Justice March," the "Radical Love" campaign, and the depersonalised messaging of the 2019 municipal elections, which embodied these discursive shifts, contributed to electoral victories in major metropolitan areas and helped transform the opposition into a more heterogeneous and coalition-based force. Nonetheless, the opposition's ability to transcend polarisation has remained partial and contingent. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

In sum, polarisation under AKP rule has functioned both as a product and a mechanism of authoritarian consolidation by serving to discredit pluralism, criminalise dissent, and rally political support through moralised binaries. The regime has entrenched its capacity to govern by institutionalising polarisation through electoral engineering, legal measures, and media framing. It is also important to note that AKP-led polarisation is durable. McCoy and Somer (2019) point out that once pernicious polarisation takes root, it often becomes self-reinforcing, making democratic recovery increasingly difficult without deliberate strategies of de-escalation and pluralist inclusion. Chapter 8 builds on these insights to examine the opposition's evolving role in legitimising or resisting the AKP's populist-authoritarian project, with particular focus on the CHP's shifting strategies, limitations, and contradictions.

### 5.3.3 Redefining National Identity through Populist Governance: Belonging and Exclusion under the AKP

In addition to transforming formal institutions and electoral dynamics, the AKP, through its populist political style, has redefined the symbolic contours of national identity and legitimate citizenship in Turkey. The party constructed a hegemonic narrative that defines who belongs to the political community and who is excluded or silenced by blending religious conservatism and majoritarian nationalism. Yabancı (2022) argues that the AKP fused populism with a nationalist-Islamic identity project and defined the "ideal citizen" as a devout Sunni Muslim Turk who is loyal to both the state and religious

tradition. Ottoman nostalgia and family-centred gender politics were used by the party to promote a moralised version of citizenship. Moreover, institutions like the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) were instrumentalised in the creation of these new boundaries. Bruinessen (2023) explains that populism's rejection of pluralism is not only rhetorical. It actively excludes minorities, dissenters, and opposition groups from the definition of "the people." Erdoğan's exclusionary discourse intensified after 2013, with increasing hostility towards Kurds, Alevis, secularists, and critical intellectuals, all redefined as threats to national unity (Bruinessen, 2023).

While exclusionary discourses about who belongs to the nation have existed since the early Republic, the AKP's approach represents both continuity and transformation. Kemalist nation-building also pursued a homogenising ideal of citizenship centred on secular modernity and Turkishness. However, the AKP rearticulated these boundaries through a different moral and cultural register. A central aspect of this political project is the equation of the characteristics of the AKP's political base with the 'real' or 'authentic' Turkish nation. Erdoğan framed conservative Sunni Muslim citizens as the core of the national body politic (Yabancı, 2023). This vision of the nation rejected pluralism and envisioned a culturally homogeneous ideal citizenship centred around piety, loyalty to the state, and alignment with the AKP's values.

This discursive strategy had a dual effect. First of all, it empowered previously marginalised groups such as religiously conservative citizens by granting them symbolic recognition and cultural legitimacy. Through frequent references to concepts like 'black Turks' versus 'white Turks', Erdoğan reversed the hierarchy of respectability and turned the AKP into a vehicle for moral revenge against perceived historical exclusion. Second, it delegitimised alternative identities and ideologies, such as secularism, Kurdish ethnicity, Alevism, leftist politics, or cosmopolitan liberalism, as threats to national unity or as foreign impositions.

After the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP's discourse further intensified this binary logic by adopting a securitised and statist tone that equated dissent with betrayal. Journalists, academics, civil society activists, and political opponents were branded as 'terrorists' or 'foreign agents.' As discussed in the previous section, these securitisation policies were legitimised through the populist discourse of the AKP and Erdoğan, which simultaneously justified repression against dissenters and reinforced the symbolic boundaries of belonging and ideal citizenship, marking others as internal enemies. Reshaping educational and religious institutions helped institutionalise the AKP's ideological vision. In parallel, media narratives played a significant symbolic role in delineating national identity. Pro-government media narratives framed the "New Turkey"

as a morally superior community rooted in Islamic identity and Ottoman heritage.

While the AKP redefined the symbolic boundaries of citizenship through exclusionary narratives, the CHP struggled to articulate an inclusive counter-vision of national identity. In the earlier years of AKP rule, the CHP's strong commitment to and emphasis on a unitary and secular national identity often translated into an exclusionary discourse that alienated Kurds and religious conservatives. This strategy limited the CHP's ability to challenge the AKP's moralised vision of the nation. Although under Kılıçdaroğlu the CHP adopted a more inclusive and pluralist tone, these efforts remained limited in comparison with the AKP's strategy.

In sum, the AKP's synthesis of traditionalist Islam, neoliberal governance, and anti-pluralist nationalism contributed to the deepening of existing polarisation and weakened the norms of democratic contestation and representation. Populist discourse reshaped the cultural infrastructure of legitimacy. The symbolic boundaries of who counted as 'the people' were redrawn so that the party was able to mobilise support, justify repression, and redefine the moral order of Turkish politics. Opposition actors, as discussed throughout this thesis, also reinforced aspects of this moral and cultural order through their own exclusionary and defensive narratives, which limited their ability to challenge the regime's populist legitimacy. This dynamic continues to structure electoral behaviour in the country.

## 5.4 Locating the Opposition in the Autocratisation Trajectory

Authoritarian legitimation has never been a one-sided project. Its resilience has also turned on how opposition actors accommodated or contested its discourse and practices. At times, defensive secularism, procedural legalism, or strategic silence on the part of the opposition inadvertently reinforced the AKP's moral binaries. At other times, inclusive rhetoric, coalition-building, and bottom-up mobilisation have pierced the regime's polarising frame and exposed its vulnerabilities. Because the CHP's behaviour alternated between complicity and challenge, it forms a crucial piece of Turkey's autocratisation puzzle.

Drawing on the three empirical articles at the heart of this dissertation, this thesis examines the party's strategic evolution from elite-centric opposition to a more emotionally resonant, coalition-oriented party, and how this has

simultaneously enabled and impeded the AKP's hegemonic project. In so doing, it illuminates how opposition under hybrid regimes can function both as a conduit of resistance and, paradoxically, as an unwitting pillar of authoritarian survival.

## 5.5 Party Alliances and the Recalibration of Electoral Competition (2002–2023)

It is not sufficient to analyse Turkey's autocratisation without attention to the shifting architecture of party alliances that crystallised under the AKP (see Table 7). In the early 2000s, coalition-building was largely superfluous: benefiting from a 10 per cent national threshold that annihilated smaller parties, the AKP secured comfortable parliamentary majorities in 2002 and 2007, while the CHP, though the main opposition, remained isolated amid a fragmented field. The first signs of cross-ideological coordination appeared during the 2007 presidential crisis, when the CHP and MHP converged around a defence of secularism, and in the 2014 presidential election, when both parties jointly nominated a candidate, an experiment that failed electorally but foreshadowed a growing awareness that single-party strategies could not dislodge the AKP.

June 2015 marked a watershed when the HDP's historic threshold breakthrough, surpassing the 10 per cent national electoral barrier for parliamentary entry, deprived the AKP of its majority. Still, the CHP, MHP, and HDP were unable to forge a governing bargain, exposing the limits of cooperation. A snap election five months later restored the AKP's single-party rule. The 2016 coup attempt catalysed a national security pact between the AKP and the MHP. This rapprochement, consolidated in the 2017 constitutional referendum, institutionalised the People's Alliance and helped steer the country into a hyper-presidential system (Selçuk et al., 2019; Sözen, 2019).

The legalisation of pre-electoral coalitions in 2018 converted polarisation into formal bloc politics (Başkan et al., ). The People's Alliance (AKP–MHP, later joined by the BBP, New Welfare Party, and Huda-Par) faced the Nation Alliance, an anti-Erdoğan umbrella initially uniting the CHP, İYİ Party, Felicity Party, and Democrat Party. Although the HDP remained outside the bloc, its tactical withdrawal of candidates in metropolitan municipalities proved decisive to the opposition's 2019 triumphs in Istanbul and Ankara, underscoring the strategic dividends of cross-cleavage coordination. By 2023, the blocs had both expanded and hardened: the People's Alliance fused

Islamist and ultra-nationalist currents, while the Nation Alliance incorporated AKP breakaways DEVA and the Future Party and endorsed the CHP's Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for the presidency. Concurrently, the HDP, threatened with closure, contested the election under the Green Left Party and spearheaded the Labour and Freedom Alliance, again pledging support to Kılıçdaroğlu.

The 2023 electoral cycle revealed both the potential and the fragility of bloc politics. Erdoğan retained the presidency and a parliamentary edge, while the Nation Alliance rapidly unravelled amid weak coordination, fragmented strategic alignment, and leadership rivalries. Yet the very fact that secular nationalists, Islamists, and Kurdish actors could negotiate common tickets and vote-transfer agreements signalled an unprecedented breach of ideological taboos and reopened questions about the geometry of opposition in competitive authoritarian settings.

Three patterns emerged. First, the AKP engineered a two-camp arena through legal change and security framing that advantaged a cohesive incumbent alliance over a heterogeneous opposition. Second, opposition coordination proved most effective when underpinned by clear electoral arithmetic (as in municipal contests) but struggled to survive post-election when distributive conflicts resurfaced. Third, and most important for this dissertation, the CHP's role within these alliances illustrates how opposition parties in hybrid regimes can simultaneously challenge executive dominance and, through tactical missteps or internal fissures, enable its persistence. The next chapter, therefore, turns to the CHP, tracing how its evolving coalition strategies, documented in the dissertation's three empirical articles, both contested and inadvertently stabilised Turkey's competitive-authoritarian order.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Alliance (Core Parties)</b>	<b>Logic &amp; Outcome</b>
2002-07	No formal blocs	AKP wins outright; opposition fragmented
2014	CHP + MHP (joint candidate)	First cross-ideological presidential bid; unsuccessful
2016-23	People's Alliance (AKP-MHP-BBP)	National-security pact; anchors presidential-system shift
2018-23	Nation Alliance (CHP-İYİ-SP-DP + DEVA, Future)	Anti-AKP umbrella; enables 2019 local upset, falls short in 2023
2023	Labour and Freedom (HDP/YSP + left parties)	Independent list; tacit support for Nation Alliance candidate

Table 7: Major electoral alliances under AKP rule (See Annex A for a detailed chronology)

## 6 Towards a New Theoretical Framework

Grounded in an in-depth study of the CHP in Turkey, this dissertation develops an actor-centred conceptual framework to analyse opposition strategies under hybrid regimes. The actor-centred framework proposes an analytical axis of rigid versus flexible opposition to explain strategic variation in opposition behaviour under hybrid regimes and in an autocratising context. In addition, I propose two additional, interdependent dimensions: exclusionary vs. inclusive discourse, and tenuous vs. strong coordination. Taken together, these three axes illuminate how opposition parties calibrate their behaviour, language, and organisational partnerships as autocratisation unfolds. These concepts emerged inductively from my empirical material, but they are also informed by, and contribute to, the growing literature on opposition politics in hybrid regimes.

The discursive axis is particularly important when populists are in power because they frequently monopolise symbolic legitimacy through the use of affective narratives and moral dichotomies, as explained in the previous section (Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2016). Under these circumstances, opposition discourse can be both a strategic act of resistance and a performative one aimed at appealing to voters. Opposition coordination is a significant dimension of competitive authoritarian regime dynamics, where alliances are not only electoral expedients but often survival mechanisms for opposition parties facing institutional asymmetry (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Ong, 2022; Wahman, 2011).

In recent years, as autocratisation has been on the rise around the world, scholarly attention to different dimensions of opposition strategies has also increased, as described in section 3. Scholars have argued that opposition actors can recalibrate their repertoires, shifting between confrontation, accommodation, and coalitional bargaining even when institutionally constrained in their ability to challenge authoritarian rule (Helms, 2021; Loidolt & Mecham, 2016; Ufen, 2020). The analytical lens developed in this dissertation contributes to this discussion by analysing strategic recalibrations as processual and relational, unfolding over time and across political arenas, instead of viewing them as static or binary.

Heibach and Transfeld's (2018) research on Yemen analysed how opposition coalitions adapt under authoritarian pressure. They show how opposition coalitions adapt organisational forms, goals, and repertoires over time. Importantly, they highlight that much of this change is internally generated rather than simply reactive. However, their study remains focused on macro-organisational transformation—how coalitions evolve—rather than the micro-level flexibility of individual parties or leaders within those coalitions.

Sözen argues that autocratisation is a dynamic process and that opposition is also dynamic under these conditions (Sözen, 2020). To conceptualise opposition dynamism, this dissertation advances a rigid–flexible axis that foregrounds strategic elasticity rather than binary outcomes of success and failure. Article 1 develops this axis in detail, showing how and why, as autocratisation deepens, the opposition either reproduces a narrow, path-dependent repertoire or revises its tactics, rhetoric, and coalitional choices. Articles 2 and 3 push this analytical lens further and trace how these strategic revisions can simultaneously contest and legitimise authoritarian rule by reshaping institutions, ideas, and discourse.

*Rigid opposition* is marked by low adaptability and organisational or ideological closure. It mainly relies on exclusionary discourse and binds itself to tight but brittle alliances. Although such rigidity may galvanise a loyal base or symbolically uphold democratic norms, it typically curtails the opposition's reach and versatility under tightening authoritarian constraints.

*Flexible opposition*, by contrast, exemplifies adaptive recalibration. It adjusts tactics incrementally, embraces discursive pluralism, and forges pragmatic coalitions across ideological cleavages. This flexibility includes institutional learning, narrative renegotiation, and alliance -building. However, as discussed in Articles 2 and 3, flexibility is double-edged. On the one hand, inclusive frames might be effective in countering autocrats. On the other hand, inclusivity might alienate core supporters. Furthermore, broad alliances can erode ideological coherence. Hence, it can be said that effectiveness hinges on the opposition's capacity to maintain internal cohesion and narrative control while adapting to shifting constraints. (See 6.1 for a detailed explanation of these concepts.)

Crucially, the rigid–flexible axis is not a normative scale of success or failure. Flexible strategies may still inadvertently stabilise autocracy, for example, by normalising skewed electoral arenas or succumbing to co-optation. On the other hand, rigid strategies may serve as moral anchors that rally resistance during systemic breakdowns. What differentiates the two is not the outcome but the degree of strategic elasticity and organisational reflexivity. Thus, this

axis is not a fixed typology but a heuristic tool for tracing temporal shifts in strategic behaviour.

Two important contributions to the literature that resonate with my framework are found in the works of Gamboa and Cleary and Öztürk. Laura Gamboa's (2017) typology cross-tabulates opposition strategies along two axes: goals (moderate vs. radical) and means (institutional vs. extra-institutional). Gamboa argues that moderate actors who pursue institutional strategies are more likely to preserve democratic legitimacy and force the regime to tolerate opposition. Conversely, radical goals and extra-institutional tactics may increase the risk of repression or marginalisation.

Gamboa's typology is highly useful, but it tends to categorise opposition behaviour at a single point in time, rather than tracing how actors evolve in response to changing constraints. Moreover, it focuses on the regime–opposition interaction without capturing the internal dynamics of the opposition (e.g., how a party sustains coherence while shifting strategies). My proposed framework complements Gamboa's model but adds a temporal and organisational dimension, examining how opposition actors recalibrate their strategies and identities over time—sometimes moving from rigid to flexible positions, or combining inclusive discourse with tenuous alliances.

Cleary and Öztürk (2020) also developed a dynamic framework to analyse opposition responses to executive aggrandisement. They use the concepts of moderate and radical opposition and argue that opposition actors can alternate between different modes depending on the political context and institutional incentives. Their focus on behavioural shifts is an important corrective to static models. However, like Gamboa, they focus on goals and tactics, rather than on the organisational repertoires or symbolic identity work that underlie strategic choices. My framework attempts to fill this gap by analysing opposition not only in terms of what it does, but how it adapts or resists adaptation across three interrelated domains: flexibility, discursive inclusion, and alliance functionality.

My approach also resonates with actor-centred theories of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and the Strategic Action Fields approach (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), both of which emphasise the embeddedness of strategic actors within a dynamic political field (see section 2). Opposition actors are understood here not only as responders to regime transformation, but as co-producers of regime trajectories, with the capacity either to contest or inadvertently reinforce authoritarian rule.

In my proposed framework, building on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) tripartite model of *temporal agency*, opposition actors engage simultaneously

in iterative action (drawing on past repertoires, identities, and loyalties), projective action (imagining alternative futures), and practical-evaluative action (making real-time judgements about how to proceed). Strategies evolve according to past experiences and future evaluations of the actors. The analysis is further enriched by Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) concept of Strategic Action Fields (SAFs), which casts politics as a set of overlapping arenas where actors vie for advantage under shared but contested rules. Within a given field, opposition parties can confront the ruling power and can, at the same time, employ field-specific resources, social ties, and interpretive frames. The rigid-flexible axis aims to operationalise how these assets are mobilised over time. For example, while rigid actors defend existing positions through fixed alliances and inherited legitimacy, flexible actors attempt to reconfigure the field by forging new coalitions, reframing cleavages, and redefining institutional rules.

Accordingly, the typology serves not only as a tool for tracing empirical variation in opposition behaviour; it also advances broader debates on agency in hybrid regimes. By integrating temporally embedded agency with field theory, the rigid-flexible axis offers a process-sensitive lens through which to examine how opposition actors navigate authoritarian constraints and recalibrate their strategies over time. Rather than offering a deterministic model, it illuminates the conditions under which adaptability emerges and how such adaptability may influence, though not dictate, political trajectories.

The proposed framework contributes a more process-oriented approach that goes beyond outcome-based assessments of opposition "success" or "failure" (Helms, 2023; Ong, 2022; Kavasoglu, 2022). It allows researchers to analyse why and how opposition actors can (or cannot) challenge autocratisation by strategically recalibrating their behaviour, discourse, and alliances. The analytical axes discussed below offer a set of conceptual tools for analysing opposition strategies as temporally embedded, relational, and often ambivalent.

## 6.1 A Process-Sensitive Lens on Opposition Strategy

This dissertation contributes to the study of opposition behaviour in hybrid regimes by advancing a process-sensitive, three-dimensional framework that brings strategic posture, discursive orientation, and coordination effectiveness into a single analytical lens. Built inductively from the Turkish case, it pivots on a rigid-flexible axis that traces the CHP's trajectory from the defensive and ideologically closed stance of the Baykal era to the adaptive, coalition-minded pragmatism characteristic of Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership. Because this strategic recalibration is inseparable from shifts in both discursive strategies and

alliance architecture, the framework treats strategy, discourse, and coordination as mutually constitutive, thus departing from approaches that silo them as discrete domains.

The first contribution of the proposed model lies in its explicit attention to temporal dynamics. By viewing opposition conduct as a sequence of adaptations rather than a static position, as explained above, the model aligns with scholarship on the temporal embeddedness of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and makes it possible to examine how parties revise and reconfigure their repertoires across different phases of autocratisation. Second, the framework demonstrates that strategic manoeuvres, discursive shifts, and coalition -building evolve together. Moves towards flexibility typically demand rhetorical moderation and inclusive narratives, which, in the CHP's experience after 2010, were integral to expanding its alliance portfolio beyond its traditional Kemalist base. Finally, the model exposes the ambivalent effects of strategic adaptation. Practices often celebrated as democratising, such as broad-tent alliances or pluralist rhetoric, can in practice legitimise skewed arenas and weaken party identity and mobilisation, thereby complicating the presumed link between coordination and democratic deepening.

Articles 1, 2, and 3 provide the empirical scaffolding for each axis in turn: Article 1 details the CHP's shift along the rigid-flexible spectrum; Article 2 analyses the transformation of its discursive repertoire; and Article 3 evaluates the fluctuating strength and institutionalisation of opposition coalitions.

## 6.2 Unpacking the Axes: Strategy, Discourse, Coordination

As mentioned above, this study disentangles opposition behaviour into three analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing axes—strategy, discourse, and coordination—to explain how actors perform under shifting authoritarian constraints.

The first, strategic axis ranges from inflexible to adaptable repertoires. While rigid actors cling to inherited tactics and adversarial goals, flexible ones engage in experimentation and gradual adaptation. The second, discourse axis ranges from exclusionary to inclusive narratives, probing how opposition forces define “the people”, draw symbolic boundaries, and mobilise claims of belonging. Where populism functions as a governing style (Mudde, 2004), inclusive rhetoric can reopen pluralistic space, whereas exclusionary frames sharpen identity but deepen polarisation. The third, coordination axis

measures the functional depth of alliances, from tenuous pacts to strong coalitions.

Discourse analysis refers to the study of a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic practices that structure social meaning and action, not only to textual or narrowly defined linguistic analysis (Weldes & Laffey, 2004). Discourse functions as a framework that shapes and reflects broader social practices. In this study, I analyse the evolving discursive strategies of the CHP by examining the language, symbols, and performances deployed in political campaigns. I define opposition discourse as a strategic and symbolic repertoire through which political actors construct their identity, articulate belonging, and communicate with the people. I distinguish between exclusionary and inclusive discourse not as binary categories, but as ideal types that capture key variations in the CHP's rhetorical evolution.

Exclusionary discourse can be defined as a communicative strategy that reinforces rigid identity boundaries by framing politics through dichotomous notions of “us” versus “them”, as evidenced in discourse theory, which emphasises how meaning and antagonism are constructed through language (Laclau, 2005; Wodak, 2015), and in agonistic pluralism, which views politics as an ongoing contestation between conflicting yet legitimate positions rather than a sphere of full consensus (Mouffe, 2000). In Articles 1 and 2, I argue that the CHP relied heavily on exclusionary discourse during the 2007–2010 period, particularly around issues of secularism and national unity.

Inclusive discourse, on the other hand, can be described as rhetorical practices that attempt to pluralise the symbolic boundaries of “the people” by moderating ideological rigidity and reducing antagonistic polarisation. Inclusive discourse does not necessarily deny difference. Rather, it seeks to reframe it without reinforcing polarisation. In Article 2, I examine the transformation of the CHP's discursive strategy and show how, for example, the CHP's 2019 campaign, under the motto of “Radical Love,” exemplified a strategic move towards inclusion. The campaign deliberately avoided conflictual language and refrained from antagonising the ruling party's base. Instead, it focused on emotional resonance and symbolic openness towards various segments of the population.

The transition from exclusionary discourse to an inclusive one is not necessarily smooth or uncontested. As shown in the articles, inclusive messaging frequently collided with intra-party tensions, nationalist sensitivities, and strategic ambiguities. This discursive recalibration marks a significant reorientation in the CHP's opposition repertoire. It signals a move from “guardian of state ideology” towards “mediator of social pluralism”, a

trajectory that can be described as the party's evolution from a state party to a party for society.

The proposed axis of tenuous versus strong alliances has conceptual roots in my 2022 policy brief, *“The Strategies and Struggles of the Turkish Opposition under Autocratization”* (Korkmaz, 2022). In another policy paper that I co-authored with Murat Somer and Edgar Şar (2021), we used the term “*esnek ittifak*” in Turkish (“flexible alliance”) to describe the opposition alliance during the 2018 elections in Turkey. Building on this concept, I propose here the terms “tenuous” and “strong” alliances to define the CHP's alliance strategies under AKP rule, refining these early, practice-oriented insights into a fully operationalised analysis based on twenty elite interviews, archival party documents, and process-traced electoral episodes. Tenuous alliances are short-lived, adhoc pacts that lack institutionalisation, a shared narrative, or deep trust and that, therefore, fracture under authoritarian pressure. Strong alliances exhibit sustained elite coordination, a cohesive public message, and implicit or explicit inclusion of ideologically diverse partners, allowing more durable strategic alignment even when formal coalition contracts are absent.

The alliance axis also dialogues with, but is not based on, Elvin Ong's (2022) “tactical” versus “full-fledged” alliance distinction. Whereas Ong emphasises formal design elements (joint candidate nomination, territorial scope), my model foregrounds the practical effectiveness of alliances, namely internal cohesion, narrative consistency, and adaptive capacity over time. This shift matters because formally robust alliances can still fail if they do not cultivate inter-party trust, disciplined messaging, and grassroots resonance under competitive authoritarianism.

By reframing alliance durability as a qualitative spectrum, the study contributes to broader debates on opposition coordination in hybrid regimes, showing how the processual evolution of alliance depth, rather than its mere existence, conditions both democratic challenge and the unintended reinforcement of autocratisation.

Cross-tabulating these axes yields different configurations of opposition strategy, which will be examined for the CHP case in Chapter 7.

Table 8 presents a cross-tabulation of strategic orientation (rigid–flexible) and discursive practice (exclusionary–inclusive) to map distinct patterns of opposition behaviour. This analytical framework does not delineate distinct, mutually exclusive categories; instead, it encapsulates the dynamic interplay between organisational strategies and rhetorical positioning. Certain configurations, notably the rigid–inclusive quadrant, appear counterintuitive yet emerge as empirically significant, representing instances where opposition

actors deploy inclusive rhetoric while maintaining inflexible organisational structures. The matrix delineates ideal-typical orientations rather than deterministic pathways, recognising that opposition movements may concurrently display contradictory strategic and discursive elements.

Strategy \ Discourse	Exclusionary	Inclusive
Rigid	Polarising purism: mobilises the base, legitimizes regime siege narratives.	Rare and unstable: inclusion without reform implodes.
Flexible	Tactical populism: mimics regime rhetoric, risks long-term legitimacy.	Broad-tent mobilisation: strong alliances, but identity dilution risk.

*Table 8: Analytical Matrix of Opposition Strategies under Autocratisation*

Building on this framework, Table 8 further shows two dimensions of opposition behaviour: strategic rigidity versus flexibility and discursive exclusion versus inclusion. Coordination is a latent but decisive axis, and its analytical value becomes clear once coordination is traced longitudinally. Broad-tent, strong alliances yield durable gains only when anchored in dense organisational linkages and a shared narrative frame, as illustrated by the Turkish opposition’s metropolitan victories in the 2019 local elections. By contrast, inclusive projects without institutionalised coordination, or tenuous alliances, tend to fragment rapidly, exposing how “reform without alliance” unravels in the absence of narrative coherence or elite trust. Even rigid–exclusionary repertoires can maintain in-group cohesion when enforced through strong intra-bloc discipline, yet they seldom achieve the outreach needed to build new electoral majorities. Accordingly, this dissertation treats coordination not as a static category but as an evolving mechanism: shifts in alliance depth recalibrate the opportunity structure, and thus the strategic menu, available to opposition actors over time. It is important to underline that the concepts suggested here are meant to be theory -generating rather than fully theorised. As such, they need to be tested across comparative cases.

### 6.3 Strategic Trade-offs and the Double-Edged Role of the Moderator Party

Bringing the three axes into dialogue makes clear that opposition actors in hybrid regimes confront a series of hard trade-offs. Particular constellations of strategy, discourse, and coordination can open space for democratic contestation, yet the very same combinations may reproduce or legitimise elements of the authoritarian status quo. A rigid, exclusionary stance within a tenuous alliance, for instance, may galvanise core supporters but typically fuels a polarisation spiral that allows incumbents to posture as reformers by portraying themselves as the only actors capable of restoring stability and transcending partisan conflict. By contrast, the flexible, inclusive, and well-coordinated configuration that propelled Turkey's opposition bloc to victory in the 2019 local elections succeeded because pluralist rhetoric and tight organisational discipline momentarily bridged long-standing ideological cleavages. However, the post-2019 period in preparation for the 2023 national elections exposed the fragility of this formula. As explained in the articles, this strong alliance formation created unanticipated problems such as narrative fragmentation, identity dilution, and base demobilisation.

One role that tries to bridge these contradictory requirements is that of the moderator party, first mentioned by Tanıl Bora (2020) in a non-academic intervention to characterise the CHP's ambivalent position within Turkish opposition politics. This term was conceptualised and developed in Article 3. A moderator party is a qualitatively distinct opposition actor that performs three intertwined functions within broad anti-authoritarian coalitions: conflict absorption, symbolic moderation, and organisational brokerage. Rather than merely bargaining for ministerial portfolios (as in the classical king-maker role) or providing a narrow policy bridge, a moderator party acts as the coalition's shock absorber. It internalises ideological frictions that would otherwise fracture the alliance, dampens polarising rhetoric through calibrated signalling, and furnishes procedural routines—such as joint campaign platforms, shared communication channels, and informal caucuses—that allow ideologically disparate partners to coordinate collective action.

Crucially, it is able to do so because its own ideological profile is both sufficiently recognisable to mobilise a core constituency and sufficiently elastic to accommodate divergent claims. The CHP between 2018 and 2023 illustrates this double bind. By toning down its historic secularist idiom and embracing an eclectic narrative, the party created a discursive and strategic umbrella under which liberals, nationalists, Kurds, and conservative dissidents could temporarily cohabit. However, to sustain that umbrella, continuous rhetorical recalibration and concessions were required, which blurred the CHP's partisan identity. Moreover, my research shows that the moderator role

exhausted elite CHP cadres and ultimately eroded activist enthusiasm. The post-2023 malaise underscored the vulnerability of a moderator party to coalition fatigue and regime co-optation. More broadly, the concept also refers to the paradox that the strategies enabling opposition unity in hybrid regimes can, over time, normalise skewed arenas of competition and thereby reinforce authoritarian resilience, even as they open episodic windows for democratic advance (see Article 3).

To conclude, each core article of the dissertation deepens one dimension of the three-axis framework. Article 1 follows the CHP's transformation from strategic rigidity to greater flexibility across successive elections. Article 2 examines the party's turn towards a more inclusive narrative and how different audiences received it. Article 3 probes the mechanics of coalition coordination and further develops the concept of the moderator party. Anchoring each axis in a dedicated empirical study strengthens the model's internal consistency and shows how it can travel to other hybrid-regime cases. I will analyse each concept in Chapter 8, linking the arguments of the three articles and explaining my findings.

## 7 Summary of the Research Papers

This chapter provides a summary of the articles and a detailed discussion (see Section 8) that synthesises their arguments and presents the main findings.

Article 1, “*The Role of the Opposition in Autocratisation: The Case of Turkey*”

sets the conceptual and empirical foundations for the dissertation by centring opposition parties as agents in the process of autocratisation. The study asks why Turkey’s opposition was unable to halt autocratisation and, more importantly, how its own strategic choices sometimes reinforced that slide. Focusing on the CHP between 2002 and 2022, the article argues that opposition parties are not merely victims of autocratic incumbents but dynamic co-producers of autocratisation, capable of both constraining and enabling authoritarian consolidation.

The article introduces a *rigid–flexible* spectrum of opposition behaviour. “Rigid opposition” is characterised by an ideologically narrow stance, exclusionary discourse, and alliances limited to like-minded actors. “Flexible opposition” denotes strategic adaptability, inclusive rhetoric, and cross-cleavage coalition -building. By moving beyond familiar binaries, such as radical versus moderate or success versus failure, this typology provides a more process-sensitive lens for evaluating opposition agency. Crucially, the article demonstrates that flexibility is neither unambiguously virtuous nor invariably effective. Adaptive strategies can open electoral space, yet they also risk identity dilution and inadvertent legitimisation of autocratic reforms.

Empirically, the article periodises the CHP’s evolution across three critical junctures, each mapped onto the rigid–flexible axis. During 2007–2010, the party exhibited rigid opposition by boycotting parliamentary sessions, invoking secularist guardianship, and fuelling polarisation, which in turn justified the AKP’s hard-authoritarian responses. Between 2010 and 2015, leadership change and lessons drawn from electoral defeats propelled an initial, if uneven, shift towards flexibility, visible in more inclusive discursive frames and tentative outreach to Kurdish voters. Finally, in the post-2015 era, which encompassed the failed 2016 coup and the 2017 presidential referendum, the CHP consolidated a flexible opposition stance through broad-

tent, strong alliances and depolarising narratives, culminating in the opposition's 2019 municipal breakthrough. Yet, as the article notes, even this adapted strategy produced ambiguous outcomes, sometimes normalising repressive measures (e.g., support for lifting parliamentary immunities).

Methodologically, the study employs a multi-layered qualitative design befitting the dissertation's actor-centred approach. Twenty elite interviews with party elites, journalists, and scholars were triangulated with archival research (newspapers, speeches, campaign visuals) and ten focus-group discussions stratified by age and partisan leanings. This rich evidentiary base allowed me to trace decision-making rationales at critical junctures and to understand voter perceptions of strategic decisions, an analytical strategy echoed across the thesis's subsequent articles.

The findings demonstrate that strategic shifts are seldom cost-free. Flexibility can mobilise broader coalitions but may simultaneously erode organisational coherence, a tension revisited in the dissertation's chapter 8 on the CHP as a "moderator party." Article 1 lays the conceptual groundwork for understanding oppositional behaviour as a dynamic and contested process under authoritarian pressure, inviting comparative application to contexts such as Hungary, India, or Brazil.

Article 2, "*Opposing Autocratization in Turkey: From Exclusionary to Inclusive Discourse*" constitutes the dissertation's second analytical pillar by demonstrating how the CHP gradually re-engineered its public discourse in response to Turkey's deepening autocratisation. Whereas Article 1 located variation on a rigid-flexible strategic axis, this study relocates the analysis to the realm of discourse, treating language not as an epiphenomenon but as a causal arena in which opposition actors can simultaneously enable and impede authoritarian consolidation. Autocratisation, the article argues, is a relational process in which the discourse of opposition parties can legitimise, normalise, or destabilise incumbent power, depending on timing and resonance.

Conceptually, the article introduces an exclusionary-to-inclusive discourse axis that complements the dissertation's triadic framework. The CHP's exclusionary discourse in the early years of AKP rule drew on a long-standing republican language of guardianship, emphasising the party's self-assigned role as the protector of the secular state and the Republic. The CHP's discourse during this period mirrored the AKP's polarising populism and reinforced its "people versus the elite" script. By contrast, inclusive discourse reframed political adversaries as dialogue partners and expanded the emotional and symbolic boundaries of belonging within the opposition coalition.

Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed qualitative design that triangulates three bodies of evidence: (1) an archive of campaign posters, newspaper advertisements, and handbook materials between 2002 and 2019; (2) media content and video footage of rallies; and (3) ten focus-group discussions with sixty participants stratified by age, gender, and party preference. The analysis combines two vantage points: elite messaging and voter reception. By comparing how political narratives were produced by party elites and later interpreted by voters, the study traces how discursive frames evolved and fed back into strategic choices. This approach mirrors the actor-centred epistemology of the dissertation, which emphasises the reciprocal relationship between strategic communication and audience interpretation.

Empirically, the article periodises CHP discourse across three phases. During the 2002–2010 phase, the CHP adopted exclusionary discourse that cast pious conservatives as existential threats, a move both CHP and AKP voters later recalled as discriminatory and fear-laden, showing how early opposition narratives reinforced polarisation rather than bridging it. Beginning in 2010, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu inaugurated a gradual shift in CHP discourse. Welfare- and rights-based themes became more visible, which reflected an effort to address social inequalities and broaden the party’s appeal. However, elements of the earlier polarising rhetoric, particularly suspicion towards religious conservatives and defensive references to secular identity, persisted alongside this softer language. The main change came with the 2017 Justice March, a 450-kilometre mobilisation that eschewed party flags and attracted ideologically diverse participants, signalling an explicit break with exclusionary protest repertoires. This trajectory culminated in the 2019 municipal elections, where a consciously depolarising campaign, backed by a multi-party electoral alliance, helped the opposition seize Istanbul and Ankara. The article stresses that this success was not an overnight epiphany but the payoff of a decade-long learning curve that fused inclusive language with strategic coalition-building.

Three mechanisms illuminate why discourse matters. First, framing effects: Alarmist slogans in CHP discourse validated AKP claims that secular elites menaced the “real nation,” thereby legitimising executive aggrandisement. Second, emotion work: the CHP’s hope-laden narratives lowered psychological switching costs for swing voters and those loosely aligned with the AKP, a dynamic confirmed by focus-group participants who lauded the 2019 CHP slogans as “embracing” and “relaxing.” Third, alliance signalling: The discursive shift between the anti-headscarf protests of 2007 and the inclusive Justice March in 2017 reassured Kurdish and nationalist partners, paving the way for later electoral alliances. Focus-group respondents

explicitly contrasted the polarising 2007 campaign with the unifying 2019 pre-electoral messaging.

Within the dissertation architecture, Article 2 develops the analytical dimension of discourse, linking the strategic patterns identified in Article 1 to the alliance dynamics examined in Article 3. By documenting how shifts in political language anticipated and arguably triggered coalition-building, the article advances the central argument that opposition agency under autocratisation is dynamic and often marked by tension between adaptation and resistance. By tracing how narratives and voter responses interact, Article 2 demonstrates that discourse can function as a strategic resource that shapes the balance between compliance and resistance in hybrid regimes. The article operationalises the discursive dimension of opposition agency and sets the stage for the alliance-based analysis in Article 3.

Article 3, *“The Evolution of Opposition Coordination under Competitive Authoritarianism: The Moderator Party Paradox in Turkey”*

completes the dissertation’s triadic framework with a focus on inter-party coordination within the opposition. This article asks whether alliances meant to counter autocratisation can, under certain conditions, reinforce it instead. Framed within comparative debates on coalition politics in hybrid regimes, the study analyses how the CHP evolved from an ideologically rigid party into a moderator party, compelled to mediate among disparate partners, even at the cost of its own identity. The central puzzle is double-edged: When and how do opposition alliances form under deepening autocratisation, and what intended and unintended effects do they have on regime trajectories?

The article’s theoretical contribution is twofold. First, it differentiates “tenuous” from “strong” alliances, arguing that electoral pacts vary not merely by formal design but by coalitional functionality: their internal trust, narrative coherence, and adaptive capacity. This typology refines earlier work on tactical versus full-fledged coalitions (Ong, 2022) by emphasising cohesion over legal architecture. Secondly, it develops the moderator party concept. I explain the concept in relation to Musil’s notion of intermediary actors (2024). Unlike intermediary actors (Musil, 2024) that simply bridge cleavages, a moderator party absorbs the burden of unity, suppressing its own programmatic voice to keep contradictory partners at the table. While that posture enables unprecedented breadth, it simultaneously dilutes brand clarity, erodes base morale, and heightens coordination fatigue. The article foregrounds elite agency as a critical explanatory factor, tracing how strategic decisions, leadership preferences, and retrospective justification narratives shaped both the design and the limits of opposition alliances under autocratisation.

Empirically, the article adopts a within-case comparative design across four electoral cycles and two broader periods of opposition coordination. The first period (2014–2018) documents tenuous, ad hoc, elite-driven pacts such as Ekmelîdin İhsanođlu’s presidential candidacy in 2014, which was supported by several parties, and the early Nation Alliance. As a result, internal incoherence demobilised supporters and inadvertently legitimated the regime’s post-coup re-engineering of the system. The second period (2019–2023) captures the 2019 local elections, when a functionally strong opposition configuration propelled Ekrem İmamođlu’s Istanbul victory. The win energised urban voters, yet also reaffirmed the procedural façade of “competitive” elections as the government forced, and lost, a rerun. The article then examines the alliance popularly known as “The Table of Six”. It was structurally the strongest alliance, but ultimately constrained by message incoherence, unequal bargaining, and shallow grassroots penetration that allowed the AKP to win the election and claim democratic legitimacy.

Across these episodes, the article identifies five recurring motivations for alliance-building, gleaned from twenty elite interviews and participant observation: The majoritarian 50 + 1 presidential rule; a strategic tilt towards conservative partners; leadership preferences (especially Kılıçdarođlu’s consensual style); learning from previous alliance experiences; and normative commitments to democratic restoration. Yet these same drivers created structural traps: elite bargains substituted for grassroots activation; smaller parties gained outsized leverage; and the CHP’s moderator role shifted from a coordinating asset into a source of overextension. The result is the paradox of opposition unity: coordination can be simultaneously indispensable and self-limiting.

Methodologically, the article mirrors the dissertation’s actor-centred ethos: 20 in-depth interviews, archival media analysis, campaign observation, and within-case comparison across electoral cycles, supported by thematic coding of interview and documentary material. This multi-layered evidence shows that even ideally “successful” alliance models can legitimise flawed contests, demobilise core constituencies, or provide the incumbent with fresh divide-and-rule opportunities.

Within the thesis architecture, Article 3 operationalises the Coordination Axis, supplying the empirical bridge between Article 1’s rigid–flexible strategy spectrum and Article 2’s exclusionary–inclusive discourse continuum. By theorising how alliance depth modulates, and is modulated by, strategic choices and rhetorical framing, the study rounds out the dissertation’s claim that opposition agency in hybrid regimes is a relational, multi-dimensional process. Crucially, it highlights how elite agency, expressed through leadership strategies, alliance bargaining, and narrative framing, operates within and

sometimes against structural constraints, offering a grounded perspective on how opposition parties manage authoritarian power asymmetry. It also raises a cautionary comparative message: opposition unity is not a panacea. Without organisational depth, a shared narrative, and timely formation, even the most elaborate coalitions may consolidate the autocratic order they intend to dismantle.

## 8 Discussion of findings and contributions: The role of the opposition in autocratisation

Turkey's shift from the promise of an EU-anchored democratisation agenda in the 2000s to its current state of competitive authoritarianism is one of the most widely studied cases of autocratisation (See section 5 for Turkey's regime trajectory and conceptualisation). Yet most narratives remain lopsided. They catalogue what the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) did to institutions, courts, and the media as part of a gradual autocratisation process, while saying far less about what the opposition did in response to those same changes (Somer, 2016; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Borsuk et al., 2022; Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016).

A new wave of studies has begun to focus on opposition strategies, with a special emphasis on the CHP and its evolving strategies to challenge autocratisation, especially after the CHP victory in the 2019 local elections (Taşkın, 2020; Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020; Balta & Demiralp, 2021; Wuthrich & Ingleby, 2020; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2019). These works illuminate how the party experimented with coalition-building, recalibrated its discourse, and reached out to new constituencies under increasingly asymmetric rules. However, since much of this scholarship is anchored in the post-2019 moment, it risks flattening the longer arc of strategic dilemmas and ideological shifts that have shaped the party since the AKP's ascent.

Earlier studies of the CHP under AKP rule primarily portrayed the party as an ineffective actor trapped by its historical burden, internal rigidity, and limited appeal. Scholars such as Ciddi (2009), Ayan (2010), Turan (2006), and Ayan and Dikici (2016) underscored the party's undemocratic internal architecture and exclusionary style; Gülmez (2013) noted its suspicion towards the AKP's early EU-driven reform agenda. Ciddi and Esen (2014) and Bora (2017) argued that the CHP under Baykal's leadership leaned on veto institutions, such as the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy, rather than mass legitimacy.

These strands of literature set the stage but leave a crucial puzzle underexplored: How an opposition party can both contest and reinforce an authoritarian turn. This thesis contributes to the literature by analysing the multidimensional role of the opposition under autocratisation. Comparative

literature shows that opposition actors in hybrid regimes often operate in a paradoxical space where their strategies may simultaneously undermine and stabilise authoritarian rule (Albrecht, 2005; Turovsky, 2014; Heibach & Transfeld, 2018; see also Chapter 5). This thesis builds on those arguments, but grounds them in a temporally embedded, actor-centred framework which captures strategic shifts over time. The dissertation provides a comprehensive case study that illuminates the dynamic nature of opposition under autocratisation. Based on elite interviews and archival material, this actor-centred analysis incorporates the perspectives of key figures within the CHP to shed light on how they interpreted autocratisation and recalibrated their strategies. It also highlights the multi-actor character of politics in hybrid regimes by focusing on the strategic agency of opposition actors, challenging accounts that conceptualise incumbents as the sole agents of authoritarian consolidation.

Drawing together the three articles, the thesis advances a two-part claim. First, the CHP's strategic repertoire can be mapped along a rigid–flexible axis. During the period of rigid strategy (2007–2010), the party clung to an exclusionary, status-quo nationalism that deepened polarisation and validated AKP pleas for majoritarian autocratic legitimacy (See Chapter 5). During the period of flexible strategy (2010–2023), it embraced inclusive discourse and cross-ideological alliances, a posture that briefly undermined the governing party's urban hegemony. Second, the CHP's long-term role as the main opposition party hinged on a different, yet intertwined, logic: the burden of acting as a moderator party (see Chapter 6) within ever broader anti-Erdoğan alliances. This role held six ideologically disparate actors to a single presidential ticket in 2023, but it also drained the lead party's brand, sapped organisational energy, and left voters wondering what the bloc actually stood for. Crucially, Article 1 and Article 2 argue that it was the turn to flexibility that made the moderator role possible. In other words, the CHP's flexible strategies simultaneously enabled broad coalitions, whether tenuous or strong, and generated the dilution effects and coordination costs that later undermined them. Rigid–flexible styles and the moderator role coexist as analytically distinct yet interacting layers.

This chapter builds on the AKP's repertoire of institutional engineering and its strategies of autocratic legitimation (as discussed in Chapter 5) to develop an interactive reading of Turkish autocratisation in order to understand the role of opposition parties in the autocratisation process. It examines how each authoritarian move by the incumbent reshaped the incentive structure of the opposition and how each strategic turn by the opposition, in turn, produced new spaces and constraints within the evolving institutional framework.

This chapter integrates the findings of all three articles, their distinct research questions, data sets, and conceptual contributions. Taken together with the analysis of the AKP's autocratisation strategies (Chapter 5) and the theoretical discussion (Chapter 6), this chapter presents an overarching analytical argument. The main questions remain: What is the role of the opposition in autocratisation under AKP rule in Turkey? How did the CHP both resist and reinforce the AKP's autocratising rule? What can this tell us about the possibilities available to opposition parties and the pitfalls facing them in other autocratising countries?

The answer, I argue, lies in tracing movement along three axes of opposition behaviour—strategic, discursive, and coordinative—and identifying the feedback mechanisms through which these movements interact with the incumbent's evolving, equally dynamic authoritarian toolkit.

As summarised in the previous section, Article 1 conceptualises the rigid–flexible strategy axis, showing how the CHP's repertoire widened after 2010, but also how flexibility carried organisational and electoral trade-offs. Article 2 analyses the exclusionary–inclusive discourse axis and demonstrates how the party's strategic discursive turn constituted a form of strategic inclusion that relied as much on silence as on speech. Article 3 conceptualises the tenuous–strong alliance axis, introducing the notion of the moderator party to explain the CHP's role in holding together ideologically disparate coalitions after 2018.

The CHP's strategic responses emerged within, and were shaped by, the AKP's evolving authoritarian context (Chapter 5). Opposition responses fed back into the regime's legitimisation toolkit, especially through polarisation, symbolic reframing, and unsuccessful coalition dynamics.

While rooted in the Turkish case, the analysis offers broader insights into opposition behaviour under hybrid regimes. It suggests that opposition parties facing autocratisation often oscillate between strategies of accommodation and contestation while seeking short-term survival within authoritarian constraints rather than systemic transformation.

## 8.1 Conceptual Architecture of the Articles: Why Strategy, Discourse, and Coordination?

In this section, I revisit the conceptual architecture of this thesis to draw out the implications of this study for understanding the role of opposition parties in autocratising regimes more generally. As argued in Chapter 3, opposition in hybrid regimes is best conceptualised not as a static institutional position but as a dynamic and relational actor handling regime-induced constraints (Heibach & Transfeld, 2018; Sözen, 2020). This thesis deepens that claim by operationalising the three interrelated axes of opposition behaviour—strategy, discourse, and coordination—which capture temporal and situational shifts in opposition agency that are important for understanding what can lead to successful opposition, under what circumstances, and at what cost.

CHP actions around the 2007 presidential crisis and the 2010 leadership change revealed striking variation in strategic repertoire, from legalistic boycotts and court appeals to cross-ideological alliances and inclusive campaigning strategies. Existing typologies of opposition, as discussed in Section 3.4 (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Gamboa, 2017; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Ufen, 2020; Turovsky, 2014), could not capture this internal movement. Building on this variation in strategic repertoire, the rigid–flexible axis therefore serves to map how the party learned, or failed to learn, from defeat, how it responded and adapted to shifting institutional constraints, and what the outcomes were.

Article 2 showed that discourse and framing were not epiphenomena but constitutive elements of political struggle in a populistauthoritarian context. An opposition that speaks a rigid, polarising language reinforces the incumbent’s Manichean script and polarisation (Yabancı, 2020; Somer, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). An opposition that speaks the language of empathy and everyday problem-solving can redraw affective boundaries. The exclusionary–inclusive axis thus captures the symbolic politics of belonging. It is important to note that inclusivity is intrinsically selective: what is left unsaid or unsupported (such as the question of Kurdish inclusion, discussed in Chapter 1) is as important as what is voiced or supported. For future research, selective inclusivity could indicate how opposition discourse is shaped by the dual constraints of coalition dynamics and political repression.

Article 3 showed that coalitions are not only electoral arithmetic; they are organisational and symbolic projects that require mediation. The tenuous–strong coordination axis captures not only whether parties cooperate but how they do so. By focusing on the role of elite agency and elite motivations in alliance formation, it is possible to ascertain whether coordination is

transactional and fragile or institutionalised and narratively coherent. To explain the CHP's central role, I developed the concept of the moderator party, first mentioned by Tanil Bora (2020) as a non-academic intervention to describe the CHP's role in opposition coordination (see Chapter 6). A relatively dominant opposition actor can soften ideological cleavages, absorb reputational costs, and redistribute visibility in order to maintain coalition unity. Based on fieldwork and elite interviews, the article shows how this role emerged not only from external pressures but also from the strategic choices and normative justifications of CHP elites themselves. Moderation, the article shows, is both enabling and corrosive.

These axes are analytically distinct but often intersect in practice. Flexibility may be reinforced by durable coordination or inclusive discourse. However, such alignments are neither automatic nor simultaneous. Flexibility in strategy can, from time to time, coexist with discursive caution or fragile alliances. Rigidity on one axis may constrain movement on others, but not deterministically so. Analysis of these intersections shows how these dynamics unfolded over time by identifying key moments of alignment, friction, and feedback among strategic, discursive, and coordinative choices of the opposition under autocratisation.

## 8.2 Incumbent Strategies and Opposition Dilemmas: CHP under AKP rule

The AKP's autocratisation (Chapter 5) was the result of institutional engineering (constitutional referendums, judicial capture, electoral law tweaks) and symbolic politics based on ideas (populist binaries, sacralised leadership) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017; Sözen, 2019a; Gençkaya & Dunbay, 2024; Oder, 2021; Özbudun, 2014; Somer, 2019; Tepe & Alemdaroğlu, 2021; Bedirhanoglu 2021). Legal mechanisms like judicial restructuring and electoral reforms transformed the formal playing field. Symbolic tools like narratives of “national will,” securitised citizenship, and moral polarisation transformed the discursive and symbolic areas of the political field. Hence, CHP actors needed to operate in a limited autocratic setting, but also needed to create counter-strategies to challenge the discursive framework of the AKP. Each element produced strategic dilemmas for the CHP (Somer, 2019). Participation versus boycott, confrontation versus conciliation, identity anchoring versus broad inclusion, centralisation versus organisational renewal—none of these choices had unambiguously “democratic” or “authoritarian” effects. The structure of the autocratic game makes every path double-edged.

As the AKP evolved, learning from court defeats, protest cycles, and international scrutiny, so too did the constraints and opportunities faced by the CHP. A key finding of this dissertation, implicit in Articles 1 and 3, is that opposition players and incumbents are locked in a dynamic strategic action field: Each side's moves alter the other's horizons of possibility. This relational perspective draws conceptually on Heibach and Transfeld's (2018) account of opposition dynamism under authoritarian pressure (See Chapter 3). The CHP faced choices within this iterative dance: rigidity in 2007; constrained flexibility options in 2010; inclusivity in 2019 that prompted nationalist hardening by the regime in 2023; coalition formation that invited divide-and-rule tactics. This dynamic resembles what Bunce and Wolchik (2010) analysed in post-communist regimes: successful oppositions do not only exploit openings but strategically create them. Similarly, the Turkish case demonstrates that incumbent and opposition actors together engage in a feedback loop where adaptation on one side triggers counter-adaptation on the other.

Below, I examine how the CHP's oppositional style transformed in relation to the broader trajectory of autocratisation in the country by tracing key shifts across three political phases.

### 8.2.1 Phase 1 (2007–2010): Rigid Opposition and Authoritarian Learning

Article 1 characterises the period between 2007 and 2010 as the apex of rigid opposition. (See Chapter 4 for a historical background of the CHP, its leadership, and positioning from 1923 to 2023.)

During the early years of AKP rule (2002–2007), the CHP consolidated its position as the main opposition party while simultaneously developing its own repertoire of strategies in response to the AKP. Under the leadership of Deniz Baykal, and reflecting the history of the party, the CHP fixed its identity as the “guardian of the secular republic”, making politics on the secularism axis and seeking leverage through extra-parliamentary veto players like courts, the military, the bureaucracy, and the presidency rather than through broad societal coalitions (Ciddi & Esen, 2014; Turan, 2006). This nationalist, security-framed stance alienated liberals, Kurds, and EU reformists, but resonated with secular middle-class constituencies (Bora, 2017; Uysal, 2011). Instead of building cross-party or societal coalitions, the CHP under Baykal anchored its strategy in alliances with intra-state veto actors like the judiciary, bureaucracy, and the military. This state-centred alignment both reflected and reinforced its discursive rigidity, feeding the AKP's “people versus elite guardians” frame. At the time, the extent of autocratisation and the

institutional configuration of elections under the parliamentary system did not generate sufficient incentives for parties to pursue alliance formation. Elite interviews with former members of the AKP also confirmed that the CHP's narratives and rigid opposition helped consolidate the AKP's own identity and anti-establishment narrative (See Articles for quotations).

That strategic anchoring translated into discursive closure, as elaborated in Articles 1 and 2. The CHP's 2007 election campaign centred prominently on the narrative that voters had a responsibility to "vote and protect the Republic" from the AKP. This slogan, from one of the most notable advertisements of that year, emerged amidst a highly polarised environment characterised by secular-religious tensions. *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, which is ideologically close to the CHP, released influential ads that explicitly targeted the AKP, asking citizens, "Are you aware of the threat?" and urging them to "Protect the Republic." These advertisements visually linked the AKP with Islamist symbolism, such as women wearing headscarves and fonts reminiscent of Arabic script, thereby heightening secular voters' fears of a potential Islamist transformation of the state. The CHP actively embraced this discourse. The 2007 electoral campaign revolved around such alarmist slogans. The same lexicon dominated the Republic Protests: "Turkey is secular and will remain secular," "We don't want an imam as president," "The way to Çankaya is closed for sharia." The pro-secular Republic Protests in 2007 reinforced the CHP's identity as the "true guardian of the Republic" against what it depicted as threats posed by the AKP and its supporters. In focus groups, AKP supporters and even some CHP supporters recalled this rhetoric as fear-mongering and discriminatory, "like a horror film." The effect was to confirm to conservative voters that they were being cast out of the Republic (See Article 2 for relevant quotations).

Another crucial event of that period was the 2007 presidential crisis. This became an institutional theatre where strategic rigidity and exclusionary discourse fused. The CHP used legal and institutional means to impede the election of the AKP's presidential candidate Abdullah Gül (BBC Türkçe, 2019), arguing that his Islamist background threatened the secular nature of the republic. This strategy combined procedural obstruction with a rhetoric that aligned the party with secular-nationalist protests and the military's interventionist e-memorandum (Bila, 2020). While meant to defend republican principles, it reinforced the image of the CHP as a guardian of the old order. The AKP capitalised on this moment by calling early elections and framing itself as the democratic alternative to unelected elites such as the military and the judiciary, a pattern that later became central to its populist legitimisation. What began as the CHP's reliance on veto institutions ended up teaching the AKP to legitimise change through plebiscitary majoritarianism. (See Article 1 for details and quotes from interviews.)

The 2008 AKP closure case deepened the pattern. Although CHP leader Baykal said he opposed shutting the party down, he endorsed the Court's reasoning, keeping the AKP tethered to the "irtica" (Islamist reactionism) frame and signalling comfort with juridical tutelage. For AKP elites and supporters, this confirmed a narrative of secularist elites trying to unseat an elected government, boosting Erdoğan's popularity and hardening the party's defensive, and later authoritarian, posture. Interviews and focus groups (see Article 1 and Article 2) explained how conservative voters crystallised this narrative in this period. Over time, such rigid and institution-bound opposition enabled the AKP to depict itself as the authentic representative of popular sovereignty by using plebiscitary populism and portraying the CHP as obstructing democratic choice. As explained in Chapter 5, the CHP's rigid opposition played directly into this frame and reinforced Erdoğan's populist narrative that cast the opposition as elite guardians obstructing the national will.

Three mechanisms explain how this posture co-produced autocratisation. The first mechanism is polarisation feedback. By aligning with unelected institutions like the judiciary and the military, the CHP fed the AKP's populist narrative that pitted a morally pure "people" against an elitist, tutelary establishment. Erdoğan utilised the boycott to depict the subsequent early elections and the 2007 constitutional referendum as plebiscites on democracy itself. Moreover, the AKP reframed the CHP's position during the process as an obstruction of the "national will". The second mechanism is institutional workaround learning. Faced with parliamentary deadlock and legal challenges, the AKP learned to circumvent veto players through majoritarian instruments. The routinisation of referendums, analysed in Chapter 5, was not only a constitutional tactic but also a legitimising ritual. Opposition rigidity thus normalised plebiscitary majoritarianism. The third mechanism is the moral delegitimation of the opposition. Focus groups cited in Article 2 show how AKP supporters, and even CHP supporters, perceived the CHP as anti-democratic during this period. Pro-government media amplified the trope of the "CHP mindset" (CHP *zihniyeti*), associating it with elitism and secularist arrogance. These perceptions lasted, reducing the resonance of later inclusive overtures.

### 8.2.2 Phase 2 (2010–2015): Transitional Recalibration, Elite-Driven Flexibility, Organisational Lag

The 2010 leadership handover from Baykal to Kılıçdaroğlu constituted a critical juncture that reopened the party's opportunity structure and legitimated strategic experimentation. Under Kılıçdaroğlu, the party moved quickly to signal a break with rigid opposition and embraced a more inclusive

discourse. The 2011 campaign adopted the slogan “CHP for everyone.” The manifesto foregrounded individual liberties and social justice themes, and the party softened its line on the Kurdish question and the headscarf. According to some interviewees, these shifts were not driven by a grassroots demand for change but by elite decisions made in response to lessons drawn from defeat and to shrinking leverage within the state (see Articles for quotations).

Discursively, the party’s rigid tone mellowed but remained uneven. While inclusive tropes entered the repertoire, Kılıçdaroğlu also personalised contention by targeting Erdoğan himself, a move that aggravated AKP supporters’ internal cohesion through a shared anti-CHP sentiment and reproduced a polarising dynamic (See also Selçuk et al., 2019). In other words, discursive flexibility coexisted with residues of confrontational framing, revealing how difficult it was to diffuse a new communication style through a centralised, factional organisation.

Alliances also reflected this elite-led but narratively thin recalibration (Article 3). As AKP control over state institutions tightened in its third term, the CHP began experimenting with cross-party coordination (Somer et al., 2021; Korkmaz, 2022). The most emblematic case was the 2014 joint presidential nomination with the ultra-nationalist MHP. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu’s conservative profile was justified as a pragmatic bid for religious and nationalist voters, yet the choice lacked a story binding the social democratic CHP to a conservative technocrat. Core supporters felt betrayed, conservatives were unconvinced, and the coordination remained transactional and top-down, exposing the perils of flexibility without narrative coherence (Bila, 2020). At the same time, Kılıçdaroğlu broadened the party’s elite cadre by bringing in figures as diverse as neo-nationalist Tuncay Özkan, pro-Kurdish Sezgin Tanrikulu, and conservative Mehmet Bekaroğlu, so that alliance-making also occurred inside the party.

In addition to these strategies, the Gezi Protests (2013) offered a brief window for extra-institutional synergy. The country-wide protests, which Erdoğan read as a civilian threat rather than a tutelary one, pushed the CHP towards a more inclusive discourse. However, the party was unable to translate Gezi’s energy into a sustained opposition narrative. The CHP oscillated between a protest register (“We clap nationally; vote and they shall go”) and a positive, programmatic pitch (“A liveable Turkey”), revealing discursive duality and the absence of a consolidated frame.

By June 2015, the CHP had distanced itself from a rigid opposition style. Nonetheless, adaptability remained predicated on an organisational foundation that was still underdeveloped. The party helped diversify the opposition field with this flexible strategy. The Kurdish HDP crossed the 10%

threshold and entered parliament. For the first time, the AKP lost its majority, yet the CHP's own strategic culture remained tactical, episodic, and susceptible to charges of identity drift. In short, 2010–2015 was a liminal phase: elite-driven recalibration produced new strategic, discursive, and alliance repertoires, but without full internalisation. The groundwork was laid for broader coordination after 2016, yet vulnerabilities such as internal scepticism, narrative gaps, and a habit of transactional rather than programmatic alliance-building were built into the party's evolving flexible opposition.

### 8.2.3 Phase 3 (2016–2023): Consolidating flexibility amidst deepening autocratisation and the Role of the Moderator Party

The failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 and the subsequent state of emergency represented a critical juncture that propelled the CHP along the rigid–flexible continuum (Article 1). The consolidation of the AKP–MHP axis, the criminalisation of Kurdish political actors, and the introduction of the 50 + 1 presidential threshold (Başkan et al., 2021) in the 2017 constitutional referendum simultaneously compelled opposition coordination and eroded the CHP's residual institutional leverage. Article 1 identifies the party's April 2016 decision to support the lifting of parliamentary immunities as the crucial strategic miscalculation, according to many actors interviewed. It was framed by Kılıçdaroğlu as “unconstitutional, but we will vote yes” in order to avert a polarising plebiscite. The move facilitated the incarceration of HDP deputies and, eventually, a CHP parliamentarian. The decision later surfaced in elite interviews as a textbook instance of strategic signalling trumping institutional principle, thereby corroding inter-opposition trust.

According to senior CHP figures interviewed, the realisation that the party could no longer rely on its allies in the judiciary, bureaucracy, and military prompted a decisive turn towards a society-centred strategy, a shift that I interpret as the party's definitive rupture with strategic rigidity (Articles 1 and 2). The 2017 “Justice March,” launched in response to the imprisonment of CHP deputy Enis Berberoğlu, constituted the first full enactment of this more flexible repertoire. Spanning approximately 450 km under a state of emergency, stripped of partisan insignia, and articulated through the tripartite slogan “rights, law, justice,” the march was sufficiently capacious to draw participants ranging from headscarved women to prominent HDP representatives. Focus-group evidence analysed in Articles 1 and 2 characterises the Justice March as inclusive and democratising, sharply contrasting it with the exclusionary “Republic Protests” of 2007. Strategically, the march also inaugurated new habits of cooperation reflected in alliance - building, which Kılıçdaroğlu later linked directly to the emergence of the “Table of Six” (Erkin, 2023).

The institutional logic of the hyper-presidential system locked this flexibility in. Article 3 shows how the 2017 referendum and the new electoral law transformed alliances from optional to necessary. The *Nation Alliance* of 2018 (CHP, İYİ, Felicity, Democrat) was the first attempt to operationalise this insight. Yet each party fielded its own presidential candidate, a good example of a tenuous alliance model fragmenting the anti-Erdoğan vote. Erdoğan won in the first round and his People's Alliance kept the parliamentary majority. This tenuous alliance exposed the limits of arithmetic without narrative or a single figurehead and became, in retrospective interviews, a core lesson for the 2023 elections.

The 2019 municipal elections marked the crystallisation of the CHP's flexible repertoire, as its discursive and coalition strategies were woven into a coherent programme and turned into a strong alliance. Article 2 analyses the party's "Radical Love" campaign (Başsoy, 2020; Wuthrich & Ingleby, 2020; Demiralp & Balta, 2021), which redirected affect from anger to empathy and from existential antagonism to a language of competence and dignity. In my conceptualisation, it was an example of moving from exclusionary to inclusive discourse. Slogans such as "Spring will arrive at the end of March" and, after the contested rerun in İstanbul, "Everything will be very great" injected hope into an atmosphere of anxiety (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Focus-group respondents, including some AKP supporters, described these messages as unifying and depolarising. In addition, alliance formation displayed a parallel consolidation: joint CHP-İYİ candidacies in metropolitan centres were complemented by tacit HDP support in western provinces. The electoral payoff was considerable, most notably the capture of İstanbul and Ankara, yet Article 3 underscores an important caveat: the CHP's acquiescence to the İstanbul election rerun, despite the absence of a credible legal rationale, effectively converged with the AKP's institutional tactic of reversing unfavourable results, thereby reinforcing the regime's procedural façade, even as it delivered an opposition victory.

After 2019, success and learning from failure bred both institutionalisation of strategies and new constraints for the opposition. From 2021 to 2023, the CHP assumed the role of a moderator party, the actor that absorbs the costs of coordination in order to hold a strong alliance with ideologically disparate partners together (CHP, İYİ, DEVA, Future, Felicity, Democrat). Interviews cited in Article 3 point to Kılıçdaroğlu's personal style and earlier gestures (e.g., transferring 15 MPs to İYİ) as sustaining the bloc. The parties jointly drafted a transition roadmap towards a strengthened parliamentary system, hailed by insiders as unprecedented. Yet the exclusion of the HDP left coordination with Kurdish actors tacit and thus exploitable by regime narratives that target and marginalise Kurds. Organisationally, elite bargains substituted for grassroots integration: few joint rallies, limited shared infrastructure, and technocratic messaging diluted emotive appeal. Moreover,

candidate selection became the tip of the iceberg. İYİ Party leader Meral Akşener briefly left and then returned to the alliance. The alliance's late endorsement of Kılıçdaroğlu as presidential candidate over popular figures like Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş also signalled fragility within a strong coalition.

Before the 2023 elections, the party tried to sustain inclusivity through *helalleşme*—a call for moral-political reconciliation with historically excluded groups, such as conservatives and Islamists—and outreach to Kurdish constituencies. Article 1 discusses how earlier decisions, notably the CHP's parliamentary support for lifting immunities for MPs in 2016, which enabled the prosecution of Kurdish representatives, and its muted reaction to the government's replacement of elected Kurdish mayors with trustees, continued to undermine the credibility of its inclusive discourse. These developments deepened perceptions among Kurdish voters that the CHP's commitment to democratic norms was selective. The rigid–flexible axis here reveals its tension: flexibility broadened reach but blurred identity, inviting accusations of drift from both the base and rivals.

The 2023 electoral setback crystallised the paradox theorised in Article 3. The same combination of strategic flexibility and routinised coordination that had defeated the authoritarian bloc in the 2019 local elections proved insufficient once it slid into over-moderation, a very cautious, consensus-seeking stance that diluted ideological distinctiveness at the national level. Lacking a clear alternative message and broader organisational reach, the CHP-led alliance lost momentum and struggled to mobilise supporters. As the moderator party of the broad opposition alliance, the CHP shouldered a disproportionate share of public blame, while its smaller partners either safeguarded their own brands or quietly defected. Simultaneously, the ruling coalition recalibrated, deploying state-aligned media, judicial instruments, and nationalist affect to re-legitimise its authority despite acute economic problems in the country. Although the empirical scope of this dissertation ends prior to a full analysis of the 2023 cycle, the episode offers a fertile agenda for future research on the limits of moderation and the adaptive resilience of competitive authoritarian regimes.

In sum, along the rigid–flexible axis, this period marks both the consolidation and the limits of flexibility. The three articles jointly underscore a broader thesis claim: the opposition is not a passive victim of autocratisation, nor an antidote to it. Rather, its strategic, discursive, and alliance choices dynamically interact with regime responses and can, at times, reinforce the authoritarian trajectory they seek to resist. Strategically, the CHP's shift from rigid opposition to flexible opposition, discursively from exclusionary to inclusive discourse, and in alliances from tenuous alliances to strong alliances

produced historic municipal victories and a credible national front, but also generated costs: identity dilution, narrative thinness, organisational lag, and short-term planning that the regime exploited to reassert hegemony. Thus, the opposition's role in autocratisation is constitutive and contingent—its moves open cracks, yet simultaneously trigger counter-moves, illustrating that democratisation and autocratisation are co-produced processes rather than binaries in which only incumbents act.

## 9 Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

This dissertation set out to illuminate how Turkey’s founding party, the CHP, has over two decades both resisted and, at key junctures, enabled the country’s slide into competitive authoritarianism. By tracing the party’s behaviour across three analytically interlocking axes—strategy, discourse, and opposition coordination—the thesis demonstrates that opposition agency under hybrid rule is processual and relational, rather than a binary of resistance versus collaboration. The resulting framework of rigid–flexible strategy, exclusionary–inclusive discourse, and tenuous–strong alliances, inductively derived from the Turkish case, offers a transferable lens for analysing opposition dynamics elsewhere, challenging dichotomous perspectives that portray opposition actors either as heroic agents of democratisation or as passive, reactive subjects.

Anchoring each axis in one article strengthened the model’s internal coherence: Article 1 conceptualises strategic rigidity and flexibility; Article 2 unpacks the discursive turn from polarising secular nationalism to inclusive discourse; and Article 3 analyses the elite motivations behind alliance formation and describes the moderator-party function that underpinned the Nation Alliance.

The research began in the period of the opposition’s demoralising defeat in the 2018 national elections and ended when the opposition failed to unseat President Erdoğan in 2023. This was a temporally bounded yet politically turbulent window within which observers expected structural openings—such as economic malaise, elite splits, and electoral volatility—to translate into regime change. Rather than evaluating the opposition through a simple metric of victory or defeat, the study implemented a longitudinal, mechanism-centred account that could register how opposition choices reverberated inside a deepening authoritarian playfield. Methodologically, it comprised twenty elite interviews, focus-group discussions, archival analysis, and participant observation.

Empirically, the thesis narrates three phases. Between 2007 and 2010, the CHP adopted a rigid, guardianist repertoire that framed politics through secularist red lines and relied on intra-state veto players, reinforcing the AKP’s “people-versus-elite” polarisation script. From 2010 to 2015,

incremental learning under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu pushed the party towards a society-centred stance with a flexible opposition strategy. The third phase, 2016–2023, brought together inclusive rhetoric and strong alliances, delivering the electoral breakthrough of 2019, yet simultaneously sowing the seeds of later vulnerability as alliance moderation diluted organisational identity, generated narrative thinness, and bred coordination fatigue. By the 2023 elections, these accumulated costs intersected with an adaptive authoritarian incumbent who wielded legal engineering, media dominance, and material patronage to blunt the opposition’s momentum, underscoring that democratisation and autocratisation evolve through reciprocal feedback rather than unilateral imposition.

A central theoretical contribution lies in foregrounding elite decision-making as the hinge between structural constraints and strategic outcomes. The April 2016 vote to lift parliamentary immunities, framed by party leaders as a pragmatic concession, facilitated the incarceration of Kurdish deputies and corroded trust precisely with the actor whose tacit support would later prove pivotal in metropolitan elections. Selective silences on the Kurdish question, adopted to preserve nationalist allies, opened a void that Kurdish constituencies interpreted as evidence of precarious commitment and illustrated how discursive inclusivity can mask, but not resolve, deep cleavages. These episodes reveal that timing, sequencing, and narrative coherence condition whether structural openings, such as economic crises, elite splits, or institutional rules, translate into regime change, complicating transition paradigms that prioritise macro-structural variables over micro-strategic calculus.

A comparative perspective accentuates these insights. Patterns diagnosed here—coordination asymmetries, narrative thinness, and identity dilution—echo the fate of Hungary’s anti-Orbán coalition in 2022 and Russia’s regional oppositions, where local successes often entangled actors in patronage bargains that domesticated dissent. Conversely, Malaysia’s Pakatan Harapan illustrates that broad alliances can succeed when undergirded by organisational depth and a unifying meta-narrative. The Turkish case, therefore, neither stands alone nor merely replicates global scripts. Rather, it clarifies the mechanisms through which opposition breadth becomes both a resource and a liability in competitive authoritarian contexts.

However, the findings of this thesis need to be tested and applied across different cases in order to theorise their implications for the larger field. 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 depoliticisation 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 in that case deserves further research.

To conclude, this thesis underscores three claims. First, ambivalence is structural. Hybrid regimes are configured to render opposition choices double-edged; each path risks legitimising what it resists or marginalising what it defends. Second, agency matters, but it is relational. The CHP's shifts arose from leadership decisions, organisational contestation, and strategic learning, yet always in relation to an adaptive incumbent and evolving societal perceptions. Third, democratisation requires reflexive opposition. Strategic flexibility gains traction when coupled with organisational anchoring; inclusive discourse is most durable when tethered to identity; coordination is most effective when both functional and principled; participation retains democratic value when balanced against the risk of legitimising authoritarian rule. Absent such reflexivity, opposition can drift towards the role of a loyal opposition within competitive autocracy.

These are not prescriptive levers but analytical dimensions along which outcomes vary. The Turkish case suggests that temporary alignments favourable to democratic contention are achievable yet fragile, because successful innovations tend to invite calibrated counter-adaptations. What emerges, therefore, is not a stable equilibrium but a cycle of mutual adjustment whose direction depends on how actors manage these tensions over time.

## Annex A: Major Political Alliances in Turkey (2002-2023)

Period	Government Bloc	Opposition Bloc(s) and Strategies	Notes
2002–2007	AKP (single-party government)	No formal alliances	Fragmented opposition; no joint candidates or coalitions
2007	AKP	CHP–MHP informal alignment during presidential crisis	Joint local candidates in some provinces (e.g., Elazığ, Gümüşhane)
2011	AKP	CHP, MHP, BDP (ran separately)	BDP entered with independents; AKP began informal cooperation with Kurdish actors (2012–15)
2014 (Local)	AKP	CHP–MHP informal collaboration in key cities	Mansur Yavaş (ex-MHP) nominated by CHP in Ankara
2014 (Pres.)	AKP (Erdoğan)	CHP–MHP–SP–BBP joint candidate: İhsanoğlu; HDP: Demirtaş	First formal joint opposition candidacy across ideological lines
2015 (June)	AKP (lost majority)	No coalition formed among CHP–MHP–HDP	HDP passed threshold; fragmented opposition failed to govern
2015 (Nov.)	AKP (regained majority)	No alliances	Increased polarisation and securitization

2017 (Ref.)	AKP–MHP (de facto alliance)	Informal “No” bloc: CHP, HDP, SP, left parties	Foundations of the People’s Alliance
2018	People’s Alliance: AKP + MHP + BBP + HÜDA PAR (support)	Nation Alliance: CHP + İYİ + SP + Democrat Party	Legal reform institutionalised alliances; DEVA/GP not yet founded
2019 (Local)	People’s Alliance	Nation Alliance; informal HDP support (no candidates in major cities)	Opposition won Istanbul and Ankara with strategic coordination
2023	People’s Alliance: AKP + MHP + BBP + YRP + HÜDA PAR	Nation Alliance: CHP + İYİ + DEVA + GP + SP + DP Labour & Freedom Alliance: HDP + TİP + others	Kılıçdaroğlu as joint candidate of Nation Alliance; HDP supported him outside formal bloc

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