

DISCUSSION PAPER

What Are the Prospects of Far-Right Nationalist Parties in Türkiye?

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Introduction

The Syrian war was undoubtedly one of the greatest tragedies of the 21st century. It was also a very important test for Türkiye. According to official figures, Türkiye hosts more than three and a half million Syrian refugees (UNHCR). Countless NGOs stood in solidarity with migrants all over Türkiye. However, being the recipient of such an influx in a short period of time has also created societal friction. One can see similar reactions globally and the tensions created by the flux of immigrants to Türkiye are not peculiar in this regard.

For instance, if one looks at Turkish social media and checks the discourse of the newly established *Zafer Party* (Victory Party / VP), one can say there

is a new far-right movement in Türkiye, which pursues an anti-immigrant discourse and policy like no other. However, it would be incomplete to depict this development only as a reaction to the influx of migrants that Türkiye faced after the Syrian war.

This discussion paper analyses VP's origins and status. It also delves on debates on nationalism and Turkish identity, which have been omnipresent in Turkish politics since the republic's founding. This discussion is paramount to examine the position and expected trajectory of nationalism(s) in Turkish democracy. The VP, founded under the leadership of Ümit Özdağ, cannot be understood independently of these debates.



Syrian families, who have been forced to displace due to the ongoing attacks carried out by the Assad regime and Russia, are seen on their way to safer zones with their belongings at Atme camp in Idlib, Syria, on January 19, 2020. Over the last three days, around 27000 civilians have fled their homes, falling inside the Idlib de-escalation zone in Syria due to attacks by the regime and its allies. (Ibrahim Dervis - Anadolu Agency)

Modern Nationalism in Türkiye

When the Ottoman Empire started to disintegrate, the most important problem was how to define the new citizenship in the transition to the modern nation-state. The empire tried to build modern citizenship around three ideologies respectively; Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism. However, the experiment of Ottomanism lost its sustainability with the nationalist revolts and the loss of the lands in the Balkans, where non-Muslims densely populated the Ottoman Empire. The second attempt was to develop a definition of citizenship inclusive of the Muslim elements of the empire. This project was not entirely successful either. On the other hand, although Islamism lost its popularity with the loss of Arab lands, it remained an ideological ground needed during the transition to the new republic. The new Turkish Republic was built on Turkish citizenship. However, at this point, Turkishness became synonymous with Islam in official ideology. In the Treaty of Lausanne (1922), in which the establishment of the Turkish Republic as an independent nation-state was proclaimed, the main element defined the citizens as Muslims and the minorities as non-Muslims. In 1924 (TC Anayasa Mahkemesi, 1924) and the following constitutions, the nation was defined as Turkish. Moreover, nationalism became one of Atatürk's six principles in the official dogma.

This situation had two consequences. Firstly, this state formation became one of the decisive discussion points for Turkish politics. How to define the nation and nationalism determined political differences. Secondly, almost all mainstream political parties became ideologically linked to nationalism.

In this regard, for example, all three of the oldest political movements, the AK Party, MHP and CHP, can be related to nationalism in one way or another. As the founding party of the republic, the CHP defines itself as the bearer of the official ideology. Creating a nation for the new nation-state is also integral to the official ideology. To this end, Atatürk founded the CHP. Interestingly, one of the arrows on the CHP emblem symbolises nationalism. Another important political movement, The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), founded in 1969 by Alparslan Türkeş, sees itself as the representative of Turkish nationalists.

Thirdly, an important part of the founding members of the AK Party came into politics as part of the National Vision (Milli Görüş), founded by Necmettin Erbakan. Among the three political movements listed, this movement is the most distant from Turkish nationalism. This gap is related to the definition of the nation based on Islam rather than Turkishness. For example, while the CHP's vision for a nation is Westernised, the national vision highlights the religious roots of the Anatolian people.

In other words, most mainstream political structures in Türkiye are somehow related to nationalism, and existing differences are connected to how these parties interpret nationalism in addition to their views on economic and social questions. When we look at the five parties that received the most votes in the parliamentary elections, the dominance of these political movements is visible; AK Party 35,63%, CHP 25,35 %, MHP 10,08, İYİ Party (separated from MHP in 2017) 9,69, YSP (HDP) 8,83. Almost 90% of the votes went to these parties.

However, each of these parties uphold substantially different conceptions of nation and nationalism. One of the defining issues is how to define the nation.

The Emergence of the Nationalist Movement on the Political Stage / 1970s

After the one-party rule of 1923-45 under the CHP, two parties became active between 1950-60 until this experiment was interrupted by the 1960 coup. As the conditions of the 1960 coup eased, new parties were incepted, and since then these new parties claim nationalist discourse as part of their dogma.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) was one of them, founded in 1969. Alpaslan Türkeş was the founding leader of the party and is still referred to among Turkish nationalists by the name "Başbuğ", which in ancient Turkish means president and commander. Although other political movements did not generally exclude nationalism, Turkish nationalism was embodied in the MHP. Today, parties that label themselves as nationalists were born out of this movement.

On the one hand, Turkish political life was experiencing the emergence of new political lines, but on the other, the 1970s have gone down in history as a painful period in Turkish political life, including armed clashes between political forces. Clashes between leftist factions and nationalists marked this period. The *ülkü ocakları*¹ (grey wolves) represented the civilian wing of the MHP. However, in the 1970s, they took up arms and engaged in violent actions. *Turanist*² (Pan-Turkish) ideology and anti-communism were their main ideological pillars. However, the 1980 coup d'état stopped the democratic journey while crushing armed groups.



Turkish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Leader Devlet Bahçeli lays flowers on the grave of founder of Nationalist Movement Party Alpaslan Türkeş after performing Eid al-Fitr prayer on April 21, 2023 in Ankara, Türkiye. (Doğukan Keskinliç - Anadolu Agency)

¹ Ülkü ocakları is the youth organization of Turkish Nationalists.

² Turan is the name for a utopia of the big Turkish homeland.

First Faction in the Nationalist Movement

Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu was a prominent figure in the nationalist movement, having served as the president of the *ülkü ocakları*. However, in 1992, he left the MÇP³ with five friends. In 1993, they founded the BBP (Grand Unity Party). The party's literature emphasised the need for the military to leave power to a civilian authority. The documents highlighted the bad memories of the 1970s, underlining that the state should serve the nation (Bora, 2021), not the other way around. This thinking signaled an evolution within the nationalist discourse that initially prioritized the integrity and survival of the state. At the same time, the new thinking criticized some of the actions of the nationalist movement, which used political violence against its opponents.

The party's principles were rooted in Turkic-Islamist ideology, and this is where it differed from mainstream nationalism. The grey wolf symbol, associated with nationalism referring to pre-Islamic Turkish mythology, was removed from this party's insignia. The combination of religious symbolism and nationalism diluted its focus on ethnicity and emphasis on the state. Throughout the 1990s, the BBP and Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu also showed solidarity with Erbakan in the face of the crackdown on Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party by the rigidly secular security apparatus.

The Ak Party Era

28 February 1997 was an important turning point in Türkiye's recent history. The military institution, which considered itself as the protector of the authoritarian secular state, forced the Erbakan government to resign using the National Security Decrees. In the same years, the pressure on religious people also increased. There were dismissals from state institutions and a harsh ban on headscarves in schools. These strict secularist practices were one of the main measures implemented by the state at that time. However, four years later, the AK Party was founded under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç, who came from the national vision and managed to win the 2002 general elections.

Meanwhile, to be able to target a wider audience, the Ak Party severed its ideological ties with the national vision and morphed into a conservative democrat party, filling a centrist position in the political spectrum. This policy was well-received by the public. Thus, the Ak Party managed to preserve power in the 2007 elections with 46% of the vote. However, during this time, the Ak Party faced an increased resistance from both the bureaucracy and civilian structures defending strict secularism. The presidential election crisis in 2007 and the e-memorandum published on the Army's General

Staff website on 27 April were the clearest examples of the attempt by the military establishment to return things back to square one. The Ak Party mobilised successfully many segments of civil society who were displeased with the military interference in the political spectrum. On the other hand, the Ak Party detractors organised a series of rallies against the Ak Party-led government, dubbed 'rallies of the republic'.

Ulusalcılık

One of the recurrent criticisms of the Ak Party government is that they had a hidden agenda and conspired to bring the country under Islamic theocratic rule. Another source of antagonism was the desire of certain quarters to preserve the militarist and nationalist identity of the state at all costs. In 2005, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in a speech in Diyarbakır, "The Kurdish question is also my problem" (BBC Turkish, 2005). It was the first time that the head of the government had acknowledged the problem in this manner. The Ak Party's discourse signalled that the state would moderate its approach towards secularism and nationalism. Meanwhile, the Ak Party also initiated full membership negotiations with the EU in 2004. At the 'rallies of the republic', the alleged creeping sharia and Erdoğan's moderate remarks on the Kurdish

³ After the 1980 coup, all political parties were banned, and MÇP was the party that was founded by MHP cadres under the leadership of Alparslan Türkeş.

question were highlighted and criticized. At this point, new ideological crystallization emerged: "Ulusalçılık".

Since the early 1970s, ulusalçılık, derived from the word "ulus" (nation) pure-Turkish equivalent of the word *millet*, began to be used in intellectual circles about a new and more moderate secular nationalism (Bora, 2021). However, it became a social movement during the AK Party's rule. There was also a transformation in its initial academic definition. In the mid-2000s, the rhetoric of ulusalçılık considered the AK Party as a Sharia, pro-Kurdish, pro-EU party that threatened the country's integrity. With this rhetoric, ulusalçılık became visible as a social movement and peaked

in the 'rallies of the republic' of 2007. The important point is that some small political groups, magazines, and newspapers of the day perpetuated this rhetoric. However, the movement influenced the discourse of two major opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, albeit the latter adopted a more moderate tones. According to Bora, ulusalçılık became a centre of attraction for the secular privileged middle classes who were worried they would lose their elite status with the rise of the Ak Party. In the following years, this trend declined as the Ak Party increased its vote share and dominance in the bureaucracy, especially in the military.

Second Faction: İYİP

In the 2015 November elections, with the decline in MHP votes, prominent figures in the party, such as Meral Akşener and Ümit Özdağ, called for an extraordinary general assembly. The following year was a year of infighting within the party, and this congress could not be held. Leading figures of the internal opposition were expelled from the MHP. In the 2017 referendum, the same names campaigned for a no vote against the MHP's yes decision. During this process, the ruling Ak Party and the MHP became politically closer to each other. The intra-party debates and opposition to the rapprochement with the Ak Party resulted in the Good Party (İYİP) splitting from the MHP at the end of 2017.

Meral Akşener, the founding leader of the İYİP, was one of the active members of the *ülkü ocakları* during her youth. She started active politics in 1994 in the centre-right party DYP. In 2001, she was briefly involved in the founding of the AK Party and then switched to the MHP and continued her political career in the nationalist movement. The İYİP, which she founded in 2017, gave the image of a party close to the centre-right, despite the presence of many names from the nationalist movement. It adopted a position between a centre-right party that advocates Western, neoliberal economic policies and a party that emphasises nationalist discourses and the unitary state and adopts a tough stance on migrants.



İYİ Party (İYİ) Leader Meral Akşener. (Evrım Aydın - Anadolu Agency)

Ümit Özdağ and Emergence of Victory Party (VP)

Ümit Özdağ was one of the few prominent figures in establishing İYİP but soon emerged as a dissident voice within the party. First, he was expelled from the party in November 2020 (Sayın, 2020). Two months later, he returned with a court decision. In March 2021, he resigned from the party with the following words;

"It is not possible for me to be in the same party with those who sit at the same table with the HDP, those who do not oppose the covert invasion of Türkiye with Syrian refugees, those who deceive Atatürkists and Turkish nationalists. I resign from the Good Party" (Özden, 2021).

Ümit Özdağ, who today is notoriously anti-immigrant, was ironically born in Japan in 1961. His father, Muzaffer Özdağ, was a member of the 38-member National Unity Committee (MBK) that ruled Türkiye after the 1960 coup. Colonel Alpaslan Türkeş, the founder of the nationalist movement, was among these 38 people. Within the MBK, 14 officers, including Türkeş and Özdağ, argued that civilian rule should be discarded

and that the sociocultural life of the country should be under totalitarian military control (Zurcher, 2004). This divergence resulted in the exile of these officers, known as the 14s, to various parts of the world. Ümit Özdağ was born in Japan as the son of the exiled Muzaffer Özdağ.

Özdağ has been involved in the nationalist movement since his youth. However, he continued his career as a nationalist academic until 2006. He specialised on Asian affairs, the Turkic world and security policies. In 2006, he announced his candidacy against MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli for the party presidency. This process resulted in his expulsion from the party. In 2011, he re-entered again the MHP party, becoming an MP. In 2017, he was among the founders of the İYİ Party.

Throughout his political career, he has been known for his harsh media rhetoric. Finally, with the establishment of the VP, his rhetoric became even harsher, and the debates he initiated and the polemics he engaged in found a place in both traditional media and social media.

VP's Political Discourse

Since the VP was founded in August 2021, its main emphasis has been repatriating migrants to Syria. According to the news dated 06 May 2022, 777 of the 1677 tweets that Ümit Özdağ tweeted in a year are about migrants (Yeni Şafak, 2022). Özdağ has also been criticised for conducting politics solely on anti-immigrant sentiments. While announcing his election manifestos, he responded to these criticisms, stating:

"The Anatolian fortress project prepared by the Victory Party to send back 13 millions of Erdoğan's refugees is the biggest and fastest repatriation operation in human history [...] Türkiye will be freed from its biggest economic, social, cultural, and geopolitical burden. Every vote for the Victory Party will let go Erdoğan's refugees." (Ümit Özdağ Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı [YouTube Channel], 08 April 2023)

Özdağ's figures related to refugees have no relation with the official figures. They fluctuate with no reason and constantly change. In January 2022, he said eight million migrants were in Türkiye (Sputnik Türkiye, 2022). However, this number was updated seven months later as 13 million (Independent Türkçe, 2022). It is clear that Özdağ is trying to create a climate of fear over migrants. From time to time, this policy has also led him to become a party that spreads misinformation and creates tensions (Diken, 2023).

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that Türkiye hosts the highest number of migrants in the world. In this respect, Ümit Özdağ's politics directly targeting refugees had an impact in the party's inception. However, their vote in the 14 May parliamentary elections was limited to 2.23%.

On the other hand, Özdağ's politics can be characterised by anti-immigrant sentiments, but there are also other important emphases between the lines. Türkiye's unitary structure and secularism are foremost among them. He stated:

"Victory Party is not just a party for asylum seekers to leave. Victory Party is the guarantee of the national unitary secular Republic of Türkiye." (Ümit Özdağ Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı [YouTube Channel], 08 April 2023)

In this context, he also points to a statist and strict secularist reflex among nationalist movements and political movements in Türkiye. In this regard, the differences between the 1921 and 1924 constitutions⁴ also find a place in Özdağ's politics. He highlights the character of the 1924 constitution with its emphasis on Turkishness and centralised government (Gazete Duvar, 2023).

Another prominent point in Özdağ's discourse is Atatürkism. He defines his nationalism as Atatürk's

nationalism. He calls his voters Atatürkist voters. He often reads today's politics with analogies of the Turkish War of Independence. In these respects, it also shares similarities with the *ulusalcılık* movement that rose during the first period of the Ak Party government. In this context, he adopts a similar stance on the purges within the military, a popular point of criticism among nationalists of that period. For example, he criticises IYIP leader Meral Akşener for dismissing from the party those who were discharged from the military at the time and later entered politics in the IYIP (Ümit Özdağ [Twitter account], 05 May 2023).

In other words, the Victory Party appeals to the *ulusalcılık* trend not only with its secular nationalism and Kemalist discourse but also with the way it reads the political developments of the early 2000s. In this respect, it is important to remember that the CHP, which has the largest mass representation of *ulusalcılık*, has developed more moderate secularist discourses in recent years. In addition to its anti-immigrant identity, the Victory Party also addresses the vacuum that has emerged at this point.

VP's Foreign Policy

The VP's foreign policy concept reflects *ulusalcılık*. Before entering politics, Ümit Özdağ was the president of ASAM (Eurasian Center for Strategic Studies). His political discourse emphasises the Turkic world and Central Asia. This discourse aligns with the Turanist (pan-Türkist) approach of the nationalist movement. However, on the other hand, "the West" is used in Özdağ's discourse primarily together with imperialism. In this respect, it also evokes the anti-US attitude of nationalism. For example, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the cause of the war was presented as both NATO's efforts to expand and Russia's dreams of empire (Zafer Partisi [YouTube Channel], 24 Feb 2022). Furthermore, the presidential candidate of the VP, Sinan Oğan, gave a moderate assessment of China's treatment of the Uyghurs, saying that he would protect

the rights of his compatriots but that the Uyghur Turks were not under such great persecution (Babala TV [YouTube Channel], 24 Apr 2023).

Given its critical attitude towards the West and its strong emphasis on sovereignty and borders on the migration issue, the VP has strong similarities with far-right parties operating internationally.

⁴ The first two constitutions of Atatürk's Türkiye, the 1921 and 1924 constitutions, contain two different perspectives in this respect. Today, these constitutions are still reference points for different political positions. While the 1921 constitution has a decentralised character, the 24th constitution dominates the understanding of a centralised unitary state. In this regard, the official ideology of Türkiye has also developed within the framework of the unitary understanding of the 1924 constitution. The distinction between the 1921 and 24 constitutions is particularly evident in the VP leader Ümit Özdağ's discourse. This discourse essentially criticises the democratisation processes Türkiye experienced in the 2000s

Party Name	Foundation year	Leader	Position
MHP (Nationalist Movement Party)	1969	Alpaslan Türkeş (incumbent Devlet Bahçeli)	Mainstream nationalism
BBP (Grand Unity Party)	1993	Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu (incumbent Mustafa Destici)	Nationalism and Islamism
IYIP (Good Party)	2017	Meral Akşener	Nationalism, neoliberalism, centre-right
VP (Victory Party)	2021	Ümit Özdağ	Nationalism, Secularism, Atatürkism

Discussion

VP's Evaluation of the Past

In Türkiye, nationalism has infused almost all mainstream political parties. However, Türkiye's transformation, especially after 2002, has had its social reactions. The shift towards more moderate secularism and the softening of harsh interpretations of nationalism, which brought about some changes in the approach to the Kurdish question, generated a backlash. Some opposition groups emphasised the core values of the republic and secular state and Turkish sovereignty. Ak Party's transformation of the political

field elicited a strong reaction from the establishment and its elites. *Ulusalcılık* became the name of an object that crystallised in this respect and was embraced by these groups. Today, it can be said that the VP is one of the strongest representatives of this ideology. This movement, which made some impact in Turkish public sphere, has now converted into a boutique party. Meanwhile, it is important to note that *ulusalcılık* and traditional nationalism were combined under one party.

VP's Vision for the Future

Among the points that need to be emphasised is the contrast between the Islamist line of the BBP, which was the first to leave the mainstream of the nationalist movement and the secular line of the VP. This contrast creates a friction in terms of nationalist values they express as well as the solutions they advance to practical issues. A good example is VP presidential candidate Oğan's encounter with a BBP youth on a YouTube program. The question asked was:

"We know that you have national and moral values. We also thought that you would not walk with someone

who does not share these values, I cannot conceive that someone I thought of as a presidential candidate [...] can ask little refugee girls: have you ever been harassed or are you afraid of being harassed." (ibid.).

Oğan answered this question by reducing the issue to the difference in style between him and Özdağ. However, the encounter between the BBP youth and the candidate of the VP reveals an important difference. The BBP combines nationalism with an Islamic touch, whereas VP does not.

Within Türkiye and its neighbouring geography, Arabs and Kurds are the largest ethnic identities. Most of Türkiye's population shares a common Muslim identity with them. As mentioned above, the Treaty of Lausanne defines Turkish citizenship based on Islam. At this point, it is no coincidence that as nationalist movements become more secularised, they adhere to more rigid forms of nationalism. Conversely, parties that include an Islamic discourse in their politics have a more moderate stance on the issue of migrants. In this respect, there is a parallel between VP's strict secularist discourse of and its racist anti-migrant policy.

Zübeyir Nişancı (2023) notes in the conclusion of his research on *Belief and Religiosity in Türkiye* that it would not be correct to conclude that Türkiye has become secularised based on this research alone, but he also notes that young people show more interest in secular ideologies. Moreover, there seems to be a strengthening trend in far-right movements, especially in Europe. The emergence of the VP in Türkiye should not be read independently of these developments. In this context, the voting rate of the VP may give hope that such movements do not have the upper hand in the Turkish public sphere, but it is necessary to highlight that the new secularised nationalist movements may adopt more racist rhetoric and practices moving forward.

In this context, it would be meaningful to look at the vote rates of nationalist parties in the 2023 parliamentary election to see the trend in Türkiye. In this election, MHP, İYİP, BBP and VP received 23% of the votes in total. This number was 21% in the 2018 elections, but BBP, which got 1% in 2023, participated in the election from AK Party lists. It should also be remembered that VP's presidential candidate Sinan Oğan received 5.17% of the vote. The vote rates of the nationalist parties do not seem to be much higher than their baseline. In other words, these numbers do not reflect a big increase in terms of tally. However, it is possible to see that the anti-migrant discourse led by the VP has influenced other political parties. For example, in the second round of the presidential election, candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu built a significant part of his discourse on anti-migrant sentiments.

The presence of migrants in Türkiye is an important issue. The wave of migration following the Syrian war is undoubtedly one of the biggest tests the Turkish society has faced. This phenomenon is also at the forefront of

debates on the rise of nationalism. On the other hand, when we look at the election results, it is very difficult to find evidence that migrants have increased nationalist votes. In Türkiye's most migrant-hosting cities, there is no increase in the votes of the VP, whose discourse is almost entirely based on anti-migrant sentiments. VP only increased its tally in Gaziantep from 2.23% nationwide to 3.32%. This increase can be explained by the fact that the party's popular leader Ümit Özdağ was a candidate from this city. In all other cases, VP did not gain traction in migrant-majority provinces. This shows that the direct link between the increase in the migrant population and the rise in nationalism is weak, but that anti-migrant rhetoric is an argument easily used by populist far-right leaders.

Under these circumstances, it seems premature to conclude that Türkiye's far right is on the rise. However, the general polarisation during these elections, the combination of secularisation and nationalism, the anti-migrant rhetoric, and the birth of the VP suggest that concerns can be justified.

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