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Social Democracy in Turkey: Global Questions, Local Answers

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the prospects of social democracy in Turkey in light of two prominent debates regarding social democracy: the challenge of populism and the proper balance between a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition. By focusing on the Republican People's Party (CHP), it shows that the main problem the party faces is to find ways of addressing the issues of recognition and redistribution. Success in addressing these issues would provide an effective alternative to the populist agenda of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and build channels for participatory democracy and institutions of accountability. We argue that social democracy, with its legacy of democratic rule and institutions, can serve as a significant anchoring point in such an effort. We point out, however, why current social, institutional, political, and cultural factors make the CHP's task of pursuing a social democratic agenda in Turkey particularly difficult.

KEYWORDS

social democracy; Turkey; Republican People's Party (CHP); competitive authoritarianism; populism

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the major debates and dilemmas regarding the future of social democracy in Turkey and how they relate to similar debates in other countries. It also addresses the context-specific conditions facing social democracy in Turkey stemming from the wider political context, such as its rising authoritarianism, and the political dynamics involving intraparty democracy and factions. In doing so, the article brings together insights from the theoretical and empirical literature on social democracy with the specificities of the Turkish case to determine the challenges to and opportunities for strengthening social democracy in Turkey.

In response to the current global political climate, including the rise of far-right, populist parties and rising levels of economic inequality, there has been growing attention to social democracy as a political ideology. Thus the question of how best to understand and categorize social democratic parties has gained fresh impetus in the aftermath of a range of developments such as the Corbyn leadership of British Labor, the challenge of climate breakdown, and the Covid-19 outbreak.¹ Scholars have argued that social democracy is best equipped to address the increasing visibility and outrageousness of social inequalities following the pandemic.² Sylvia Walby notes, for example, that a social democracy perspective is best equipped to theorize the Covid crisis and its alternative outcomes as well as to contest the “neoliberal restructuring of society” by championing

a solidaristic provision of welfare and economic interventions.³ It is therefore important to discuss the prospects of and challenges to social democracy in specific countries—such as Turkey—which is what we attempt to do in the present article.

The Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the founding party of modern Turkey and the biggest party to identify itself with social democracy, is our central focus,⁴ which also enables us to situate the Turkish case in the broader context of the debates and developments related to social democracy.⁵

Bringing Turkey into the debate also addresses the deficiency identified by Rob Manwaring and Paul Kennedy in the current literature, which focuses “almost exclusively on the family of European social democratic and labour parties” and thereby misses “a key part of the wider story.”⁶ Moreover, in our attempt to embed Turkish social democracy in this wider framework, we seek to remedy the problem identified by Rob Manwaring and Josh Holloway of the tendency of studies on the subject of “talk(ing) past each other.”⁷

We begin by reviewing the two most pressing issues of social democracy in the industrialized world, where it first developed, and then discuss how these issues apply to the Turkish case. We argue that the first challenge social democracy faces across the globe is its relationship with populism. The second issue it faces is how to provide a holistic political alternative that purports an agenda of justice and equality, the two values that are intrinsic to social democracy. We see this question as both a moral commitment of social democracy and as a strategy to achieve its political goals, and primarily the ability to win the hearts and minds of electoral majorities. We claim that the issues of redistribution and the recognition of identities are key to such an agenda, and are viewed by some as being in tension with each other, and by others as complementary. We will then turn to Turkey and analyze the viability of and the political dilemmas faced by social democracy there. More specifically, we will delve into the political and socio-cultural circumstances that complicate the issues at hand in the Turkish case.

We suggest that bringing the question of redistribution to the forefront could potentially prevent right-wing populism, including that of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), while diverting attention from identity-based cleavages to issues that cut across groups. Our discussion will also show that neither redistributive policy proposals nor claims to redress identity issues are sufficient on their own to address Turkey's complex problems such as the process of democratic backsliding. As the pressing issues of the Turkish case will show, there is no formula for the successful combination of redistribution and recognition solutions since these depend on both historical and current injustices and social cleavages.

Our findings also point to the pivotal role social democracy can play in democratization. With its emphasis on institutions and justice, social democracy can play a central role in democratization and a counterbalancing role against the threat of populism and competitive authoritarianism both in Turkey and in other increasingly authoritarian settings that limit its power base by curbing its messages and by securitization, manipulation, and persecution of its actors.

Methodologically, we will take a within-case process tracing approach,⁸ and substantiate our arguments with textual and discursive evidence from Turkish politics. We will examine historical and contemporary evidence in order to identify continuity and change in the prospects of and challenges faced by the CHP on the road to social democracy. Where applicable, we will note critical junctures and turning points of the CHP to provide

a well-rounded account of the relationship between the CHP, social democracy, and Turkish politics. Utilizing historical sources as well as speeches of prominent CHP politicians and programmatic documents and policies, we will discuss how the dilemmas of social democracy play out in the CHP case given the political context in which it operates.

In terms of case selection, certain characteristics make Turkey a particularly useful case for analysis. As an example of competitive authoritarianism in which elections are still meaningful but take place under severely unfair conditions,⁹ it provides a test case for social democracy outside consolidated democracies. Similarly, as a country with deep-set social cleavages and rising economic inequalities, it also provides an interesting test case with regard to the question of how best to balance the policies of redistribution with those of recognition.

Social Democracy and the Threat of Populism

Today populism is mostly discussed in relation to social democracy for two reasons. First, social democracy competes with right-wing populism in attracting the vote of those who are unsatisfied with the current political and economic situation. Secondly, leftist parties and movements are not immune to populism and can shift to populist politics as an alternative road to social justice.

Although both left-wing populism and social democracy are presented as leftist solutions to social injustices,¹⁰ there are fundamental differences between the two. Social democracy advocates redistribution and social protection from market insecurities without overthrowing the capitalist system altogether. It accepts liberal democracy's respect for individual rights and liberties as well as its commitment to competitive elections, but it is at the same time concerned with reducing social and economic inequalities and providing social rights to citizens. Thus the emphasis on pluralism and democracy distinguishes social democracy from populism,¹¹ the constitutive elements of which are a Manichean anti-establishment discourse, a mass support base combined with a leader who is seen as the embodiment of "the will of the people" and who builds vertical ties that bypass public institutions.¹² Unlike populism, social democracy accepts that there is more than one legitimate group, interest, and voice in society, and that society therefore does not constitute a monolithic entity with one unanimous voice called "the will of the people." Several scholars have noted that populism, with its focus on "the will of the people" and on the leader as the embodiment of the people, targets democratic institutions,¹³ attacks pluralism,¹⁴ and shows an elective affinity with competitive authoritarianism.¹⁵

The debates on the nature of populism intensified when the radical left-populism thrived particularly in Southern Europe, from Podemos in Spain to Syriza in Greece. Alexandros Kioupiolis notes how, in the case of Podemos, populism reinforced vertical tendencies in the movement whose prominent figures transformed from "nodal points of popular unity" to "leaders who direct their parties in an authoritative style."¹⁶ What started as a horizontal grassroots movement in early 2014 turned into a plebiscitary relationship between the leader and his followers, shifting "the notion of the 'people' ... from an open and participative multitude of active citizenry to a passive and homogeneous mass led by an elite."¹⁷

The relationship between populism and social democracy is thus a constant source of concern as social democrats face the double challenge of populism from without and within. As we will show, the threat and reality of losing political power to populists and the genuine possibility that social democratic leaders may backslide into populism are especially relevant in the case of Turkey.

Social Democracy and the Question of Redistribution and Recognition

Several interrelated factors have contributed to the changing face of the Left in the Western world. Among them was the loss of social democracy's traditional power base (the large working classes of the industrial age), as a result of capitalist restructuring, as well as the challenges of rising new social movements and identity-based activism in the post-Cold War world.¹⁸ In the current sociopolitical context the issues related to redistribution and recognition and how to balance them pose the major points of contention of social democratic politics. Iris Marion Young has argued that focusing solely on redistribution violates key social-democratic principles such as justice and equality.¹⁹ What is more, several scholars have pointed out that the changing voter base, particularly in postindustrial societies, has made it harder to garner votes solely based on class-related and/or redistributive issues. Herbert Kitschelt, for example, has argued that social democratic parties need to transform themselves to accommodate "libertarian concerns with individual self-realization and communitarian participation" in light of recent changes.²⁰ Others have stressed that in the struggle with right-wing populists, it is essential to offer voters a communal narrative in order to convince them which party to vote for. In other words, it is essential to counter the narratives of the populists, who are good storytellers, with appealing narratives of communal identity along with proposals to improve the people's economic and social wellbeing.²¹

On the other side of the debate, there are scholars who believe that the issues of identity and recognition have been given too much attention in left politics at the expense of social inequalities and the question of economic justice. Manwaring and Holloway have noted that in rediscovering ways to restrain unfettered capitalism, "there is an ongoing tension between social democrats' 'old' class politics and balancing or supplanting these with the 'new' identity politics" since social democratic parties "appear uncertain as to how (and whether) to emphasize issues of underprivileged and minority groups amid the popularity of far-right parties (or center-right parties acceding to far-right policy positions)."²²

Other scholars, mostly focusing on the European experience, have argued that concentrating on identity politics actually plays into the hands of right-wing populists. By buying into the neoliberal agenda rather than addressing economic grievances, the social democratic parties increase the appeal of right-wing populists who then exploit these economic grievances.²³ Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, for example, argue that the underlying reason for the global decline of the Left is its shift to the center on economic issues and its acceptance of neoliberal reforms, which prevented it from becoming the voice of popular grievances against the neoliberal reforms and the 2008 financial crisis, and played into the hands of far-right and populist parties which stressed cultural and social issues.²⁴ Scholars have therefore stressed that to recover political power, social-

democratic parties need to appeal to the socially disadvantaged groups with social protections and redistributive policies.²⁵ The reason why the multicultural left is not seen as an alternative is its emphasis on a “politics of recognition” as opposed to the “politics of redistribution,” which diverted attention away from economic issues and thus fragmented the left and made it harder for it to build broad coalitions and win elections.²⁶

Those who call for a renewed interest in the question of redistribution are primarily concerned with the fact that identity politics leads to the abandonment of broader systematic problems such as rising income inequalities that perpetuate societal inequalities. While scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm have argued that the left should move away from identity politics and stick to economic issues,²⁷ Nancy Fraser has called for a comprehensive framework that can integrate redistribution and recognition in order to fight injustices on both fronts.²⁸

Various studies have elaborated on how to approach the two issues—redistribution and recognition—as complementary in addressing current-day political inequalities. Adolph Reed Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun claim that if we see discrimination as the only real injustice we are in fact playing into the hands of the capitalist system as it leaves no room to talk about economic inequalities and their remedies.²⁹ Similarly, Fraser argues that the move from redistribution to recognition is happening at a time of increasing economic inequality and that “questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them.”³⁰ The key political question as formulated by Fraser is thus: “How can one develop a coherent programmatic perspective that integrates redistribution and recognition” so as to bring about justice for all?³¹ It is becoming increasingly clear that a twenty-first-century social democratic agenda would need to respond to the demands for recognition as much as to the demands for redistribution. In doing so, it is vital not to reify issues of identity, as Fraser also argues, but to contextualize them in the broader economic and social context. This approach would also counter the populist attempts of capitalizing on cleavage-based traumas and victimhood.

The questions raised in these ongoing debates point at the dilemmas faced by social democratic politics in deciding on how best to appeal to the electorate and to promote social democratic principles. Such soul-searching debates on how to address social injustices and accommodate identity politics are pressing questions for any incoming leaders of the post-industrial world as is evident in the case of the German Social Democratic Party and the Labor Party in the United Kingdom, for example. Yet this debate is compounded in the Turkish case owing to factors such as the nature of its social cleavages, its high levels of polarization, its unconsolidated democracy and the threats to its institutionalized secularism.

The CHP: Between Social Democracy and Populism

The dual struggle with populism has haunted Turkish social democracy for a long time. Since 1950 when Turkey transitioned to a multiparty democracy, right-wing populist leaders have been key political actors and have managed to exacerbate the identity-based divides in the country. Yet also as an internal threat to social democracy, populism has always been present in the CHP. Its central challenge has thus been how to gain

a broader appeal and mobilize groups around more egalitarian causes without succumbing to the Manichean and anti-institutionalist impulses of populism.

For the CHP the tension between social democracy and populism is as old as its turn to social democracy under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit, who was credited with transforming the party from a centrist cadre party to a center left-wing party that successfully appealed to the people.³² Ecevit (who served as Turkey's prime minister in the years 1974, 1977, 1978–1979, and 1999–2002) argued that the CHP should expand the role of politics from the “center to the periphery” into a dual movement between the center and periphery, which meant that peripheral forces in society should establish channels of political participation in the CHP.³³ Similar to the Latin American experience with the Left,³⁴ where populism emerged as a surrogate for social democracy since groups lacked autonomous forms of representation and therefore relied on populist leadership,³⁵ the structural and institutional conditions in Turkey—such as late industrialization and democratization, and a small and unorganized working class— bore little resemblance to those in Western Europe, the cradle of social democracy.

Ecevit achieved the CHP's turn to social democracy by first balancing its social democratic agenda.³⁶ This entailed an emphasis on democracy,³⁷ the reform of the capitalist system and the establishment and expansion of a welfare state and redistributive policies based on principles of social justice and equality,³⁸ with a populist appeal that mobilized a multiclass coalition of discontented groups,³⁹ through the populist division between the “people” who owned their labor and those who exploited them. Utilizing media outlets such as the radio⁴⁰ and later television, Ecevit's political messages reached the rural population and workers all over the country thanks to his charisma and eloquent style of speech.⁴¹

Yet following Ecevit's resistance to the ban imposed by the United States on the cultivation of opium in Turkey (1971–74), and even more so after the Cyprus military intervention in 1974, when he was prime minister,⁴² Ecevit's politics morphed into a developmentalist national populism that gradually diminished the influence of social democracy.⁴³ This turn to left-populism became increasingly evident in Ecevit's speeches, as well as in the way the party operated. Moreover, by 1977 his brand of personalistic politics started clashing with his own colleagues in the CHP.⁴⁴

These events cast a long shadow over social democracy which has persisted until today. Since the 2019 municipal election campaign, for example, there has been a sharp increase in the number of CHP references to the 1970s Ecevit era.⁴⁵ At the same time, the challenges are perhaps even more evident, for in the era of neoliberalism, populism has found a more fertile ground given the state's diminishing welfare capacity and lack of central institutions that could give voice to the people's interests. All of these factors have played into the hands of populist leaders whom many people see as the sole source of hope.⁴⁶ What is more, given the decades-long global decline of social democracy, running on a solely social democratic agenda without relying on populist appeals may pose an even more difficult challenge than before.

While some populist traits, such as the choice of a charismatic leader or the claim that it represents the socially disadvantaged, may exist in every political movement, it is when these traits combine with the distinctive characteristics of populism—seeing the leader as the embodiment of the people's will, a Manichean outlook, and

disdain for political institutions—that it manifests its hostility to democracy in general and to social democracy in particular. It would be fair to say that at present neither the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, nor Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş—both of whom are hailed as potential presidential candidates in the 2023 elections—shows any signs of these distinctive populist traits.⁴⁷ It is nevertheless worth remembering the potential tension between charismatic leadership and the institutional and organizational aspects of social democracy, such as the respect for rights and liberties, at the expense of the more vertical and plebiscitary dynamics that are attributed to populism.

While studies reveal that identifying with a candidate, such as İmamoğlu or Yavaş, is a major source of motivation for voters,⁴⁸ the appeal of the candidates and their propensity for populism need to be curbed for a more meaningful participatory and long-lasting political mobilization of the electorate. This is especially true given the crises of representation in conventional forms of politics,⁴⁹ and the global push to more horizontal and participatory forms of politics.⁵⁰ As Kenneth M. Roberts argues, in contrast to plebiscitary linkages in which people delegate policymaking authority to a leader who acts on their behalf, participatory linkages ensure that citizens themselves play a direct role in government through acts such as selecting party leaders, influencing party platforms, or sponsoring policy initiatives.⁵¹

The need for such changes in the political system in Turkey came to the fore with the massive Gezi Park protests, which started in Istanbul and spread to the entire country in 2013, and called for less hierarchical and more deliberative participatory channels,⁵² as evident in the deliberative forums created at the time in Gezi and that are still operating,⁵³ as well as in those of other grassroots environmentalist and human rights movements. However, how an inspiring leader or group of politicians could ignite a general mobilization of the masses around an egalitarian, democratic agenda, and not present themselves as the sole voice and embodiment of the people is a question awaiting an answer not just in Turkey but in most countries in which a social democratic, participatory alternative has not been realized.

Since the 2019 municipal elections, the CHP has indeed taken several steps toward less centralization and more participatory politics. Its 2020 “Declaration of a Call for the Second Century [of the Turkish Republic]” emphasized these ideals, and the CHP-run metropolitan municipalities created new avenues for local participation, as in Istanbul, for example, where public square projects were opened for local voting over the internet.⁵⁴ A similar process was also initiated in Ankara.⁵⁵ In Istanbul, İmamoğlu also initiated a project of “Neighborhood Assemblies,”⁵⁶ and in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, CHP municipalities have created City Councils to enable local participation in decision making.⁵⁷

One could however argue that it is Turkey’s existing institutional constraints—such as the Law on Political Parties (which strengthens the hierarchical party model and limits intraparty democracy by giving party leaders too much power regarding decisions on issues such as candidate nomination⁵⁸), as well as elements of Turkish political culture (its personalistic, clientelistic networks,⁵⁹ and the dominance of leader-centered political perspectives),⁶⁰—that are the major hindrances to more horizontal, participatory channels at the party level and beyond. Thus the combined effects of Turkey’s late industrialization, the weakness of its trade unions, the lack of other organized interest groups in

the CHP and strong institutionalized channels further diminish the prospects of a social democratic agenda against a leader-centric, potentially populist politics in Turkey.

Redistribution, Recognition, and the CHP

Following the postindustrial restructuring of the Western economies over the past few decades, the traditional basis of their social democratic parties, namely, their blue-collar workers, has largely shrunk. What is more, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of identity politics at the expense of a discourse that favors economic redistribution have prompted these parties to rethink their agendas so as to include identity-based political claims and cross-class left-libertarian demands.⁶¹

When it comes to the issues of redistribution and recognition, the CHP faces challenges that are intrinsically related to the Turkish political context, some of which further exacerbate the role of identity politics and prevent both the pluralistic accommodation of different identities and the adoption of a redistributive policy under a social democratic agenda. As noted earlier, what has hindered the rise of social democracy apart from late industrialization and the lack of a strong and organized working class, was the repression of the left by the state, particularly in the Cold War era,⁶² which increased still further following the 1980 coup.

Yet in the post-1980 era, the export-oriented neoliberal economic policies opened new opportunities in the Turkish economy, politics, and media. This had significant consequences for the expression of political identities and the assertion of identity-based claims of ethnic and religious groups. In the 1990s, political debates came to be dominated by the dichotomies of Islam vs. secularism, Sunni vs. Alevi, and Kurd vs. Turk.⁶³ The rising prominence of identity politics was also reflected in the rise of political Islamist parties, pro-Kurdish parties, the Alevis becoming more politically vocal, and the fact that the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) had reformulated its anti-communist stance into an anti-Kurdish discourse.⁶⁴ All of these changes came to the fore in the deepening secular-religious divide and around the Kurdish issue.

Religion and Secularism in Turkey

One of the challenges of the CHP in combining a redistributive agenda with one that accommodates identity-based differences stems from the historical cleavage between secularism and Islam in Turkey. The key question is how to defend secularism and prevent the encroachment of political Islam on the lives of citizens without falling back into the religion vs. secularism debate and being labeled a “militant laicist.” So one of the party’s greatest challenges is to maintain its distinctive ideology without playing into the hands of right-wing politicians, particularly populist ones, who rely on the secular-religious divide and accuse it of being alienated from the people.⁶⁵ Over the last two decades the AKP has made social polarization along religious lines its master strategy for elections and referenda.⁶⁶ Given this, the CHP has recently refrained from entering into debates that could elicit the usual accusations of it being an organ of the secular forces that oppose the people’s cultural identity and traditions.

But apart from the CHP’s concerns regarding its voter base and image, maintaining its secular agenda has become imperative given how central it is in the struggle for human

rights and protection of civil rights and liberties. Secularism, among other things, serves as an important bulwark against gender discrimination and homophobia and is a guarantor of a modern education system, all of which are central social democratic principles. What is more, given the increasing political role religious orders have played in in the AKP era (2002–present) as well as their dominant role in education, student accommodation, and cultural life, it is essential for the CHP to uphold secularism as a guarantee of meritocracy, equality, social justice, and even democracy.

In considering the history of the CHP, we see that Ecevit's example in the 1960s and 1970s is illustrative. In attempting to transcend the religious-secular divide as the prime marker of political struggle, Ecevit rejected the political use of these terms altogether. He rejected the equation of "progressiveness" with secularism and obscurantism and bigotry with religious observance. Instead, he saw the political landscape as divided between the genuine people who lived off their own labor and those who exploited them. He thus departed significantly from the traditional CHP line by recognizing the stratified structure of Turkish society and by working for the betterment of certain parts of society that were organized along class lines.⁶⁷ Ecevit worked hard to reimagine Turkish politics as the struggle between the productive forces and those that wanted to exploit those forces, and emphasized the values of social justice, redistribution, and democratic political struggle.⁶⁸

Upon being reinstated as a political party after the 1980 coup, the CHP of the 1990s followed a mostly identity-based party line and become a champion of secularism against the rising forces of political Islam and the presence of Islam in the public sphere.⁶⁹ The party advocated a strictly secular Turkish identity as the cornerstone of their political campaign. Deniz Baykal's tenure as party chairman in the years 2000–2010 was marked by his preference for elite politics, in liaison with the military-bureaucratic elites. He focused on sociocultural issues, pursuing an aggressive polarization policy to defend secularism and curbing the efforts to resolve the Kurdish issue.⁷⁰

With the AKP coming to power in 2002 and consolidating its power one election after another, the political landscape of the country changed, and Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP leader from 2010, was faced with the challenge of rebranding the party once again.

Responses to the new political landscape within the CHP were by no means uniform, as, for example, with Tanju Özcan, the mayor of Bolu, who proposed populist, discriminatory measures against immigrants,⁷¹ or the nationalist tone of Muharrem İnce, who broke from the CHP because of his own political aspirations and dissatisfaction with its policies. Yet one could nevertheless argue that the erosion of institutions, the rising authoritarianism of the AKP and its polarization policy have in fact strengthened the party's momentum toward democratic, pluralistic institutional arrangements as seen in its calls for strengthening parliamentarism.⁷² Similar alliances against authoritarian rulers were also formed in other parts of the world as in the 2021 Czech elections,⁷³ and in the Polish opposition.⁷⁴

Aiming to appeal to a broader electoral base as a promising political alternative, Kılıçdaroğlu backed away from polarization and built alliances with right-wing and centrist partners, starting with the 2014 presidential election and followed by the Constitutional Referendum of 2017. In the 2018 general elections, CHP created the "Nation Alliance" with center/nationalist-right İYİP (İyi Parti, Good Party) and the religious SP (Saadet Partisi, Felicity Party). In 2019, the CHP and the İYİP continued their alliance in

the municipal elections. With the left-wing and pro-Kurdish HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, the Peoples' Democratic Party) tacitly supporting the alliance by not nominating their own candidates in the major cities, the CHP managed to win most of the seats in the largest metropolitan areas.

The CHP Istanbul metropolitan mayor İmamoğlu, who was elected against all impediments in the 2019 local elections, as noted earlier, was especially commended for his strategies during the election campaign that helped him overcome the polarizing political line of Erdoğan over identity issues.⁷⁵ İmamoğlu, along with other mayoral candidates of the CHP, followed a "depolarizing campaign" using a non-polemical discourse aimed at voters of both the opposition and the governing alliances. In particular, he emphasized reconciliation, and appealed directly to "16 Million Istanbulites," while avoiding national level politics with the significant exception of the economy and by focusing on local solutions.⁷⁶ After an annulled election in March and a rerun victory in June 2019, İmamoğlu strengthened the position of the CHP in the alliance and gave it an edge in policy entrepreneurship.

The tactics of the CHP mayors such as İmamoğlu and Yavaş are in tandem with Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy of avoiding identity-based polarization and promising local agricultural subsidies and welfare policies to the urban and rural poor in the provinces.⁷⁷ Thus, despite the pressure of the AKP's central government and its dominance in the municipal assemblies, CHP mayors have managed to implement policies that enfranchised local agriculture, and to initiate solidaristic fundraising campaigns for aid during the month of Ramadan and the Covid-19 pandemic once the CHP municipality funds were cut by the central government.⁷⁸

Unlike the political climate Western social democratic parties operate in, the CHP struggles on an unlevel playing field.⁷⁹ It has insufficient access to the media, which is mostly owned by pro-government businesspeople. This has led to cases in which the CHP's economic ideas are easily hijacked by the governing party.⁸⁰ Moreover, the party was not given sufficient opportunities, if any at all, to respond to its demonization by politicians, the pro-government media, and social media trolls, which have portrayed it as an organization collaborating with terrorists and enemies of the state.⁸¹

Perhaps the most significant development in the CHP's soul-searching regarding a definition of secularism that can accommodate different group identities is Kılıçdaroğlu's persistent efforts to come together with religious opinion groups and present the party's self-criticism over the headscarf issue.⁸² Since the formation of the Nation Alliance (2018), it has moved to include breakouts from the AKP such as Ali Babacan's Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Ahmet Davutoğlu's Future Party (Gelecek) under a separate body called "Table of the Six" [Altılı Masa]. Yet the vulnerability of the secular state, as was evident in the discussions of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, shows that the CHP needs to fight for a secular state while putting together a firmly social democratic alternative that can appeal to the masses and accommodate the religiosity of individuals. What makes this task particularly difficult is the weakness of the state institutions when faced by majoritarian politics and lack of the internalization of democracy among certain parts of society. Under such conditions, the fight for a secular state becomes an indispensable part of pluralism, human rights, and democracy.

The Kurdish Issue and Political Islam

The greatest challenge facing the CHP and the promotion of social democracy in Turkey more generally is posed by political Islam and the attitude to minorities, and particularly to the Kurds. But before focusing on the Kurdish issue, we will briefly discuss the CHP's position on identity issues, such as women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the attitude to the Alevi and Roma minorities. The CHP has been vocal in its criticism of the government's withdrawal in 2021 from the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention for the prevention of violence against women (2014);⁸³ it was the first to have an openly Roma MP;⁸⁴ and historically, the majority of Alevis voted for the CHP in support of its advocacy of secularism.⁸⁵ On the LGBTQ+ issue, trans individuals have joined local CHP organizations,⁸⁶ and Kılıçdaroğlu spoke openly in their support.⁸⁷ While the CHP is still far from having a systematic and comprehensive agenda for addressing the fundamental problems these groups face, it has certainly shown its political will to deal with these problems.

More recently, the CHP has attempted to publicly voice its social democratic agenda on issues of identity. Kılıçdaroğlu attempted to put together a redistributive agenda (akin to Ecevit's in the 1970s) as seen in his social media video, where he states: "I am a social democrat. The CHP is a social democratic party. I believe in the social state. If I can remove poverty from this land, I will get the blessing [hayır dua] of my people. That is sufficient for me."⁸⁸ In another video on social media he called for "helalleşme" [a coming to terms or cancelling of each other's debts], which implied that "helalleşme" was a potential policy.⁸⁹ Thus unlike the "Justice March" in 2017, which emphasized justice and the rule of law in a non-partisan way but did not tackle issues of identity, Kılıçdaroğlu opened the path for the CHP to address a range of problems in Turkish society, from the infamous Wealth Tax during WW2 (which deeply affected the country's non-Muslim minorities) and the headscarf issue, to the youth killed during the Gezi Park protests and those killed at Uludere (a Kurdish village in which civilians died as a result of a military airstrike).⁹⁰

The Kurdish issue, however, remains the CHP's Achilles' heel. Historically it has engaged in two different yet complementary discourses on the Kurdish issue: it either insisted that economic underdevelopment and other grievances lay at the heart of the Kurdish issue, or that the demands of the Kurds presented a national security problem. The first position was best exemplified by Ecevit, and the second by Baykal.

In the 1970s, as noted earlier, Ecevit favored a redistributive approach that tried not to stigmatize individual identities. Especially on the Kurdish issue, he proposed policies that bordered on economic reductionism.⁹¹ In the 1990s and early 2000s, in contrast, Baykal presented a securitizing and exclusionary attitude toward the Kurdish issue by refusing, for instance, cultural and identity-based amendments in the Constitution.⁹²

The Kurdish issue suffers from the fact that it has been a protracted military conflict from the rise of the PKK in the 1980s, which has put it beyond the mere claims for accommodation and recognition. What is more, the geopolitical developments in the Middle East, particularly the regime changes in Iraq and Syria, contributed to the internationalization and further militarization of the Kurdish issue. These changes have complicated the CHP's attempts to address the Kurdish problem. While it would require great efforts for the CHP to win over the hearts and minds of the Kurds and become the voice for their demands, a serious discussion of the future prospects of this would require

a closer analysis of the different camps involved rather than just treating the Kurds and the Turkish majority as monolithic entities. What is clear is that the position of the CHP is not unanimous regarding the demands for ethnic rights of the Kurdish minority, such as the right to teach, publish, and broadcast in Kurdish, and the political rights such as the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity and the decentralization and local autonomy of its administrative system.⁹³ While some factions take a nationalistic and state security position that is opposed to the creation of any platform for ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, to demand recognition and gain equal citizenship in Turkey,⁹⁴ other factions advocate a policy aimed at reaching a peaceful resolution with the Kurdish political movement. The CHP constituency and membership seems to mostly echo the dominant paradigm in Turkey vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue,⁹⁵ which portrays their demands as “remnants of backward ages, underdevelopment or external provocation, rather than legitimate claims that can be voiced within the boundaries of the Turkish political community.”⁹⁶

In this context, another important challenge was the CHP’s decision to exclude the left-wing and pro-Kurdish HDP from the “Nation Alliance” of the main opposition parties. This decision was made for various reasons, including the CHP’s fear of its own electoral base, the need to prevent the intensification of the AKP’s negative campaigns and the concern not to dissolve the alliance over the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

Yet there are other CHP members who see the Kurdish issue very differently. İmamoğlu, for instance, recognized the right to teach and use the Kurdish language.⁹⁷ At the party level, CHP’s 2020 “Declaration of a Call for the Second Century [of the Turkish Republic]” openly addressed the Kurdish question as a problem to be solved in parliament in a way that “strengthens the independence, democracy and unitary model of Turkey.”⁹⁸

Even though preliminary data show that the CHP is gaining popularity among some of the Kurdish population,⁹⁹ it remains uncertain, for example, how much this could be undermined by the backlash within the CHP as well as by the AKP’s negative campaigning (which tries to identify almost every move of the CHP as an act of terrorism). The authoritarianism of the ruling alliance of the AKP and the MHP poses a serious problem for the CHP as it includes the physical targeting of CHP members regarding their real or alleged approaches to the Kurdish issue.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Our article demonstrates that the threats posed by populism to social democracy at the global level are evident also in Turkey. These threats are compounded in the case of Turkey by various factors such as its leader-centric political culture, a strict party discipline that favors party leadership over party organization, clientelism, and the exploitation of social cleavages, especially under the conditions of a weak civil society and an unorganized working force. On the other hand, the growing public demands for more participatory and horizontal political participation as voiced in the case of Gezi Park protests continue to urge social democratic parties to adopt more inclusionary institutional channels of representation. The main challenge of the CHP has thus been to mobilize voters by advocating democracy and pluralism against unchecked power while presenting substantial policies that could alleviate economic insecurity and inequality, without rallying around a populist savior.

On the issues of recognition and identity politics, we showed that the CHP generally follows the lines pursued by other social democratic parties in the attempt to bring the economic problems back to the forefront. However, in its attempt to showcase its redistributive agenda, the CHP is faced by various obstacles such as an increasingly authoritarian political climate and restricted access to mainstream media. Thus despite some recent promising moves, the CHP's position on the recognition and accommodation of diverse ethnic and religious minority rights remains fragile.

We believe that our findings may pave the way for more systematic and structured comparisons of the underlying patterns and determinants of social democratic parties.¹⁰¹ These would include, for example, understanding the relative significance of agential and institutional factors in comparison to structural and political cultural givens, as well as the relationship between regime type and prospects of social democracy. These comparisons could, for example, focus on the relative prospects of social democracy not only in terms of the current political systems in different countries (parliamentary vs presidential), but also in terms of past experiences, such as Turkey's long history with parliamentarism and its recent switch to presidentialism.

The findings of this study reveal the intertwined relationship between democracy and social democracy. While social democracy can become the engine that drives democracy, its prospects are closely linked with the level of democracy in any given country. As our discussion of secularism in Turkey reveals, the constant need to protect political institutions and individual rights and liberties make the struggle for social democracy an uphill battle. Our study also reveals the unintended consequences of rising authoritarianism: while the unlevel playing field created by the AKP has limited the visibility of the social democratic agenda, the traumas of rising levels of authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism,¹⁰² and related income inequalities may provide a catalyst for social democracy. Comparative studies can further identify the specific dynamics that influence social democracy under competitive authoritarian settings in contrast to consolidated democracies or full-blown authoritarian regimes.

Compared to Western Europe—in which memories of “the pan-European antifascist popular consensus”¹⁰³ with its economic and social success can inspire a return of social democracy—in Turkey social democracy does not occupy the same place save for its brief heyday under Ecevit in the chaotic era of the 1970s that made it impossible for the party to implement its agenda and reap its benefits. Hence, compared to social democracy in Europe, the task of the CHP is particularly daunting.

At the same time, because the risks of authoritarianism are more visible in Turkey than in most of its European counterparts, social democracy can mobilize voters not just on issues of redistribution and recognition but also in the cause of democracy, institutionalism, and pluralism.¹⁰⁴ But in the Turkish context, the emancipatory potential of social democracy would need to shoulder even more responsibility, since with its emphasis on institutions, organization, inclusion, and justice, it could serve as an important source of mobilization and anchoring without succumbing to the monism and authoritarianism inherent in populism.

Like WW2, which constituted the defining experience and unifying cause in postwar European democracies,¹⁰⁵ in the Turkish case it is not unreasonable to expect that the attempts to build a post-authoritarian Turkey will be tied to a social democratic future. In

light of our findings, we argue that given social democracy's central role in addressing all forms of injustices as well as the need to counteract populist narratives with appealing ones that are more egalitarian and inclusive,¹⁰⁶ redistributive policies need to be accompanied by convincing accounts of recognition. In other words: for democracy and justice—the central pillars of social democracy—to succeed in Turkey as elsewhere, it is imperative not only to place economic inequalities at the center of politics but also to address the country's identity-based injustices.

Notes

1. Manwaring and Holloway, "A New Wave," 2.
2. della Porta, "Progressive Social Movements."
3. Walby, "Social Theory and COVID," 193; see also, Manwaring and Holloway, "A New Wave."
4. Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey"; Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019. See also Ayata and Güneş Ayata, "The Center-Left Parties."
5. Turan, "Old Soldiers Never Die"; Belge, "Nationalism, Democracy."
6. Manwaring and Kennedy, "Why the Left Loses," 5; Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller, and Teichman, *Social Democracy*, 12–19.
7. Manwaring and Holloway, "A New Wave," 4.
8. Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing."
9. Levitsky and Way, "Elections Without Democracy."
10. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; Mouffe, *For A Left Populism*.
11. Roberts, "Is Social Democracy Possible?"
12. On the defining features of populism, see Barr, "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment"; Filc, *The Political Right*; Gidron and Bonikowski, "Varieties of Populism"; Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist"; Mudde and Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective"; Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism."
13. Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism."
14. de la Torre, "Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer"; Müller, *What Is Populism?*
15. Arato, "Political Theology and Populism"; Cohen, "What's Wrong with the Normative Theory."
16. Kioupkiolis, "Podemos," 111.
17. On PODEMOS and populism and authoritarianism, see Booth and Baert, *The Dark Side*. On left populism and competitive authoritarianism, see Weyland, "Populism and Authoritarianism."
18. Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Therborn, "Twilight of Swedish Social Democracy."
19. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
20. Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Democracy*, 285.
21. Smith, *That Is Not Who We Are*.
22. Manwaring and Holloway, "A New Wave," 16.
23. Cuperus, "Social Democracy"; Berman and Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline"; Berman and Kundnani, "The Cost of Convergence."
24. Berman and Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline."
25. Dostal, "The Crisis of German Social Democracy," 239; Berman, "Europe."
26. Berman "The Specter Haunting Europe," 75.
27. Hobsbawm, "Identity Politics."
28. Fraser, "Social Justice." For a critique and rejoinder of Fraser's discussion of recognition and redistribution, see *European Journal of Political Theory* 6, no. 3 (2007). On the discussion of the left and identity politics, see also the special issue, *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 2 (2018).
29. Reed and Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis," 169.
30. Fraser "Rethinking Recognition," 108.
31. Fraser, "Social Justice" (discussion Paper), 10.
32. Kili, 1960–1975 *Döneminde Cumhuriyet*, 440–41.

33. Ecevit, *Ortanın Solu*, 84; Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations." Ecevit's articulation of the center periphery cleavage in 1966 predated Şerif Mardin's famous article in 1973 by several years.
34. Roberts, "Is Social Democracy Possible."
35. Roberts, "Populism, Political Mobilizations," 144.
36. For Ecevit's perspective on social democracy in the 1960s and 1970s, see, for example, Ecevit, *Ortanın Solu*; Ecevit, *Bu Düzen Değişmelidir*; Ecevit, "1 Şubat 1974"; Ecevit, "28 Haziran 1977"; Ecevit, "12 Ocak 1978"; Tachau, "Bülent Ecevit."
37. Ecevit, *Ortanın Solu*, 20.
38. Güneş Ayata, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, 89.
39. Tachau, "Bülent Ecevit," 117.
40. Güneş Ayata, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, 160–61, 164.
41. Güneş-Ayata, "The Republican People's Party," 106.
42. An Athens-backed coup on July 15, 1974, and the fear of genocide against the Turkish Cypriots, prompted Ankara's military intervention. It was Ecevit who declared the operation, which was successful and gained him the nickname "conqueror of Cyprus."
43. Emre, "The Role of Academics," 114.
44. Ibid. For the future implications of Ecevit's personalism, see Kiniklioğlu, "Bülent Ecevit."
45. Şençekiçer, "Sosyopolitik (28)"; CHP, *Radikal Sevgi Kitabı*. CHP's Campaign Director Başsoy stated that CHP's slogans in the 2019 campaign were first used by Ecevit and his team in the 1970s. CHP's intra-organization training book for the elections, "Book of Radical Love," quoted an old CHP slogan from the 1977 campaign on its cover: "Love My Sister/Brother" [Sev kardeşim].
46. Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism"; Weyland, "Populism and Authoritarianism."
47. "Son Anket Açıklandı." İmamoğlu and Yavaş are the mayors of İstanbul and Ankara, respectively. They competed on an unlevel playing field in the 2019 local elections against AKP candidates. Polls show that in a presidential election either candidate would win against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.
48. Konda, *Konda 23 Haziran 2019*; Başsoy, *Hepimiz Aynı Belediye Otobüsündeyiz*.
49. Azzellini and Sitrin, *They Can't Represent Us*.
50. Fung and Wright, "Thinking about Empowered Participatory Governance."
51. Roberts, "Populism, Political Mobilizations," 143.
52. Mendonça and Ercan, "Deliberation and Protest."
53. Ugur-Cinar and Gunduz-Arabaci, "Deliberating in Difficult Times"; Ergenç and Çelik, "Urban Neighbourhood Forums."
54. IBB Bilgi İşlem Daire Başkanlığı, "Katılımcı Proje Platformu."
55. ABB, "Mansur Yavaş Başkent'te Dijital."
56. IBB Muhtarlıklar ve Gıda Daire Başkanlığı, "Haberler—Muhtarlıklar Müdürlüğü."
57. See <https://istanbulkentkonseyi.org.tr/ibb-istanbulun-ilk-katilimci-butcesini-hazirliyor/>, <https://ankarakentkonseyi.org.tr>, <https://www.izmirkentkonseyi.org.tr/tr/Anasayfa/Index>.
58. Ayan, "Authoritarian Party Structures."
59. Cinar, "A Comparative Analysis."
60. Türk, "A Glance at the Constitutive Elements."
61. Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Democracy*; Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Therborn, "Twilight of Swedish Social Democracy."
62. Emre, *Emergence of Social Democracy in Turkey*, 22–29; Kakizaki, "The Republican People's Party."
63. Yavuz, "The Politics of Fear," 202.
64. Ibid., 207.
65. Aytaç and Elçi, "Populism in Turkey," 90–91.
66. Koçal, "'Çevre'den 'Merkez'e Yönelim Bağlamında,'" 98; Bakiner, "A Key to Turkish Politics," 9–10. Kiriş, "From the Single Party."
67. Erdoğan, "Demokratik soldan Devrimci Yol'a."
68. See Ecevit, *Ortanın Solu*; Ecevit, *Bu Düzen Değişmelidir*; Ecevit, *Atatürk ve Devrimcilik*.

69. Aydın and Taşkın, *1960'tan Günümüze Türkiye Tarihi*, 482.
70. Grigoriadis and Öniş, "Europe and the Impasse"; Uysal, "Continuity and Rupture"; Aydın and Taşkın, *1960'tan Günümüze Türkiye Tarihi*, 291.
71. Özcan was dispatched to CHP's disciplinary bodies for expulsion on 14.06.2022.
72. Köylü, "Muhalefet 'Güçlendirilmiş Parlamenter Sistem.'" On the unintended consequences of the changes made to the 2018 electoral laws that brought the opposition together, see Evci and Kaminski, "Shot in the Foot."
73. "Czech Election."
74. Strezelecki, "Tusk Urges Opposition."
75. Wuthrich and Ingleby, "The Pushback Against Populism."
76. Yavuzylmaz, "When Local Becomes General," 630. For analyses of Imamoğlu depolarizing and inclusive strategies during the electoral campaign, see Demiralp and Balta, "Defeating Populists"; Taşkın, "The 2019 Provincial Elections."
77. Esen and Gumuscu, "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly"; McCoy and Somer, "Toward a Theory."
78. "Ankara ve İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyelerinin"; "İBB'den 'Askıda Fatura' kampanyası"; Among the most significant was "Askıda Fatura," started by İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality, in which citizens would pay the bills of those who are not able to do so. Soon after other CHP municipalities followed suit. For the İzmir municipality, see, for example, Soyer, "Sosyal Demokrasi 4.0." For Eskisehir, see "Hayvancılıkta 'Eskişehir Modeli'."
79. Levitsky and Way, "Elections Without Democracy."
80. Examples include the copying of CHP's retirement pension plan; on Kılıçdaroğlu's proposal, see "CHP'den emekliye iki maaş"; "Kılıçdaroğlu, Emeklilere Yılda İki." On AKP policy declaration, see "Son dakika: Başbakan Yıldırım'dan," and the acquisition of onions and potatoes from producers in need, and distribution to the poor. See CHP—Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, "Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Aksaray'da"; CHP—Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, "CHP Grup Toplantısı"; Sözcü İstanbul, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın talimatıyla alınan"; İstanbul İl Tarım ve Orman Müdürlüğü, "İhtiyaç Sahibi Ailelerimize Ücretsiz."
81. Grossman, et al., *Political Retweet Rings*; Yavuzylmaz, "When Local Becomes General," 629; "Özhaseki"; "Son dakika: Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan." Demonization of the CHP and İYİP's "Nation Alliance" [Millet İttifakı] was carried out by wordplays on the word *millet* such as "alliance of abasement" [zillet ittifakı] and "alliance of malady" [illet ittifakı]. Another venue of demonization was the association of opposition mayoral candidates with terrorist organizations. Erdoğan also blamed Kılıçdaroğlu with Islamophobia and for being "together with terrorists."
82. Kılıçdaroğlu, "Kılıçdaroğlu Yazdı"; "Kılıçdaroğlu: Başörtüsü sorununu."
83. "CHP İstanbul İl Örgütü."
84. "Türkiye'nin ilk Roman kökenli."
85. See, for example, Çarkoğlu, "Political Preferences."
86. "CHP'nin trans adayına LGBTİ"; Sarıöz, "CHP'nin ilk trans yöneticisi."
87. "Kılıçdaroğlu LGBT'yi savundu."
88. "CHP Lideri Kılıçdaroğlu."
89. CHP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, "Ben ömrümde, ülkemizde nefreti."
90. "28 Şubat, başörtülüler, Roboski."
91. Ecevit, *Bu Düzen Değişmelidir*; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit"; Kirisci and Winrow, *Kürt Sorunu*; Uğur Cinar, *Collective Memory and National Membership*.
92. Efeğil, "Analysis of the AKP," 35.
93. Ergil, "The Kurdish Question"; Sarigil and Karakoc, "Inter-ethnic (In)tolerance," 197.
94. "Muharrem İnce'den HDP"; "Muharrem İnce." For example, Muharrem İnce openly criticized the CHP leadership for their "secretive alliance" with HDP and left the CHP and founded his own party barring those "who did not cut their ties with terrorism" from joining his new party.
95. For a detailed analysis, see Emre, Cop, Aladağ, and Arslantaş, *Haksızlıklar Ülkesinde Sosyal Demokrasi*.
96. Uğur Cinar, *Collective Memory and National Membership*, 14.

97. İstanbul Haber Ajansı, “İmamoğlu söz verdi”; “İSMEK’in Kürtçe kurslarına yoğun.” In another instance İmamoğlu openly opposed banning of a play in Kurdish by Governor of İstanbul. See “İmamoğlu’ndan Kürtçe oyunun yasaklanmasına.”
98. CHP, *İkinci Yüzyıla Çağrı Beyannamesi*, 8, 11.
99. T24 Haber Merkezi, “Rawest araştırma.”
100. “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu saldırıya uğradı.” For example, Kılıçdaroğlu received verbal attacks and survived an attempt of lynching by groups attending a funeral over CHP’s alleged connection with the PKK and HDP voiced by the government.
101. George, “Case Studies and Theory.”
102. Ugur Cinar, “Embedded Neopatrimonialism.”
103. Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 7.
104. Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Frega, “The Fourth Stage of Social Democracy.”
105. Eley, *Forging Democracy*.
106. Smith, *That Is Not Who We Are*.

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