# How do political leaders use populist rhetoric to legitimate war?

**Speech Analysis of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**

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# Introduction

"War is not, after all, a malign act of fate - an unexpected volcano eruption or a tornado that spirals up from nowhere" (Carruthers, 2000:16). The conduct of violence today in a modern society ruled by law indeed relies heavily on psychological mobilisation for its success. Thus, in order to produce clear approval of one's military ambitions, one can no longer take a unilateral decision without popular support. As the charter of the United Nations reminds: war begins in the minds of men, thus great processes must be used in order to collectively accept and legitimate the waging of warfare in modern societies. The beginning of 2018 was characterised by the political success of many populist leaders: Donald Trump in the United States, Vladimir Poutine in Russia or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Countries that are led by populist leaders are often perceived by other nations as a threat owing to the fact that they are seen as strong states. In a democratic system, legitimacy is the assumed key to power, consequently populist leaders are very efficient at gaining power. It is interesting to see how this legitimacy is established because of a smart use of populist rhetoric. A modern definition of populism is an ideology that "pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008:3).

Populism as a rhetoric used by political leaders remains largely unstudied as such in International Relations. It is a particular loss, since according to cognitive sciences « When children pass from infancy and toddlerhood to childhood, the parental roles within the socialisation process gradually diminish and are taken over by a wider social context » (Oppenheimer, 2006:275). Thus the political leader can serve as a role model for the citizen who will copy/adopt the leader's values as its own. In the most extreme cases it can be an incentive toward violent behaviour. Studying in International Relations the impact of identity politics on International Relations while considering populism as a political ideology might actually be of great interest. The research question of this paper: 'How do political leaders use populist rhetoric to legitimate war?' comes directly from this thought.

To understand populist rhetoric the focus is not only on the material world but on the signification infused on it. Populist rhetoric produced by political leaders blurs the reality, creating a cognitive one, meaning that reality "is in the eye and mind of the beholder." (Snyder, Tanke, Berscheid, 1977:657). For this propose the Constructivist literature is the best suited to make out how norms though rhetoric shape international relations.

# Literature Review

Populist rhetoric as an incentive to make war has yet to be studied as such in International Relations. "International Relations scholars often downplay emotional influences, casting them as secondary to coalitional or cognitive forces" (Widmaier, 2010:127), but since populism as a political ideology is essentially playing on emotions, the study of it is highly relevant for International Relations. However, we can find some literature recognising the use of political framing through a particular manipulation of speech in order to create violence. Populist discourse relies on identity politics to be efficient, so even though populism in International Relations Theory is not a popular subject, we can find abundant literature concerning the use of identity politics to fulfil a political agenda - such as war.

Constructivism is particularly relevant to the study of populism because "it is less a theory of International relations or security, however than a broader social theory". Indeed as demonstrated before, populism is a multidisciplinary concept, it would make sense that it needs to be studied through several academic fields. Furthermore, structure is approached by the constructivists as a top-down system, which fits with our assumptions that populist politics are created by the powerful actors in International Relations. This literature review will discuss the different constructivist theories (Securitisation, Conventional Constructivism and Critical Constructivism) concerning the use of political framing through use of populist speech in order to legitimate violence/war. We will then make an argument for critical constructivism as the best suited approach to our research question.

Securitisation is a product of the Copenhagen School presented by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde in their work Security: A New Framework for Analysis (1998). They define Securitisation as "the process whereby a securitising actor defines a particular issue or actor as an 'existential threat' to a particular referent object and this move is accepted by a relevant audience" (Williams, 2013:73). Successful securitisation involves the articulation of the threat by an elite (Williams, 2013:72). However, Securitisation theory leaves out a major issue: the importance of identity, which is essential to the proper analysis of the 'threat-making'. Identity and Populism are entwined in such a sense that it would not make sense to study them apart from each other.

According to Hopf (1998:181-185) it is indeed the concept of identity that gives meaning to the separation between conventional and critical constructivists. Both currents agree that international relations are not only affected by power politics but also by ideas and norms. "The fact that we live in an international society means that what we want and, in some ways, who we are are shaped by the social norms, rules, understandings,

and relationships we have with others. These social realities are as influential as material realities in determining behaviour." (Finnemore, 1996:128). The main idea is that "shifts in intervention behavior correspond with changes in normative standards articulated by states concerning appropriate ends and means of military intervention." (Finnemore 1996:2) meaning that we can confer the existence of an influent normative-system in international relations that influence the way we wage wars. However when it comes to the identity concept, both current diverge.

Conventional Constructivists only see national identity as a tool that helps determine state's interest. Identity is something that exists out there and needs to be discovered through analysis. In this sense conventional constructivists can be seen as using positivist epistemology. It is an explanatory theory that aims to explain why state act the way they do. The main voices of conventional constructivism are Katzenstein (1995) and Wendt (1999). This theory is rather interesting for our research question because it consecrates a Security/Identity complex even though it doesn't mention populism as such. The downside of this theory is that it approaches identity as a relatively stable object (Williams, 2013:66).

Critical constructivists explores the relationship between security and identity by outlining how narratives of national identity become dominant and help set the limits for legitimate political action in a particular context (Williams, 2013:66). It approaches identity as a deeply unstable object that is in competition with others. The focus is on the representations of threat, defining who 'we' and 'the others' are in order to legitimate protection against 'them'. Exploring the relationship between security and identity here would be a study of the different competitive representations of a threat in International Relations (Williams, 2013:66). Critical constructivists go beyond questioning why states act the way they do by focusing on how certain actions become possible, thus broadening the actor spectrum to political leaders. The aim is to analyse "how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities" (Doty 1993:298). The main voices of critical constructivism are among others Doty (1993) and Fierke (1998). This theory is the one that is the most relevant in the light of our research question because it focuses on the 'narratives of identity' (Williams, 2013:70) which can work in the study of populism.

The lack of a consensus on defining populism in International Relations makes it difficult for theorists to study it as a sole object, this is why we can mostly find indirect literature on the matter. Securitisation lacks the identity aspect in order to be properly focused and useful to study populism, even though it does focus on legitimating war. Conventional constructivism was on a good track but they conceptualise identity in a way

that doesn't account for the actual stress on identity in international politics. Additionally it also focuses too much on the state level. In my opinion critical constructivism is the theory that is the closest to actually studying populism and its role in legitimating war. It focuses on the way elites create representations to fuel the identity competition in International Relations and as an effect legitimate coercive actions in the process of winning the 'identity battle'.

# Method

The method we will use is speech analysis. The aim of this present study is to create a better understanding of the populist rhetoric that political elites can use to legitimate their political agenda. We will use the following questions as guidelines:

1) Who are 'we'?
2) Who are 'they'? How are 'they' a 'threat'?
3) What is 'our' solution to this 'threat' and how is legitimate?
4) What conclusions can we draw?

Speech analysis is the most relevant methodology to see how a political leader creates a narrative that influences the people. It shows how power is exercised through language. In order to conduct the analysis a few concept borrowed from psychology and cognitive science theories can help like the otherness, stereotypes...

The selected data is a speech available as a written version on the official Presidency of the Republic of Turkey website in the speech and statement section. The speech was given by President Erdogan during the opening of the Grand National Assembly of the 25th term within the second legislative year on January 1st 2015. It is an official statement by the highest political leader of Turkey and it presents a general view of the policies that Erdogan plans to implement during the coming year. What is strong and interesting about this data is that it was held only a few months before Turkey hit Northern Iraq with heavy airstrikes (July 29th 2015). It can be considered as enhancing the enemy images effect because it was encompassed within a critical timeframe. It also gives a clear causality link between speech and action, a slightly obvious demonstration of how words can slay. This speech is to be inserted within a historical context of an ever-lasting conflict between PKK and the Turkish government labelling them 'terrorists'. The weakness of this data is that it doesn't show the live version, it lacks the theatricality of it.

# Analysis

The resistance to war in modern society is of such strength that an organised and aggressive rhetoric is necessary to justify it, an alternative reading of reality is created that can be called an "adult fairy tale" (Keen, 2004:7). The analysis will highlight how this narrative is created.

### 1) Who are 'we'?

Thorough the whole speech Erdogan uses the pronoun 'We' never dissociating himself from the people. This 'We' is a whole, it is a collective "together" (ls. 110, 113) that has gone through a lot of difficult times "We have struggled" (l. 66) "We have seen this structure that killed" (l.71) "We have been struggling for a thousand years" (l.84). The vocabulary implies that 'we' have suffered a great deal but 'we' remained strong and united. Erdogan shouts a lot during his speeches, this speaking style is used only one in the speech for this declaration "ONE NATION, ONE FLAG, ONE HOMELAND and ONE STATE" (l.102). This unity is also enforced by the use of religious rhetoric which is Erdogan's forte. Turkey is part of an ensemble of states that considers religion as a part of their national identity (Sandal & Fox, 2013:17). Religious legitimacy is certainly a defining factor in political discourse including those concerning foreign policy (Sandal & Fox, 2013:18). The term "martyr" (ls 48, 90, 91) is used several times to mark that 'we' are a holy people, and that we get the highest honour in the 'struggle'. Additionally "Allah" (ls. 90, 122) is mentioned, especially on the last sentence as a stamp of legitimacy at the end of the text, it acts as a signature as to give the effect that god himself was upholding the words pronounced by Erdogan.

### 2) Who are 'they'? How are 'they' a 'threat'?

Within the speech we can count 33 mentions of 'terror'/'terrorist' which is built by Erdogan as the ultimate enemy. Those enemies are mentioned only once but then are only referred to as 'terrorists'. It creates according to cognitive sciences a systematic bias, meaning that upon hearing a particular word one's mind will process the information by filtering it with previous images (Blanton, 1996:41). In the case of the word 'terrorist' the ming will systematically make an unconscious negative analogy. The enemy is identified as "DEAŞ [ie: Turkish for Daech/Islamic State], PKK, DHKP-C" (l.51). We focused more on PKK because it has a larger history in Turkish politics and history, ISIS being as such more recent. Erdogan's ambition as stated is "to dry up a swamp" (l. 58). The use of any

word possible in order to take the listener away from the fact that we are talking about actual living persons is a classical rhetoric in the matter of 'enemy making'. It is a form of characterisation, process which to the extreme can cause the complete dehumanisation of the enemy who is "evil" (Keen, 2004:18) and "dehumanised" (Keen, 2004:12). 'They' are a threat because they stand against 'our' core values (cf previous section), 'we' need to react hence the use of the word "fight" seven times.

**3) What is 'our' solution to this 'threat' and how is it legitimate?**

Creating an invasive narrative by associating terrible traits to a figure doesn't automatically mean that this figure is innocent from having them (Keen, 2004:13). However an oversimplified narrative associated with deep emotional affects can conduct to disproportional behavior and divert from other issues (freedom of the press in Turkey for example). The legitimation of taking a military action is naturally flowing from the threat construction in the speech. Since the enemy is a "threat to our country" (l. 38) with its "despicable and felonious attacks" (l. 36) it is only fair to fight them "until arms are buried and concrete poured over them" (l. 38). Also an aggressive and rigid foreign policy against countries 'supporting' the enemy can be legitimised, a warning is issued "we are following you very closely" (l. 49) meaning acute surveillance/intelligence gathering and "One day tongs that you are holding will burn your hands too" (l. 50) "these guns will be pointed at them too" (l.52). Additionally we can see that Erdogan's vocabulary becomes operative, he goes from threatening to using the imperative form and action verbs. At first the herbs describing Erdogan and the people are passive "We have struggled" (l.66), "we have seen this structure that has killed" (l. 71), "We have witnessed" (L.73) "We have been struggling" l.84), it implies a static position of suffering. But then at the end of the speech, the vocabulary becomes active, building up on the enemy narrative, it stirs up the emotions in order to create a climax through action : "We must be strongwild" (l.99) "Let us make good use of this opportunity" (l.98) "Let us protect Turkey together" (l.100) "We must build Turkey's future" (l.103), "Let us build the powerful, great and new Turkey together" (103). This is the process used to create this legitimation of policies: a mix of proximity to the people, 'enemy making' and threat. This is populist rhetoric.

**4) What conclusions can we draw?**

« So great are the psychological resistance to war in modern nations that every war must appear to be a war of defence against a menacing, murderous aggressor. » (Lasswell,

1927:47). President Erdogan uses a very special rhetoric meant to make his audience react in a way that is favourable for his political agenda. Populism is used in this end to create trust between the leader and his people. This trust is established by using a familiar discourse in a vocabulary that is relatable for the common citizen. It is also established by being loud, the aim of populism is to express the voice the 'silent majority', this is why charism and theatricality has a very important place for the success of a populist leader. The political leader must appear full of strength to the audience. One might notice that all successful political leaders currently at power are male - Marine Lepen having lost the last French presidential elections. However the forceful style of populist leaders isn't more important than the actual content of the discourse. Trust is reinforced by the unity caused by the struggle against a 'common enemy'. Erdogan's recurrent rhetoric on terrorism and the place of the targeted Turkish population in this context has created a worldview that might not actually be representative of the actual international relations. After this speech, Turkey launched itself in a long lasting conflict that is still going on today (Kurdish-Turkish conflict 2015-present). The security threat could be considered as minimal however the heavier strikes against PKK supposed settlements in Northern Iraq were conduced that year by the Turkish Army. Discourse surrounding PKK as terrorists has later on be merged with the one concerning the YPG from Kurdish Syria. Several Erdogan's address on the matter of an independent of Rojava were constructed in the same fashion than the speech analysed in this paper. We could fairly conclude that populist rhetoric had an impact on International Relations where like in our case it can legitimate the decision to go to war. It is interesting to note the effect that emotions - trust, identity, fear, uncertainty, alienation - can have on International Relations. The constructivist view that anarchy is not rational can be sustained (Wendt, 1992:394).

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