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## INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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### **From Christchurch to Turkey's elections: A global symbiosis of antagonisms**

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#### **“Grand narratives” in an entangled world**

References to a history of antagonism between a Christian West and a Muslim East played a pivotal role in the staging of the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019. The symbols chosen by the terrorist had a ready appeal to both of these constructed “sides:” the one identified with “Europe,” and the one represented by the “Muslim East.” One of the declared aims of the shooter was to “drive a wedge” and “incite violence, retaliation and further divide” between the two.<sup>1</sup> The plan was partially successful. In his election campaign, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had been highlighted in the terrorist’s manifesto as one of Europe’s main enemies, drew heavily on the mosque attacks and their framing to mobilize his constituency by presenting himself and the Turkish nation as crucial players within an eschatological drama.

Countering the alleged end of grand narratives,<sup>2</sup> it has been argued that current “narratives of the extreme” may be particularistic and incommensurable, but nonetheless still “grand.” While targeted at specific groups, they are “grand” in the sense that they aim to explain the world as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, under conditions of globalised communication, such “grand narratives” of distinct communities are often interrelated. To grasp these relations appears especially appropriate when they are made explicit and are emotionally charged, for example by strong antagonism. Using the example of Christchurch, we argue that the attacks’ framing by the shooter has been (re-)produced by Erdoğan in order to lend plausibility to narratives of the current Turkish government and of the President in particular. This demonstrates that relationships between antagonistic narratives are often symbiotic; separate communities equally contribute to the same patterns through globally entangled media interaction. We therefore question the idea of our contemporary era as one bereft

of grand narratives.

### **Staging a global drama**

The massacre in two mosques in Christchurch was planned and staged as a media event; the shootings were live-streamed on Facebook, and with his manifesto the shooter disseminated his desired reading of the events. The text and pictures in the manifesto alluded to a grand narrative of global war between “Islam” and “Europe;” it included references to the crusades, the siege of Vienna in 1683, and presented the vision of a de-mosqued Hagia Sophia. Parts of the text was specifically directed to a Turkish audience and claimed a special role for Turkey within the insinuated drama. Meanwhile, the footage showed that the assassin’s weapons bore the dates of historic European battles against the Ottoman Empire.

Following the example of New Zealand’s Prime Minister, there was a certain agreement among political leaders and media not to give more attention than necessary to the shooter’s own framing of the massacre. In contrast, Erdoğan did not hesitate to take up and reproduce the assassin’s symbols and narratives, transforming them into resources for his own ongoing electoral campaign. This move was not surprising. Throughout the current decade, Erdoğan has used campaign strategies with similar patterns. The shooting gave him the opportunity to boost these strategies before the vitally important municipal elections, which were to take place two weeks after the attack. His public reaction to the attacks allows us to examine his strategy and to understand how narratives involving enemy images symbiotically cross-fertilize.

### *The use of horrifying imagery*

At election rallies, Erdoğan played the gunman’s graphic footage on giant screens, showing different parts of the recording about a dozen times.<sup>4</sup> He did this despite his strong past opposition to media attention to earlier terror attacks, particularly those occurring in Turkey, on the grounds that such publicity encourages terrorists.<sup>5</sup> While Erdoğan’s screenings were criticized,<sup>6</sup> and while concerns were expressed in Turkish media over the possibility of encouraging terrorism and the effects of such scenes on children,<sup>7</sup> they obviously were expected to fulfill important functions as emotional illustrations of Erdoğan’s central narratives.

### *Narrative of ‘outside forces’*

Over the past decade, a discourse of ‘external forces’ (*dış güçler*) has been used as Erdoğan’s foremost argument, particularly when faced with criticism and challenges such as the Gezi Park protests of 2013.<sup>8</sup> Blaming economic woes and social tensions on outsiders rather than on the government has obvious appeal, as does the prospect of persuading society that there exists a

serious external threat. Within this framing, of course, Erdoğan and the ruling AKP are shown to be saviors.

Erdoğan used the massacre to portray himself and his government, as in previous election campaigns, as the source of salvation of both Turkey and of the wider Muslim world, and depicted the latter as dependent on a strong Turkey. “Turkey has no other option than holding firm. If the Turkish nation weakens, the Jerusalem cause, the Palestinian cause, and the cause of justice would also weaken. Turkey is the symbol of peace and trust for the millions at the other edge of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

This ‘external forces’ notion is at once indistinct and multifunctional, as it directs suspicion towards a shadowy purported enemy. Yet, given the history of stereotypes in public discourse, the implied antagonists are the Christian West in general, as well as Israel.<sup>10</sup> On the 19th March in Ereğli, while referring to the Battle of Gallipoli and to the Christchurch massacre, Erdoğan declared, “the only reason [for the attacks]: we are Muslim, and they are Christian.”<sup>11</sup> At a rally in Üsküdar, Istanbul, the same day, he evoked “remnant crusaders, Byzantine zealots and neo-Nazi scrap” as the enemies of the Turkish nation.<sup>12</sup>

In the run-up to the municipal elections of 2019, the Christchurch massacre was incorporated into this discourse about foreign enemies. “This is not an isolated event, it is something more organized,” Erdoğan said, later accusing the West of “preparing” the terrorist’s manifesto and “handing it to him.”<sup>13</sup> He went on to correlate the massacre with Turkey’s problems on the Syrian and Iraqi borders, in Cyprus and the eastern Mediterranean Sea, with the problems of Turks in Europe, and even with the coup attempt of 2016 and the current economic crisis, contending that “they are testing our patience and determination” through all these attempts and “dark alliances.” At an election rally that coincided with the commemoration of the 1915 Gallipoli campaign, when Ottoman soldiers also defeated British-led forces from Australia and New Zealand, Erdoğan said: “Your grandparents came here and returned in coffins. Have no doubt, we will send you back like your grandfathers!”<sup>14</sup> Here again the language employed mirrors that of the New Zealand shooter, strongly evoking a global battle to come while referring to a common past reduced to antagonistic encounters, such as the Crusades or the Ottoman sieges of Vienna – references that have all willingly been taken up by Erdoğan.<sup>15</sup> The attacks of Christchurch were thus used to contribute to Erdoğan’s strategy of elevating the elections to a global and almost eschatological dimension.

### *Proclaiming a ‘matter of survival’*

The most prominent discourse of the 2019 election campaign was ‘the matter of survival’ (*beka sorunu*), which implicated that the survival of Turkey itself is deeply connected to the continued survival of the current government and of the alliance between the parties AKP, MHP and BBP.

Erdoğan organized his election rally in Izmir with his most significant ally, Devlet Bahçeli, the MHP chairman, who said in reference to the New Zealand massacre: “Have you understood now, why survival is important? The great powers of the world are looking forward with their collaborators to our fall. Therefore the only way is our alliance.” He made reference to rifles and the manifesto and proclaimed the blood-curdling line: “Hey crusaders! We are here, come on then! We are waiting for you, come and let us drown you in your blood!”<sup>16</sup>

In his manifesto, the mosque shooter identified Erdoğan and the Turkish nation as crucial for Islam and for the global Muslim community. Among “high profile leaders” to be killed, alongside the German chancellor Angela Merkel, he lists Erdoğan as “the leader of one of the oldest enemies of our people [i.e. Europeans], and the leader of the largest islamic [sic] group in Europe.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, both sides agree on the narrative of a comprehensive battle in which Turkey prominently represents one party, and global salvation therefore depends on the fate of the Turkish nation, one way or another.

### *The symbol of Hagia Sophia*

One of the most fertile tokens of this joint narrative is the Hagia Sophia. From a symbol of Christian sovereignty and power, it was transformed into a landmark of Muslim triumph after its conversion to a mosque following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. In 1934, it became a museum; some Islamist groups in Turkey have seen it as a symbol of secularist suppression of Turkey's Islamic identity, with the hope and expectation that one day it would once again become a mosque. The shooter of Christchurch, contrarily, warned the Turks that “the Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian [sic] owned once more”.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the sensitivity of the issue, Erdoğan never raised the issue of the Hagia Sophia in previous campaigns. Rather, he brushed off demands from the crowds at some of his rallies. At least, that was his initial reaction in Tekirdağ two days after the massacre, when the crowd started chanting “Open Hagia Sophia [as a mosque].” While he did cater to strong emotions by pointing to the role of Istanbul/Constantinople in the shooter's manifesto and having promised at a memorial event for the Battle of Çanakkale that Istanbul would not be turned into Constantinople again (thereby linking distinct events of Turkish history again through the grand narrative of ongoing battle),<sup>19</sup> Erdoğan now warned his audience: “It has a political dimension. Let's not be deceived. It is a ruse.” Instead, he urged people to pray at the Sultan Ahmet or the recently built Çamlıca Mosques, saying: “We know how to take the step and we know the political language of it. We would not take the step just because these dishonest people so wish!”<sup>20</sup> In the last days of the campaign, however, when Erdoğan's power seemed under threat, he changed his mind and he talked for the first time about converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque: “As you know, the mosque was converted to a museum in

1935, as a reflection of the Republican People's Party (CHP) mentality. We may as well take a step and change that,” he concluded, pointing to the harshly secularist policies of the CHP in the 1930s, with this party constituting the main opposition today. “After the elections, we will change Hagia Sophia’s name from museum to mosque,” he told a crowd in Istanbul two days before the election, “We have plans and we are going to implement these plans.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Symbiotic antagonisms**

As he himself stated, one of the goals of the shooter of Christchurch was to alienate Turkey from the European NATO powers and “drive a wedge” between them.<sup>22</sup> At one level his plan was successful, as Turkey's most powerful politician has willingly taken up the shooter’s narrative and contributed to the propagation of his agenda. “Grand narratives of the extreme” are crucial to the soft power repertoire of the Turkish government,<sup>23</sup> which relies on and reproduces conspiracy myths especially in times of crisis.<sup>24</sup> But, as not only Christchurch has reminded us, “grand narratives of the extreme”<sup>25</sup> are prevalent also on a global scale – and they are perhaps becoming even more important as realities are fragmenting. However, the outcome of the elections in Turkey may be taken as a suggestion that when economic grievances tell a different story, pathetic narratives will fail. In addition, as Joseph S. Nye has put it: “[...]if a narrative is too transparently manipulative and discounted as propaganda, it loses persuasive power.”<sup>26</sup> However, when exactly this point will be reached depends on circumstances and audience. Indeed, in the hands of the latter remains the power of grand narratives and the decision whether or not to contribute to such self-fulfilling prophecies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Anonymous 2019, [6]. We refer to the 74-page anonymous document titled “The Great Replacement” that has been made available on various websites in the aftermath of the attacks. The document contains no page numbers; the numbers we give in square brackets refer to the respective page numbers of the PDF file.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979, pp. 63-68; *passim*.

<sup>3</sup>Schellh h et al. characterise such “narratives of the extreme” as delusional, disconnected from reality, and enthusiastic about exclusion, often in a way prone to violence (Jennifer Schellh h et al., “Einleitung”, in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Gro erz hlungen des Extremen. Neue Rechte, Populismus, Islamismus, War on Terror*, Bielefeld: Transcript. 2019, pp. 8 f.).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., his appearance in Tekirda  on 16 March, transmitted live by the official YouTube channel of the AKP and still available, “Cumhurbaşkanımız Erdoğan, Tekirda Mitingi'nde konuştu” [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=725XKRnKFAc>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Publication of such news had indeed indirectly been banned by decree under state of emergency in March 2017 (Resm Gazete, “Olağanüst halkapsamında bazı d zenlemeleryapılması hakkında kanun h k m nde kararname” [<http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2017/01/20170106M1-2.htm>], accessed 11 May 2019). When New Zealand’s foreign minister Winston Peters met with Erdoğan after the attacks, he raised the issue of public screening of the footage at his election rallies. Two hours after this meeting, however, Erdoğan showed the recordings once again, in Konya, and continued showing them at rallies thereafter.

<sup>6</sup>BBC News, 18 March 2019, “Christchurch shootings: Erdogan criticised for showing NZ video” [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47609814>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>7</sup>T24, 18 March 2019, “Erdođan'ın mitingde katliam g runtulerini izletmesine uzmanlar ne diyor?” [<https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-in-mitingde-katliam-goruntulerini-izletmesine-uzmanlar-ne-diyor,812744>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>8</sup>Eirikur Bergmann, *Conspiracy and Populism. The Politics of Misinformation*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup>Sputnik, 19 March 2019, “Erdođan: İstanbul'u Konstantinopolis'e  evirmeye  alışan Bizans artıklarına okkalı bir tokat indirmenizi istiyorum” [<https://tr.sputniknews.com/amp/turkiye/201903191038290972-erdogan-istanbul-konstantinopolis-tokat-istiyorum/>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>10</sup>With these kinds of allusions Erdoğan follows in the tradition of Necmettin Erbakan and his *MilliG r ş* manifesto (Necmettin Erbakan, *MilliG r ş*, İstanbul; Derg h Yayınları, 1975).

<sup>11</sup>T24, 19 March 2019, “Erdođan: Bunun hesabını Yeni Zelanda sormazsa biz sormasını biliriz” [<https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-eregli-icimizde-ukde-kalmisti,812964>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>12</sup>H rriyet, 19 March 2019, “Erdođan 'yolumuzdan alıkoyamazlar' dedi ve tek tek saydı” [<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/yolumuzdan-alikoyamazlar-dedi-ve-tek-tek-saydi-hacl-i-artiklari-bizans-heveslileri-neo-nazi-bozuntulari-41154945>] (Accessed 11 May 2019)

<sup>13</sup>Mark Lowen, BBC News, 20 March 2019, “Christchurch shootings: Why Turkey's Erdogan uses attack video” [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47638936>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>14</sup>T24, 18 March 2019, “Erdođan: Dedeleriniz geldi, kimi ayaklarının  zerinde kimi tabutla d nd ” [<https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-canakkale-de-konusuyor,812796>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>15</sup>BirG n, 16 March 2019, “Erdođan: Yeni Zelanda saldırıganı İstanbul'a gelmiş, bađlantılarını ortaya  ıkaracađız” [<https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/erdogan-yeni-zelanda-saldirgani-istanbula-gelmis-baglantilarini-ortaya-cikaracagiz.html>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>16</sup>BBC News T rk e, 17 March 2019, “Erdođan: Bunlar İzmir'e ceketimizi atsak kazanırız diye bakıyor” [<https://www.bbc.com/turkce/amp/haberler-turkiye-47603457>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>17</sup>Anonymous 2019, [39]

<sup>18</sup>Anonymous 2019, [28]

<sup>19</sup>Sabah, 18 March 2019, “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: İstanbul'u Konstantinopol yapamayacaksınız” [<https://www.sabah.com.tr/webtv/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-istanbulu-konstantinopol-yapamayacaksiniz>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>20</sup>Sputnik, 16 March 2019, “Yeni Zelanda'daki saldırının videosunu izleten Erdoğan: Canı İstanbul'a gelmiş, bađlantılarını ortaya  ıkaracađız” [<https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201903161038235772-erdogan-istanbul-gelecegiz-camileri-yikacagiz-yeni-zelanda-nere-turkiye-nere/>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>21</sup>Reuters, 29 March 2019, “Turkey's Erdogan says he plans to change Hagia Sophia's title from museum to mosque” [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-election-museum/turkeys-erdogan-says-he-plans-to-change-hagia-sophias-title-from-museum-to-mosque-idUSKCN1RA1ZB>] (Accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>22</sup>Anonymous 2019, [6]

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<sup>23</sup>For the notion of soft power, see Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in Modern Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

<sup>24</sup>See e.g. Türkay Salim Nefes, “The conspiratorial style in Turkish politics: discussing the deep state in the parliament”, in: Joseph E. Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People who Believe Them*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 385-395.

<sup>25</sup>Jennifer Schellhöh et al., “Einleitung”, in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Groß Erzählungen des Extremen. Neue Rechte, Populismus, Islamismus, War on Terror*, Bielefeld: Transcript. 2019, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 94.