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## Understanding right-wing populists' anti-abortion politics in Turkey: The symbolic violence of the state

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### Abstract

This study investigates how symbolic violence is shaping anti-abortion stances associated with legitimising right-wing populist policies. The prominent questions are as follows: What are the institutional and politico-administrative mechanisms that are impacting anti-abortion politics in terms of material and symbolic violence? How and to what extent does anti-abortion politics influence the interplay between symbolic and material state violence? The study argues that reproduction-centred policies and material and symbolic violence have intensified through anti-abortion politics in the discursive context of the social reproduction crisis in Turkey. It explores the institutional actions and the legitimisation mechanisms of anti-abortion policies in relation to the penetration of right-wing populist politics after the authoritarian turn of 2010. This qualitative case study uses critical discourse analysis. It interprets the public speeches of representatives of the government and documentary data concerning the ruling party's programmes, development plans and relevant legislation. The research provides a gendered perspective on the anti-abortion policies that anchor right-wing populism in terms of the crisis of social reproduction. It also contributes to critical state theory and feminist scholarship on right-wing populism.

**Keywords:** right-wing populism; symbolic and material violence; crisis of social reproduction; anti-abortion politics; Turkey

## 1 Introduction

Recently, there has been much talk globally about the dangers of right-wing populism, reflecting persistent and rising authoritarianism<sup>1</sup> in political practices.<sup>2</sup> A major feature of right-wing populism is that it rends new cleavages based on values, beliefs and traditions

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<sup>1</sup> It can be stated that right-wing populism, which should not be discussed separately from rising authoritarianism, relies on short-term and variable strategies in order to avoid addressing the underlying causes of the actual crisis of neoliberalism.

<sup>2</sup> For a conceptual distinction between left-wing and right-wing populisms and its implications for problem definition and policy-making, see Gandesha (2018).

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in addition to the existing ones of class, ethnicity and gender. These cleavages are mobilised by emotional appeals that elevate fear, insecurity and anxiety about the future of the nation, society and family (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Ádám & Bozóki, 2016). Right-wing populism has affected daily social life by penetrating these microspheres built upon the legitimacy of electoral representation. It has integrated nationalist, racist, sexist and anti-freedom views into government policy discourses (Ádám & Bozóki, 2016; McCoy & Somer, 2019).

Previous research has identified certain common features of right-wing populism in relation to gender and sexuality: it supports the heteronormative nuclear family as the model of society, attacks reproductive rights and gender studies, questions sex education, rejects same-sex marriage and seeks to re-install the biological understanding of binary gender differences. In addition, right-wing populists depict opposing stances as obstacles to family and demographic goals (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Sauer, 2020; Cosar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Yazar, 2020).

This study focuses on anti-abortion politics, one of the prominent issues of right-wing populism. In Turkey, anti-abortion campaigns of right-wing populists directly target reproductive rights. There is an increasing prevalence of traditionalist and anti-abortion policies, such as restricting and banning access to abortion services (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Bogaards, 2018; Czerwinski, 2004). In the United States, laws restricting abortion, which began their current rise in the 2000s, have intensified with anti-abortion politics in recent years (Edgar, 2020). In Hungary, a new period of anti-abortion politics began in 2010, while in Poland, abortion has been completely banned by laws regulating the life of the unborn (Hussein et al., 2018; Koralewska & Zielińska, 2022). In Italy, the ruling right-wing party supports anti-abortion politics and hints at expanding these in the future. In Turkey, abortion has been de facto banned in public hospitals and has not been a public service since 2012 (Erkmen, 2020; O'Neil & Çarkoğlu, 2019).

Previous research, mainly in the fields of social policy, reproductive rights and social movements, has mainly discussed the political context of religion and conservatism in relation to the foetus and women's equality rights. This study argues that anti-abortion politics has been used for the legitimisation purposes of right-wing politics. It claims that right-wing abortion politics is a response to a perceived crisis of social reproduction. Hence, it focuses on the motivation for anti-abortion politics in the discursive context of the social reproduction crisis, what kind of political practice it envisages, and why and how this political practice transforms the female body into a political or public object. Turkey is a genuine example of right-wing populism and how the alleged crisis of social reproduction has crystallised in anti-abortion politics. In the context of persistent authoritarian politics and the spread of anti-abortion policies in Turkey, the study explores how right-wing populism is trying to penetrate the capillaries of society with its anti-abortion politics.

## 2 The crisis of social reproduction and the case of Turkey

The concept of social reproduction<sup>3</sup> understands the gendered nature of social relations and labour power – thus the reproduction of life – and the production process of commodities as two sides of the same coin (Hülagü, 2021). Social reproduction requires workers who are able and willing to perform everyday labour and a generational flow of replacements for workers who retire or die. This requires a significant amount of unpaid care and reproductive work, including pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017).

The crisis of social reproduction<sup>4</sup> refers to how the current social reproduction policies were triggered by the economic, social and political crisis of neoliberalism following the 2008 financial crash and how the state re-established the gender-based social order. The fundamental tool of right-wing populism for addressing the crisis of social reproduction is the reproduction of ideals, thought patterns, cultural imaginaries and values accompanied by gender-based social relations and domination of the female body in its symbolic cultural order: the heterosexual, nuclear family (Luxton, 2014; Weeks, 2011), which can legitimise right-wing politics.

In Turkey, the crisis of neoliberalism since 2008 has implied a shift in capital accumulation to domestic sectors that prioritise a young male workforce, and in response to rising demographic concerns,<sup>5</sup> the government has changed its social reproduction policies. According to claims in government party programmes, Turkey is on the verge of experiencing an ageing population yet needs a young, dynamic workforce; therefore, fertility rates should not fall below a certain level. With the Protection of the Family and Dynamic Population Programme (2014–2018),<sup>6</sup> the government aimed to protect and strengthen the family institution and intergenerational relations, reconcile work and family life and increase the total fertility rate. Accordingly, new incentives were announced to protect the family and motherhood, promote women's flexible employment, and support working mothers with more children. These incentives include an early retirement option

<sup>3</sup> The focus of this study is not the field of social reproduction itself but rather how it has been restructured by right-wing populism and, more broadly, by the state, apropos of abortion politics. For a comprehensive study on social reproduction, see Bhattacharya (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Two main dynamics shape the political context of the crisis of social reproduction: i) The persistent struggle of feminist movements that criticise both the gender-based expectations that a woman should become a mother and wife and gender-based, racialised sexual forms and advocate concerning daily issues in life such as lack of access to birth control and abortion (see Fraser, 2017; Luxton, 2014; Sears, 2017). ii) Right-wing populist ideas, especially when incorporated into governmental positions, attempt to resolve the crisis of masculinity resulting from the political struggle between traditionalist and critical stances on social reproduction and the socioeconomic crisis of neoliberalism. On the crisis of social production perceived through the lens of the 'male problem' of the capitalist state and violence against women, see Hülagü (2021). On the framework of masculinist restoration, see Akkan (2021).

<sup>5</sup> For the government, the main concern about the low fertility rates relates to the Western provinces. The total fertility rate has stabilised at the level of replacement, ranging from 3.41 children per woman in eastern Turkey to 1.93 in the western regions (UNFPA, 2013) <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/portal-document/Turkey> (Accessed: 07-10-2022)

<sup>6</sup> Development Ministry (2015) <https://dspace.ceid.org.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/247/ekutuphane3.4.6.22.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed: 10-10-2022)

for mothers of five children and the right to a pension for mothers of eight children. Among the most notable incentives are the option of part-time work for working mothers and a lump sum payment for each birth.

In fact, there is still a considerable imbalance in women's participation in the labour force<sup>7</sup> and the family is still the main unit engaged in unpaid care work,<sup>8</sup> while the size of the population has not changed significantly. And yet, the government aims to restore the patriarchal family<sup>9</sup> by readjusting the work-life balance of families and supporting unpaid care for children, the disabled and the elderly (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Akkan, 2021). Furthermore, it strives to reproduce the young workforce, thus supporting economic growth through the ideal of competitiveness that stems from neoliberalism (Özkan Kerestecioglu, 2014; Korkman, 2015).

The government's pro-natalist and pro-family stance has escalated right-wing political ideals and restored gender hierarchies. The restructuring of social reproduction has intensified family- and women-centred policies in all policy areas, but with the fundamental transformation of these policies. The new policies put pressure on the female body to bear and raise children, care for family members and maintain the reproduction of households and the wider community. In this context, the right-wing populist understanding is that the crisis of social reproduction stems from previous changes to the patriarchal gender contract. The new changes should, therefore, abandon the idea of gender equality and annul the previous changes made in favour of women (Hülagü, 2021). This raises the question of how these new family- and women-centred policies are used to legitimise right-wing populist politics. The empirical section of this study examines this question in the context of anti-abortion politics in Turkey.

### 3 Conceptual and analytical framework

#### 3.1 Symbolic violence

Using the concept of 'symbolic violence' developed by Pierre Bourdieu, this study explores how symbolic sources are instrumentalised to legitimise right-wing populist politics. The concept of symbolic violence can be used to explain the mechanisms of state interventions in political practice. Bourdieu (1979) sees politics as a field with its own rules, interests and aims, played out by politicians to gain mass support. He refers to symbolic violence while pointing to the ritual characteristics and emotional appeal of elections, public speeches and campaigns. Accordingly, social actors are not merely 'pieces' which are moved by material forces but actors who are the bearers of cognitive-symbolic structures and have

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Time Use Survey (2014–2015), women spend 4.17 hours per day on household and family care, compared to only 0.51 hours for men. See TÜİK (2015) <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Zaman-Kullanim-Arastirmasi-2014-2015-18627> (Accessed: 08-10-2022)

<sup>8</sup> Fifty-five per cent of women who are not in the labour force cite being 'busy with housework' as the reason for not being in the labour force, and the share of flexible working among women is more than three times that of men (TÜİK, 2016) <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Kadin-2017-27594> (Accessed: 08-10-2022.)

<sup>9</sup> For an example of how the Islamic media is reporting this, see Bulaç (2013). 'Men are pushed to murder because women work outside the home,' <https://t24.com.tr/haber/ali-bulac-kadin-calistigi-icin-erkek-cinayete-italiyor,221639>

agency (Bourdieu, 2014). Symbolic violence, ultimately, refers to the types of constraints that occur between objective-material structures and mental-symbolic structures, which, at the same time, rely on unconscious agreements (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 80). For Bourdieu, the logic of subordination is to believe and obey, while the dominant actor ensures belief and obedience through mechanisms of legitimacy. Symbolic structures, a principle in the construction of social reality, constitute the primary sources of this legitimisation.

It should be noted here that without a broader consideration of the state as a form of social relations, the discussion of right-wing populist leaders and symbolic violence as a populist legitimising device will mask the complex social relations that extend beyond the form of the state and its distinctive capacities. Bourdieu, who placed symbolic violence at the conceptual centre of his research, attributed the monopoly on this violence to the state. In the current form of the state, symbolic violence manifests itself as state practice. For this reason, the concept of the 'institutional materiality of the state' can be applied in line with the framework of Poulantzas' (1978) relational state approach. Thus, the organisation of social reproduction can be interpreted through the Bourdieusian view of this relation in daily practice through the relational analysis of the state (Bourdieu, 1994).

The following section addresses how the state, as an area in which material and symbolic violence crystallises, organises social reproduction and how material and symbolic violence interact with legitimate right-wing politics in relation to the female body. This section seeks to answer the following questions: What are the institutional and politico-administrative mechanisms that shape anti-abortion politics in terms of material and symbolic violence? How does the broad institutional and social penetration of symbolic violence legitimise right-wing policies?

### 3.2 Social reproduction is a sphere of the interplay between the material and the symbolic

Poulantzas understands that the state's presence in production relations has evolved throughout the history of capitalism. In other words, the forms that the state takes depend on the transformations in production relations and social class struggles. One of the most important features of this is that the capitalist state appears to be separate from production relations, but at the same time, it forms the basis of the institutional structure of these relations (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 15). This means that the state takes different legitimate forms depending on its conflicts and contradictions with social classes, and the related processes depend upon material and symbolic violence.

Material violence, in its barest form, is understood as violence done to bodies. One of the main manifestations of power, and the main condition for its establishment and survival, is the coercion, threat and punishment of bodies because the body is a political institution. Therefore, the state shapes bodies, subjugating, moulding and squeezing them into institutions and apparatuses. Symbolic violence comes into play in the process of realising the relationship between coercion and consent and in the process of creating and maintaining consent. Symbolic violence functions as a form of legitimation in a set of political-economic material practices that extend to the customs, manners and lifestyles of those who rule (Poulantzas, 1978). While Poulantzas captures the material and symbolic power of the state in terms of social relations, Bourdieu explains how this symbolic vio-

lence is organised in concrete processes and how it penetrates daily relations. That is, he deciphers the mystery of the state on a practical level.

For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a condition for implementing the monopoly of material violence. The process of symbolic violence takes place in a community through actors-perpetrators who have a certain habitus. This ensures legitimacy in the maintenance of the social order, the continuity of authority and the construction of consent (Bourdieu, 2014). The use of symbolic forms and power in social reproduction involves the imposition of dominant social groups' vision of society through struggles and conflicts. The systems of meaning, classification and interpretation ensure the maintenance of power either by masking the arbitrary nature of that power or by the (mis)recognition of the subordinated. Symbolic violence is a hidden and polite, gentle version of violence and is based on the automatic acceptance of already existing postulates and axioms in the world we are born into, without the need to implant them (Loyal, 2017). Bourdieu does not see language as an autonomous area of communication but correlates it with power. According to him, the power of words does not come from the words themselves but from the institutions that give a person the authority to speak. Words are expressions of dictums and rituals, and they are part of the symbolic struggles in everyday life. They represent symbolic authority, and they involve the socially recognised power to impose a certain vision of the social world and its division (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2016).

In fact, the state as a political form of social relations represents a functional practice for maintaining a masculinised political rationality related to competitive power in neoliberalism and a symbolic order based on gender. The institutions of the state reproduce, in different forms and at different levels, the gender-based hierarchies of capitalism and the nation-state in which capitalism developed. Thus, state power and gender relations are institutional and material intensifications of social power (Poulantzas, 1978). The development of the gender-based organisation of the modern state, together with patriarchal relations, shapes the division of labour between public and private spheres and between production and social reproduction functions based on gender (Wöhl, 2014). State institutions, normative heterosexual family life, the gender-based division of labour and the gender selectivity of institutions shape gender relations distinctively. Accordingly, women and men embody socially different gender identities and interests, and the relations between them are institutionally and symbolically structured in an asymmetrical way. The state is one of the main actors that defines and mobilises institutional mechanisms and symbolic practices at material and discursive levels in the processes of transforming, maintaining and reproducing these power relations (Jessop, 2004).

These symbolic practices are imprinted in social structures in forms expressed in the division of labour between genders, bodies and minds. They are constructed within cognitive structures and assumed to be impeccably natural. Gender differentiation in the social organisation of time and space provides women and men with different familiarities. The embodiment of cultural arbitrariness, namely the permanent construction of the unconscious, occurs through the masculinisation of the male body and the feminisation of the female body (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2016). In this way, the state defines the basis for the rational and normative convenience of the social world which creates unity and consensus. It creates the hidden principle of the orthodoxy which manifests itself in social and public order. Thanks to the direct agreement of people who have similar categories of



ideas and perceptions that the state has created and imprinted on things in the social world, state power as a symbolic power ensures the unity of belief, subordination and thinking among subordinates (Loyal, 2017).

Therefore, the state oppresses not only through its ideological or legal, institutional means but also through its symbols and identities and the process of creating subject formations based on gender. If, for example, the exploitation of existing gender differences is found to be 'profitable', the division of labour becomes structural and organisational. State rulers and politicians can abuse gender differentiation by politically exploiting this socially constructed differentiation without being questioned (Wöhl, 2014). The existing gender regime, therefore, on the one hand emphasises the abstract equality of women as citizens before the law, but on the other constantly dissolves this equality to the detriment of women in practice.

Such dissolution and restructuring mainly occur in crisis situations. The area of social reproduction is a key factor in the reproduction of social life and its stabilisation. In the area of labour reproduction, stability requires the working population to increase or decrease according to the needs of competitive capital accumulation. This includes biological reproduction, the care and rearing of the next generation, and the provision of a labour surplus or control for population planning, and as such, the 'gender difference' becomes an established social institution for the capitalist system (Weeks, 2011).

### 3.3 The context of right-wing populism in Turkey

The population policies of capitalist states tend to rely on the gender-based social reproduction crisis framework, which exerts material and symbolic pressure and reinforces the regulatory role of a gender regime based on gender differences in capital accumulation (Hülagü, 2021). In Turkey, where right-wing populism has become prevalent since 2010, the government has taken radical steps back from the regulations implemented in its first period (2002–2007), which favoured the position of women in social reproduction and aimed to increase the well-being of female citizens.<sup>10</sup> The relative improvements for women resulted from struggles for social reproduction that challenged gender-based divisions of labour and hierarchies. This process, which empowered women and left men less able to fulfil their traditional roles, unsettled patriarchal relations and began to dissolve the family, leading to an increase in material and symbolic violence. Although it was not new for the family to occupy a politically important place in the neoliberal social formation, the AKP placed the family at the centre of the political agenda. In this context, the family appears as the ideal institution through which to frame and address the crisis of social reproduction and, at the same time, to build and maintain hegemony in a conservative and Islamist society. The family is important as it supports men with care work, resolves their crisis of masculinity, and meets the needs of production by caring for and maintaining the population.

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<sup>10</sup> The first period of the AKP (2002–2007) witnessed both regulations that challenged the gender-based division of labour between women and men and also practices that opposed these regulations (see Hülagü, 2021; Erkmen, 2020; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017).

These right-wing populist and family-centred policies can use two types of incentives to overcome the social reproduction crisis: promotions and sanctions (or carrots and sticks), both materially and symbolically. The basis of both is the role attributed to the family in regulating society and building the social power of the state, especially in times of crisis. Particularly on the right and in conservative circles, crisis frames are highly functional in the penetration of the state into the capillaries of society through the reproduction and strengthening of family structures and in the application of symbolic violence (Yılmaz, 2018; Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). These incentives support the reproduction of the neoliberal-patriarchal family and are embedded in development programmes based on national and religious foundations. For example, the Development and Democratisation Programme explicitly stated that the family was the basis of society and that family-centred policies would be prioritised (AK Parti, 2002). In 2005, the Family Guide, supported by the Prime Minister's Office, aimed to provide information on sexuality, reproduction and family life to couples about to get married (Başbakanlık, 2005). Since 2010, reproduction has been given a prominent place in the government's population and family policy documents.

These strategies, which the AKP has used with varying intensity throughout its rule by placing the family at the centre, need to be understood as gendered cultural practices and as gendered norms of capitalist relations built on the symbolic order of these practices. In this way, gendered political subject-object formations and the effects of material and symbolic violence can be traced. Considering anti-abortion politics as a response of right-wing populism to the social reproduction crisis, we can explore how symbolic violence is manifested in daily life. It can be shown how material and symbolic violence is crystallised in women's bodies and how right-wing populist politics transforms the female body into a public object. Returning to Bourdieu and bearing in mind the complex social relations behind this practice, we can ask what the sources of the symbolic are and how practice creates the symbol.

The following section addresses how right-wing populist leaders attempt to overcome the crisis of social reproduction through anti-abortion politics and how, in the Turkish context, they legitimise their authoritarian policies through symbolic violence. It seeks to answer the following question: How and to what extent does anti-abortion politics influence the interplay between symbolic and material state violence? The analysis of relevant policy documents and public speeches (Burnham et al., 2004) reveals the historical dynamics of the issue and will provide crucial insights into how symbolic violence is effectively used to reinforce the wider social acceptance of authoritarian policies.

#### **4 Anti-abortion politics as a sphere for the crystallisation of material and symbolic violence**

Based on the crisis of social reproduction, the rise of anti-abortion politics in Turkey is directly related to family and population policies and means prioritising the right to life of the foetus over that of the mother. The programmatic book of AKP, entitled *Conservative Democracy*, explicitly states that a 'conservative democratic' government must pursue family-centred, anti-abortion, heterosexist policies:



Today's conservatism is opposed to state financial support for abortion and gender reassignment surgeries out of concern for the protection of the family or on religious grounds. The AK Party also believes that individual preferences and acceptance should be protected within the framework of human rights and freedoms and that the rights of babies should be protected even when they are in the womb. The AK Party believes in the importance of protecting rights as well as respecting preferences. (Akdoğan, 2004, p. 13)

Family-centred and anti-abortion politics, which played a minor role during the AKP's first term (2002–2007), became a more central issue after the 2008 crisis of neoliberalism in the context of deepening economic, political and ideological cleavages. Two main motivations for the family-centred and anti-abortion politics of the AKP can be identified:

i) Concerns about the new demographic trends, such as lower fertility rates, the ageing of the population and the need for a young labour force.<sup>11</sup> These concerns accelerated family- and reproduction-oriented material and symbolic incentives that were mainly framed in economic policy terms – increasing the population, protecting the family,<sup>12</sup> paying for care services – and pointed to the importance of women's existence for the future of the country. Especially since 2010, this explicit link between sexist conservative reproduction policy and neoliberal economic productivity has been observed in government development programmes (Development Ministry, 2013).

ii) Expanding the scope of legitimacy through symbolic violence in the transformation of the hegemonic struggle between the oppositional and Islamist power blocs. By declaring itself the representative of 'the survival of culture' against 'the death of culture', the AKP has redefined the family and the 'acceptable woman' in it. It has infiltrated the most private spheres of daily life, naturalising violence through speeches, campaigns and slogans in the media and before the public. Symbolic forms have been used to emphasise the importance of the family and the woman within the latter for society and the state, referring to the nation, the family, religion and sacred motherhood. The AKP's ideal woman is portrayed as a Muslim Turkish woman who is a 'mother' who works but does not neglect the home, who takes primary responsibility for caring for children, the elderly and the disabled, and who knows how to behave and dress on the street, and who fulfils her public duty of child-rearing (see Erkmén, 2020, pp. 110–111).

The intensification of anti-abortion politics has been reflected in the public statements of political leaders since 2012 and has meant the radicalisation of discourses on population, gender and social reproduction policies and a deepening of material and symbolic violence against the female body. In his speech at the Programme of Action of the

<sup>11</sup> The targets of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2014–2018) differed from the previous ones in that they strongly emphasised the need for a young labour force population. Accordingly, Turkey is among the countries that can benefit from the demographic window of opportunity. However, it is stated that health expenditure may create pressure on public finance unless measures are taken due to the increasing proportion of the elderly in the population (2013, pp. 1–12). [https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Onuncu\\_Kalkinma\\_Plani-2014-2018.pdf](https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Onuncu_Kalkinma_Plani-2014-2018.pdf) Accessed: 01-02-2022.

<sup>12</sup> An example of an incentive intended to prevent divorce: [www.t24.com.tr](http://www.t24.com.tr) (2013). The Ministry of Family will give another four chances to couples who want to divorce. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/aile-bakanligi-bosanmak-isteyen-ciftlere-4-sans-daha-verecek,244293>. Accessed 09.10.2022. According to TÜİK data, since 2010 there has been an increase in the divorce rate compared to the marriage rate (2021). <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Evlenme-ve-Bosanna-Istatistikleri-2021-45568> Accessed: 06-10-2022.

International Conference on Population and Development, the prime minister criminalised abortion by saying:

I consider abortion as murder. No one should have the right to allow this. You either kill a child in the womb or you kill it after birth. There is no difference. (Erdoğan, 2012a)

At the congress of the women's branch of his party, he again evoked campaigns such as family planning, but this time he went a step further by emphasising that abortion is murder and also an international conspiracy:

I know that these [family planning campaigns] were planned, and I know that these are steps taken to prevent the country's population from increasing. In this way, the population of this country is being stopped somewhere. I see abortion as murder... I also address some circles and members of the media who oppose my statements. You go to bed, you get up, you constantly say 'Uludere'. Every abortion is an Uludere.<sup>13</sup> [...] We have to fight against this together. We are in a position where we know that there is an insidious plan to erase this nation from the world stage; we should never give credit to these games. (Erdoğan, 2012b)

One after another, various politicians within the AKP expressed their support for these speeches of the prime minister. For example, the health minister at the time said that between 'women's choice' and 'the baby's right to life', the government considered the baby's right to life to be more important and that even if a woman was raped, the state could take care of the baby (Akdağ, 2012). The statement was backed by the mayor of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality at the time. Referring to pregnancies resulting from rape, he said: 'What is the fault of the child, the state will look after it' and 'The body belongs to you, the soul belongs to God'. Regarding pregnancies outside of marriage, he said: 'What is the child's fault in the wrongdoing of the person who will be its mother? Let the mother suffer, let the mother kill herself, no one has the right to have or perform an abortion' (Gökçek, 2012), thus characterising extramarital sexuality as a crime for which the woman is responsible. The chairman of the Turkish Parliamentary Human Rights Commission stated that while rape is a crime, the termination of a pregnancy resulting from rape is a greater crime and a tragedy, and emphasised that abortion should be punished, that the idea that a baby's life begins after a certain number of months is wrong, that killing a baby because it will be disabled is also a crime, and that the baby's right to life cannot be taken away (Üstün, 2012). The chairman of the Parliamentary Health Commission, claiming that 'Abortion is something worse than Uludere', stated that children's rights cover the 0–18 age range, but since rights begin in the womb, he announced that he had submitted a request to the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policy and the Ministry of Health to extend the age range to begin at one year prior to birth (Erdöl, 2012). The president of religious affairs also joined the discussion, stating that miscarriage and abortion are considered 'haram and murder'. Emphasising that abortion counts as murder in all religions and that our body does not belong to us but is something we are entrusted with (by God), he also stated that this is a scientific reality (Görmez, 2012).

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<sup>13</sup> As a result of the bombs dropped by the Turkish Armed Forces on villagers crossing the Iraqi border in the Uludere district of Şırnak on 28 December 2011, 34 people lost their lives.

Public statements by political and administrative leaders thus crystallised symbolic and material violence and were followed by legal-institutional regulations. One of the first items on the agenda was a bill to reduce the legal time limit for abortion from 10 weeks to 4 weeks. Eventually, the 10-week period remained unchanged in the bill after medical experts argued that at four weeks, a viable pregnancy could not be distinguished from an ectopic pregnancy, that abortion could be dangerous at this early stage of pregnancy, and that the four-week period was tantamount to a ban on abortion.<sup>14</sup>

However, many new regulations were envisaged that would make abortion both materially more difficult and symbolically more strongly deterred: Doctors were given the right to withdraw from performing voluntary abortions. Women were given 2–4 days of reflection time before an abortion, and counselling was offered to pregnant women or couples. Only training hospitals and health boards were allowed to carry out abortions after ten weeks gestation, studies were carried out on not getting married, not having children or having few children, and abortion was made an exceptionally used intervention. In addition, the sentence for women who deliberately caused a miscarriage after ten weeks of pregnancy was increased from 1 to 3 years imprisonment, and permission for abortion for women/girls under the age of 15 who had become pregnant as a result of rape was granted only by a judge.<sup>15</sup> Another regulation on birth control<sup>16</sup> was the ban on the sale of two drugs containing Misoprostol, which is used in medical abortions, outside hospital pharmacies.<sup>17</sup>

The opposition to abortion, birth control and caesarean section was followed by practices aimed at limiting and preventing contraception: The prime minister, at a wedding he attended, said that those who asked for birth control were wiping out their generation, describing birth control as treason:

We will increase our offspring; we will increase our generation... [whether it] is population planning, birth control, no Muslim family can have such an understanding. Whatever God says, whatever our prophet says, we will follow that path. We'll look into that. (Erdoğan, 2016)

<sup>14</sup> The article was also removed from the draft due to the reactions of women's organisations, some media outlets, and medical associations. The issue was dropped due to contradictions with current law and the reaction of women's and health organisations (Istanbul Bar Association, 2013). Press release on the draft reproductive health law. <https://www.istanbulbarosu.org.tr/HaberDetay.aspx?ID=7675> Accessed: 25-12-2021.

<sup>15</sup> According to news articles in 2014, a court did not give permission for an abortion to a girl who became pregnant as a result of rape at the age of 16 and learned that she was pregnant in the 16th week on the grounds that the legal period of ten weeks had passed and the foetus's right to life would be violated (Bianet.org, 2014). Court: Abortion is violation of foetus' right to life. <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/kadin/152892-mahkeme-kurtaj-ceninin-yasam-hakkinin-ihlalidir> Accessed: 25-12-2021.

<sup>16</sup> Habertürk (2012). Reproductive health services draft law. <https://www.haberturk.com/polemik/haber/759732-kurtaj-yaptiran-kadina-hapis.18.07.2012>. Accessed: 25-12-2021.

<sup>17</sup> Milliyet, (2012). Prohibition of the drug causing miscarriage protested. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/saglik/dusuk-yaptiran-ilaca-yasak-isyan-ettirdi-21450707> Accessed: 25-12-2021.

In another speech on birth control, the prime minister stressed the importance of the future of the nation and the continuation of each generation:

We will not neglect this, and if we want to rise above the level of modern civilizations, this nation must be strong. There is a rule in the economy that 'being young means being dynamic'. In this country, for years, they betrayed [us] with birth control and tried to dry [up] our generation. The importance and power of the generation is as important [for] the economy as it is [for...] spiritual [life]. (Erdoğan, 2014)

Following the prime minister's statement that he was against caesarean sections because they reduced the desired number of children (Erdoğan, 2012c), regulations were also introduced in this area. It was envisaged that caesarean sections would only be performed when there was a medical need for this because of the status of the woman or the baby.<sup>18</sup> This took caesarean sections out of the hands of women and doctors and increased control. Various projects and training courses, such as 'Claim your birth', have tried to prevent and dissuade women from having caesarean sections. On this topic, the minister of family and social policies stated:

Birth is already a normal process, and there is no such thing as additionally normal. There is such a thing as normal birth; birth itself is already normal. This is a capability and a talent that comes from nature and creation and that Allah has given to all mammals. Caesarean section is an intervention when this normal process cannot take place under normal conditions. (Ramazanoğlu, 2016)

While material and symbolic incentives have focused on family and reproduction, material and symbolic violence against contraception, caesarean sections, and abortion became widespread. The shift from a family planning framework to a reproductive health framework has significantly reduced women's access to contraceptives, which were supposed to be provided free of charge by the state (Erkmen, 2020). Furthermore, government officials, with their monopoly on material and symbolic violence, have described abortion as murder, an international conspiracy and a religious sin. The use of the words 'baby' and 'child' instead of 'foetus' in public discourse has made it commonplace to refer to pro-abortion activists, women who have had abortions and doctors who have performed them as 'baby/child murderers'. Accordingly, although the law could not be changed to ban abortion outright, the state's violence was concretised through legal amendments such as granting doctors the right of conscientious objection to performing abortions and increasing the prison sentence for exceeding the time limit for the latter set by the law. Due to these amendments and doctors' fears of being condemned for performing abortions, combined with the procedure's low 'performance score',<sup>19</sup> abortion became de facto inaccessible in public hospitals and largely relegated to the realm of private health care. The pres-

<sup>18</sup> Resmi Gazete (Official Gazette) (2012). Amendment to Law No. 6354 concerning health legislation. 63542012: Article 1. <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2012/07/20120712-12.htm> Accessed: 25-12-2021

<sup>19</sup> Referring to a performance system brought in by the neoliberal Health Transformation Programme, put into practice in 2003, which designates scores for different procedures according to which health service funds are allocated. Subsequently, the number of low-scoring procedures declined.

ident of the Turkish Gynaecology and Obstetrics Association has stated that abortion services, which should be provided free of charge for up to 10 weeks in public hospitals under social security, have been terminated without any legal basis (Demir, 2014). According to a survey of public hospitals conducted by the Gender and Women's Studies Centre of Kadir Has University, only 7.8 per cent of 431 public hospitals reported providing abortion on demand (O'Neil, 2017, p. 150).

The anti-abortion discourse generated by the government and the related legal-institutional regulations imply a perception of abortion as legal but not legitimate and mean serious difficulties in access. The governmental anti-abortion discourse has gradually transformed the perception of abortion in Turkish society: the proportion of those who believe that abortion should be banned for religious and national reasons – emphasising tradition and defending the right to life of the foetus – has increased from year to year (O'Neil & Çarkoğlu, 2019, p. 39). And in street interviews conducted in Ankara in 2017, when women were asked whether abortion was legal, the majority said it was banned. When asked when it was banned, they claimed this had occurred within the last few years, since 2012.<sup>20</sup>

These discursive and regulatory features of anti-abortion policies are codes of the organised material and symbolic violence of the state (Poulantzas, 1978). As seen in anti-abortion politics, the reproduction of doxa/belief and the everyday, micro-scale naturalisation and internalisation of state discourses are shaped by the interplay of laws, regulations, campaigns and public speeches. By transforming the symbolic order, the state has naturalised and institutionalised many of its practices so that they are accepted without reaction. The interrogation of many issues that might challenge the foundations of institutions has been suspended, and questions are not posed at all (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 112).

According to Löffler (2020), when political leaders change the rules of the game in their favour, they strategically use symbolic forms such as the nation, religion and the sacred. AKP leaders have mobilised the symbolic gender order to support their ideational preferences by combining hegemonic and oppositional, authoritarian and democratic politics and changing the formal and informal rules of policy-making. In order to legitimise such state practices, they have resorted to populist, nationalist and religious discourses of varying resonance. They have legitimised anti-abortion politics by deploying symbolic forms of nation-religion-family in discourse that opposes women's right to choose and advocates the right to life of the foetus. Through this discourse, which has criminalised abortion and regards it as an international conspiracy and a sin, they have reproduced the doxa/belief in the need for control over female sexuality, women as sinful and the preference for the life of the foetus over that of the mother. These symbolic forms have polarised society into 'us' and 'them', with 'them' (for example, those who advocate abortion) being criminalised and marginalised. This division is designed to protect the 'cultural essence' of the person, society and state from external threats. Within this framework, the future of the nation is entrusted to women, who are given the role of building national belonging and development through procreation, child-rearing and caring for the whole of society.

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<sup>20</sup> Ekmek ve Gül (2017). The discussions on abortion in the world and Turkey. <https://ekmekvegul.net/file/turkiyede-ve-dunyada-kurtaj-tartismalari> Accessed: 09-10-2022.

Thus, the state/society becomes seen as more like a family, and the family more like a state/society, with the female body as the bearer of all of this.

Right-wing populism's pretence of knowing and defending the 'real' interests of 'the people' has intensified patriarchal symbolic violence in politics by appealing to popular doxa about natural differences between the sexes. The AKP has thus developed a new model of political habitus that has reorganised gender practices. Women who conform to men's, society's and the state's ideals of sacred motherhood and what it means to be an acceptable woman have retained their symbolic value. In this context, patriarchal, paternalistic, nationalist and religious discourses have played a key role in mystification and naturalisation. The deepening of patriarchal gender politics has made those who do not conform to 'acceptable womanhood' more vulnerable to material and symbolic violence at home and in the public sphere.

#### 4 Conclusions

This study has explored how right-wing populism used symbolic violence to seek legitimacy in the context of anti-abortion politics in Turkey. It has argued that anti-abortion politics is a response of right-wing populism to the crisis of social reproduction. This means that one of the most visible sites of symbolic violence is the female body. The analysis used various concepts, including right-wing populism, the crisis of social reproduction, and symbolic and material violence, and empirically linked them to the discursive and legal-institutional mechanisms of contemporary authoritarian states. The theoretical framework linked right-wing populism and anti-abortion politics, locating them within existing social relations, and the empirical research discussed the state practices of material and symbolic violence used to legitimise anti-abortion politics. The study emphasises that the case of Turkey is analytically generalisable: the motivation behind anti-abortion policies is not only related to the personal choices of conservative, right-wing populist leaders but also to the crisis of social reproduction. Taking these complexities into account, we see why anti-abortion politics are on the rise in this period of history and how right-wing populism legitimises violence embedded in the female body as an object of family-centred reproductive politics.

The study has also made some theoretical contributions. It has connected Poulantzas' concept of the institutional materiality of the state to gender-based policy mechanisms. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence was applied to decipher the mystery of the state at a practical level by exploring how state mechanisms operate in conflictual ways. The theory of social reproduction was used to understand the intersectionality of race, class and gender with which the dynamics of power are intertwined and to explore how material and symbolic violence directed at the female body takes shape through conflicts and contradictions. In other words, the cultural sphere is not an area of independent, authentic existence but one where inequalities are manifested according to the varieties of state formation. Revealing the dialectic between the symbolic and the material should not mean deploying a descriptive institutional approach but undertaking a concrete relational analysis of the capitalist state. From this theoretical perspective, the root of the anti-abortion politics that transform reproduction and population policies is the crisis of social reproduction.



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