

From *Ayran* to Dragon Fruit Smoothie: Populism, Polarization, and Social Engineering in Turkey

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Food embedded with symbolic meaning has power in politics. Food as political communication is extensively studied as a nation branding and public diplomacy tool. However, academic studies seem to overlook the role that food plays in populism and political polarization. Pointing out a gap in the field, I explore the role of culinary culture in Turkish politics between 2013 and 2019 to demonstrate its polarizing effect and its role in social engineering. I argue that social engineering as part of constructing native/national culinary items, efforts to polarize people through an AKP-sanctioned culinary tradition, and the particulars of the palace menu, are at once contradictory and consistent. Despite government efforts to appeal to average people and to polarize the public both by replacing alcohol with native/national and familiar *ayran* and grape juice, and by distributing *aşure* to the people, branded with the symbol of the presidency, the palace kitchen has also invoked the neo-Ottoman exotic by serving dragon fruit smoothie and chia seeds.

Keywords: food, political communication, populism, Turkey, polarization, neo-Ottomanism

Culinary items are highly loaded with cultural codes and contain political subtexts. They produce, maintain, transform, and disrupt imaginary or geographical borders, cultural similarities or differences, and social hierarchies. Therefore, it is not surprising that political leaders, parties, and governments use food as a political communication tool. However, whereas food as political communication is extensively studied as a nation-branding and public-diplomacy tool, its role in populism and political polarization seems to be underestimated in academic studies. Pointing out a gap in the field, I examine how culinary traditions become a means of political communication and a polarizing tool in New Turkey.

Food takes on various meanings in particular cultural contexts. Following Arjun Appadurai (1981), Michaela DeSoucey (2016) defines “gastropolitics” as “conflicts over food that are located at the intersections of social movements, cultural markets, and state regulation” (p. xii). Gastropolitics, according to DeSoucey, includes and seeps into “the spaces, rhetorics, trends, and social institutions that anchor episodes of contestation over food objects and culinary practices” (pp. xii, xiii). She further states that “such episodes are situated in time and place, which can lead to very different outcomes in different social

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Date submitted: 2019-08-03

¹ I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their guidance and comments.

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contexts" (p. xiii). I do not intend to investigate all the aspects of gastropolitics in New Turkey. But because my main objective is to locate food within the subdiscipline of political communication, I intend to understand how these "episodes of contestation over food objects" take place and how food becomes a polarizing instrument in a particular context.

In this study, I investigate the role of food in political communication and populism by looking at a number of events between 2013 and 2019. This period is important because it characterizes the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential system. It also marks the period when the concept of New Turkey was introduced by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the 2014 presidential elections. In the 2015 elections, his ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) polarized voters in terms of their choice between "New Turkey" and "Old Turkey," the first referring to a powerful state and nation, stability, inclusion, advanced democracy, wealth, economic prosperity, and accountability and the latter signifying economic instability, poverty, corruption, short-lived coalition governments, military control of politics, and exclusion (Selçuk, 2016, p. 577). Erdoğan rather aggressively sought support for the constitutional change to a presidential system, which supported the emergence of New Turkey. In this study, I intend to understand how food is mobilized by political leaders as a polarizing and social engineering tool in New Turkey. I explore the following questions: How does food become a political tool to communicate with a domestic audience? In what ways are culinary items used to contribute to populism and polarization in Turkey? How is food used to engineer society? How are culinary items used in the construction of what is deemed to be native/national? What is the role of neo-Ottomanism in the polarizing process? In other words, how is neo-Ottomanism aligned with populism and polarization in food-related politics in New Turkey?

The events between 2013 and 2019 demonstrate the ways that political leaders use culinary items to communicate with people. My aim is to understand how food is used as a tool for political communication and how it has become a tool of populism in the context of New Turkey. As Benjamin Moffitt (2016) argues, populism today has to do with a performative political style, which provides "a theoretical framework where the leader is seen as *the performer*, 'the people' as *the audience*, and crisis and media as *the stage* on which populism plays out upon" (p. 11, emphasis in original). In this study, the food-related statements and engagements of the president and ministers (the performers) as they played out in the media (the stage) constitute my data. I collect news and opinions published by mainstream newspapers such as *Hürriyet*, *Sabah*, *Habertürk*, *Sözcü*, *Milliyet*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Star*, and *Cumhuriyet* between 2013 and 2019 during the transition to the presidential system, which is characterized by the introduction of the concept of New Turkey.

This study contains four sections. First, I give a broad understanding of the concepts related to food, nationalism, politics, and political communication. Second, I provide discussions on populism and its reflections and operations in Turkey. Third, I investigate what kinds of food and drink the government and its representatives construct as "native and national" and how these products are then promoted to represent Turkey both inside and outside the country. In this process, I use the concept of food policing and try to understand how it operates and establishes authority by way of invention and reconstruction. Fourth, I look at the instances when politicians use food to connect with common people. *İftar* tables during Ramadan are the most visible example, being instances when political leaders break their fast alongside common people at the same table. I also investigate the ways that political images have been constructed

through the Presidential Palace's kitchen—namely, through the reception held on Turkey's Victory Day in August 2018. The main focus of this study is to explore the role of culinary culture in Turkish politics in order to demonstrate its polarizing effect and its role in social engineering.

Food, Politics, and Nationalism

Studies have shown a strong connection between food and national identity in both the consumption and the production of food. These studies have demonstrated how food has become a tool for nation building (Belasco & Scranton, 2002; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caldwell, 2002; Cusack, 2000; Ferguson, 2004; James, 1997; Pilcher, 1998; Warde, 2009; Wilk, 2002) and how this tool is used to promote the country in the global market (Bestor, 2014; Hiroko, 2008; Leer, 2018; Mincyte, 2011; Wilson, 2013). The world has become one market with the rapid growth of globalization, according to Simon Anholt (2007). In this market, countries or nations are in competition to build a strong and positive reputation and to get attention from publics around the world (pp. 1–2). Therefore, there is a need to rethink and reconceptualize the link between food and nationalism in the context of globalization. According to Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (2010), "culinary nationalism today operates in an increasingly globalized world" (p. 102). What defines the nation is its national culinary distinction, which is used to find a spot in a highly competitive international culinary arena. "Gastronationalism" is a term also used to define nationalism in the international culinary arena. In the context of globalization and the increasing and expanding power of international trade, gastronationalism operates through marketing communication in a highly competitive way (Kimura, 2017, p. 446; Mincyte, 2011). According to DeSoucey (2010), gastronationalism "signals the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food" (p. 433). Gastronationalism should be considered within the context of localized food cultures that are connected with nationalist projects in the international market.

The relationship between nationalism and cuisine in Turkey has mostly been a struggle to represent Turkey internationally. Especially since the 1990s, there has been a strong top-down effort to turn Turkish cuisine into a "world cuisine." Governmental and private institutions have worked to "improve" Turkish cuisine (Karaosmanoğlu, 2007). In this process, issues of ownership and food fights, especially with the neighboring countries, over kebab, yogurt, cheese, baklava, and coffee, among others, have been an official concern.

Food's connection with politics, power and identity has been explored at length by researchers in anthropology, sociology, geography, and history. These studies have confirmed that there is a close relationship between possessing the means of production and power as well as between consumption and status. Food reorganizes hierarchies in society. As Danielle De Vooght and Peter Scholliers (2011) state when talking about early 19th-century Spain, "The consumption of rich food—in terms of quantity and quality—was and undoubtedly is a manner of showing one's social status, creating or maintaining power, or aspiring to powerful circles" (p. 2). Food, therefore, is an indicator of how "people are socially, culturally and even politically positioned within society" (pp. 2–3).

In Turkey's political scene, culinary items have also been discussed in relation to class hierarchy. Binary oppositions such as civil versus noncivil, cultured versus ignorant, and modern versus primitive

have been the extensions of this hierarchy. The case of *çiğ köfte* (raw meatballs) being prepared in the Turkish Parliament in 1992 is perhaps the most discussed case revealing the difference between lower- and upper-class tastes. *Çiğ köfte* has been an indicator of "primitiveness" because of how it is made (kneading), its ingredients (raw meat and bulgur), the manner in which it is eaten (finger food), and maybe more importantly its southeasternness. When a parliamentarian from Urfa (a city in southeast Turkey) attempted to knead *çiğ köfte* in the Assembly Hall of the Turkish Parliament, the media turned the event into a scandal. Mainstream newspapers regarded kneading and eating *çiğ köfte* in the Assembly Hall as a vulgar, cheap, and shabby act of primitiveness ("Bu kadarı da fazla," 1992, p. 1). Class hierarchies have also been observed in culinary items such as *lahmacun* (Turkish pizza) and kebab, which once represented low-class tastes due to their southeastern associations. Today, however, kebab and *lahmacun* are not necessarily a reflection of southeasternness or low culture. They are highly popular in cities and served in high-end restaurants as well.

When talking about food and political identity, it is worth mentioning *maklube*, which is perhaps the most politicized food in Turkish history due to its status as a significant sign of membership in the Gülen community, or as it is officially named, FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization; Onaran, 2016). *Maklube* is directly associated with the Gülen movement, serving as a symbol of community meetings because it is held and eaten collectively in the Gülen community houses. *Maklube* is basically a rice dish made of vegetables and meat lined up in layers in a pot. It is served on a large tray with yogurt and salad on the side. In some polemics related to the Gülen community, which has an important place in recent political debates in Turkey, politicians make direct references to *maklube* instead of the community or FETÖ (Firat, 2014, p. 133). On September 19, 2019, Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gül initiated a *maklube* crisis in the AKP. He said, "the ones who spooned *maklube* until yesterday should not give us lessons to fight against FETÖ." Meral Akşener, the leader of the conservative nationalist İYİ Party, responded by saying, "maybe I do not know who has spooned *maklube*, but I know who has cooked it" ("Maklube' tartışmasına Akşener de katıldı," 2019). *Maklube*, therefore, is used interchangeably with FETÖ. Eating and cooking it have become a direct indicator of being a terrorist.

Food embedded with symbolic meaning has power in politics. This power is further elaborated by Christian Reynolds (2010), who conceptualizes the impact of food in the political sphere in three ways: hard power, where food becomes "a political and economic force upon other actors through the application of embargos" (p. 297); soft power, where culinary culture is used in (public) diplomacy to change the minds and hearts of the other actors of concern (Chapple-Sokol, 2013; Osipova, 2014; Rockower, 2012, 2014; Ruddy, 2014; Wilson, 2013; Zhang, 2015); and power of prestige, which is especially achieved through diplomatic banquets (Albala, 2011; Morgenthau, 1985).

In this study, my intention is not to understand food as a diplomatic tool in international relations, but to explore its role in domestic politics. Taking food as a tool for political communication, I intend to understand how food is used in New Turkey and how it is mobilized by political leaders. Political communication is strategic and has specific objectives. It comprises all forms of communication mobilized by politicians, political actors, and the media for a purpose. It is about how politicians work to communicate their political messages and about how communication regarding actors and activities is conveyed by the media, especially in news reports and editorials (McNair, 2011, p. 4). This kind of strategic communication

is mobilized to construct a political image or identity, which is constituted not only by the written and verbal statements of politicians but also by how they behave and dress, by what they do in everyday life, and by what, how, and where they eat (McNair, 2011). Political communication is addressed to the people—more specifically the voters—and to the media (Foster, 2010). As this study elaborates, it contains discussion of politics, political actors, and their undertakings in the media, including news reports, newspaper columns, and editorials. Food is used to create a public image that portrays the politician as someone who shares the values either of average people or of the elites. As Alison Perelman (2013) argues about the United States, “Specifically, food is mobilized to create, reinforce, and challenge narratives about a politician’s relative connection to, or cultural distance from, ‘average’ Americans” (p. 6). Food is also used in political communication when politicians hold beliefs about what people should (and should not) eat and drink (pp. 4–5), which relates to the concept of food policing. The food police narrative is part of a discourse about the fear of big government and the fear of losing individual freedom (Perelman, 2013, p. 38). The banning of trans fats in some U.S. states in the mid-2000s is an example of how state regulations are implemented to police the people with respect to what they should and should not eat (Perelman, 2013, p. 163).²

Food policing became visible in Turkey when special taxes were implemented on alcoholic beverages in 2010, causing alcohol prices to increase dramatically. That same year, advertisements promoting alcoholic beverages were banned from television, and a law was implemented to blur images of alcoholic drinks and cigarettes on television and in films. The law on the sale and advertising of alcoholic beverages took effect on September 9, 2013. Under the new law, retailers are not allowed to sell alcoholic beverages between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., and the sale of alcohol near schools and mosques is forbidden. In addition, education and health institutions, gas stations, and sports clubs are not allowed to serve or sell alcohol (Kömürcüler, 2013).

Therefore, in my discussion of food, populism and political communication, by investigating the political actors’ relations with food, I demonstrate how food is used as a tool to reinforce stories about politicians’ connection with and distance from average people. I also investigate how food is used to police the public, polarize the people, and engineer society.

Populism in New Turkey

Populism in New Turkey is defined as right-wing (Kaya, Robert, & Tecmen, 2019), authoritarian, nationalist, neoliberal, and constantly producing enemies at home and abroad (Özçetin, 2019, p. 943). Based on the recent academic literature, Orçun Selçuk (2016) explains populism as a mode of governance that is based on three dimensions: “establishment versus anti-establishment, endorsing versus rejecting the leader and in-group versus out-group thinking” (p. 574). The first is about the ways that “the leader

² The concept of the “nanny state” also refers to the government’s advice, control, and regulations concerning what one should and should not eat. The term “nanny state” is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* (“Nanny State,” n.d.) as “a government that tries to give too much advice or make too many laws about how people should live their lives, especially about eating, smoking, or drinking alcohol.” It was first used in Britain to refer to a government that is overprotective and interfering when it comes to the lives of its people.

brands himself as an authentic figure" (p. 574) who well knows the true interests of the people, in contrast to the inauthentic political elite who do not know the realities of the country. In this case, the old establishment can no longer meet the needs of the people; therefore, the political environment should be restructured. The second is about the plebiscitary understanding of democracy, where only two options are given to the people. There are no gray areas. Citizens can either endorse or reject the leader. The third is another dualism that is evident in the political sphere: in-group versus out-group, good versus evil, nation versus anti-nation, and native versus anti-native. Politics, in other words, constantly reproduces the dualism of the nationalist versus the traitor. Polarizing the people by using these binaries seems to be a noticeable characteristic of populist leaders (Selçuk, 2016, p. 574).

Authoritarianism is the defining characteristic of populism in Turkey. Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Kerem Öktem (2016) use the concept of "existential (or ontological) insecurity" to explain the historical and contemporary basis of Turkish politics, where an increasingly authoritarian government is operating in an increasingly insecure environment (p. 506). As they argue, "insecurity should be seen not only as an outcome of authoritarianism, but also as a cause of it" (p. 508). Insecurity has shown itself in huge waves of purges of individuals from the media and other sectors since the early 2000s, and especially since the coup attempt in 2016 (pp. 514–515). Moreover, signs of the personalization of power in Turkey have been visible since the beginning of the 2010s. One of the indicators of this personalization is that Erdoğan's supporters call him "*Reis*" (the chief; p. 515). Because of this insecurity and authoritarianism, social engineering has been implemented for various purposes, such as to raise a "pious generation" through education reforms (Lüküslü, 2016), to de- or re-regulate and restructure ownership and control of communication networks (Çelik, forthcoming-a), and to police people by, for example, restricting the sale and consumption of alcohol and cigarettes.

In this study, my aim is to understand the role of food and its symbolic meanings as a means of political communication within the context of the new authoritarianism of Turkey. According to Murat Somer (2016), the new authoritarianism is based not only on suppressing and controlling the media or public opinion but also on manipulating and instrumentalizing them (p. 494; see Çelik, forthcoming-b, for a thorough analysis of Erdoğan's televisual logic and strategies). This is also true for the symbolic use of culinary items. The new authoritarianism not only controls or bans particular foods or drinks (such as alcoholic beverages) but also replaces them with something else so that they can be instrumentalized in politics either to create an economic opportunity in the international market, to reproduce nationalism, or to connect with "average" people, as we will see in the next section.

Yerli milli, a phrase that had been coined by 2015 and that can be translated as "native/national" (Gürpınar, 2019),³ is significant if one is to understand the tools of right-wing populism in New Turkey. According to Nil Mutluer (2019), not only is *yerli milli* about regulating everyday life from a conservative and neoliberal perspective, it also reshapes the divide between the secular and the religious (p. 101) because *yerli milli* is part of the "Muslim nation" project, where the nation is designed in opposition to its Western counterparts. For example, in his speech at Ibn Khaldun University in May 2017, Erdoğan complained that the ideas of "troubled people" such as August Comte have long been accepted in Turkey, whereas the value

³ *Yerli* is also translated as "homegrown" (Mutluer, 2019) or "authentic" (Gürpınar, 2019).

of Ibn Khaldun's work as a Muslim Arab historian and scholar has not been acknowledged. The dismissal of Ibn Khaldun as a "native" scholar was described as "cultural suicide" by Erdoğan ("Erdoğan: August Comte," 2017). Therefore, in contrast to his Western counterpart August Comte, the Muslim Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun represents the "native." As Menderes Çınar (2018) claims, the AKP has positioned itself as the only native and national political force, as opposed to the ones who adherents of movements that follow Western paradigms. These non-natives are portrayed as Islamophobic, Eurocentric, Orientalist, elitist, and tutelary threats to the AKP and Erdoğan. The AKP employs a populist nativist approach, which is religious, nationalist, conservative, neoliberal, and anti-Western, and according to Çınar, the AKP's populist nativist "Muslim nation" project challenges Western hegemony (pp. 177–178). Populist nativism, I argue, is also seen in the AKP's or Erdoğan's branding of food as native and national, which has become a social engineering project.

Neo-Ottomanism, as a populist nativist project, is "instrumental in popularizing a new political identity at home" (Özçetin, 2019, pp. 946–947). The revival and glorification of Turkey's Ottoman history have always been a nationalist concern, one that shows itself in food-related politics as well (Karaosmanoğlu, 2007, 2009). In New Turkey, the growing interest in Ottoman history is about remembering, reconstructing and recreating the past, which is incorporated into official government discourse and popular culture. Neo-Ottoman nostalgia refers to the rise of Ottoman aesthetics and taste, which shows itself in multiple areas, including architecture, clothing, decoration, television series, and cuisine (Emre Cetin, 2017; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). Neo-Ottomanism also refers to government-led policies (Ergin & Karakaya, 2017). It is a political project designed to revive the Ottoman past in different areas, such as foreign policy, state television (Al-Ghazzi & Kraidy, 2013), anniversary celebrations, urban architecture and cuisine. The latter is illustrated by official diplomatic banquets such as the NATO İstanbul Summit in 2004 and the G20 meeting in Antalya in 2015. My objective here is to understand the ways that government-led neo-Ottomanism is aligned with populism and polarization in food-related politics in New Turkey.

Social Engineering: Construction of the Native/National

The AKP's promotion of food under the label of native/national seems to be a unique characteristic of New Turkey. In this section, I look at discussions articulated in response to various attempts at social engineering through the construction of culinary items as native/national in New Turkey. Here, food policing is an important concept, as indicated by the ways that the president and the ministers prescribe what to eat and what not to eat.

Food policing was first initiated when Erdoğan talked about the new alcohol regulation during a program hosted by the well-known journalist Fatih Altaylı in June 2013:

I love my people and I don't want them to be alcoholics. It is scientifically proven that alcohol is harmful to human health. The most important cause of traffic accidents is alcohol. What should we do? Should he [the drinker] go and commit suicide or stab himself as he wants? It is my duty to interfere. We are fulfilling the provisions of the Constitution. ("Başbakan Erdoğan, Teke Tek'te," 2013, para. 27)

Erdoğan made a polarizing distinction between the ones who drink alcohol—"alcoholics" as he called them—and the ones who do not. "The alcoholics" should be policed, regulated, and controlled, according to Erdoğan. Food policing works to ban and restrict "unwanted" foods and drinks as a means to regulate and control the people. Health here is used as a tool to justify policing and authority. Erdoğan is responsible for the health of "his" public, as he claimed. Besides banning and restricting food and drinks, it is necessary to replace them with something else. The promotion of *ayran* (a yogurt-based drink) as a native and national drink is a case in point. In 2013, the annual meeting of the World Health Organization was held at the Haliç Congress Center. Erdoğan attended the symposium and condemned those who once had cast beer as the national drink of Turkey: "Beer, which is an alcoholic drink, was unfortunately presented as our national public drink in some books in the early years of the Republic. However, our national drink is *ayran*" (Özkaya, 2013, para. 4).

The early years of the Republic have been classified as non-native, elitist, anti-Muslim, and Western in some other statements by Erdoğan as well. In his speech about the laws on alcohol restrictions, he referred again to the early Republic and said, "The law made by two drunkards is regarded as valid, but a law ordered by religion must be rejected, why?" Who were those drunkards? There was a consensus on the opposition side that those two drunkards were Mustafa Kemal and İsmet İnönü (two leading figures in the process of building Republican Turkey), but this idea was denied by the AKP's spokesperson, Hüseyin Çelik, who claimed that the term "two drunkards" was used haphazardly by Erdoğan ("Çelik'ten 'iki ayyaş' açıklaması," 2013). In any case, Erdoğan again made a polarizing distinction between the Republican actors, deemed to be inauthentic and elite, and himself as the authentic Muslim leader.

Therefore, identified as a threat due to its anti-Muslim, elitist, and non-native character, beer has been replaced with something else by the authorities. *Ayran* is now presented as a national drink not only to defeat alcohol but also to exploit an economic opportunity in the local market and, more significantly, in foreign markets. Consequently, it is important to study the processes of invention of tradition because they tell us what governments regard as a "threat" and an "opportunity"—as Lerna Yanik (2006) argues. For example, because alcoholic drinks could be considered a threat, replacing them with new national and native drinks is an economic opportunity and a means to enter the foreign market. After the statements of Erdoğan, the giant dairy company Pınar Süt saw a significant increase in its stock prices (Özkaya, 2013). In 2016, at the opening of a plant by another giant dairy company, Süttaş, Erdoğan once again repeated that Turkey's national drink is *ayran* ("Varsın saldırınlar," 2016). Following these statements, *ayran* exports increased threefold in 2017 compared with the previous year and reached \$2.6 million in 2018. *Ayran* started to be exported to Qatar, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Libya, Kuwait, and Italy (Akyıl, 2018). The example of *ayran* shows that gastronationalism, which provides a way to define "ours" and "not ours," gives commercial advantages to local producers and traders (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016, p. 11).

After the declaration of *ayran* as the first national drink of Turkey, authorities needed to find a second drink. A year after Erdoğan's speech on *ayran*, Minister of Food and Agriculture Ahmet Eşref Fakıbaba declared the second national drink to be grape juice. He dictated that restaurants should serve *ayran* with kebab and *çiğ köfte*, but grape juice with all other meals ("Bakan açıkladı," 2017). Restaurants were told what to serve with particular foods, and the people were indirectly given the same instructions. Grape juice

had been waiting to be turned into an opportunity, and, in fact, the director of the Manisa Vinery Research Institute would thank Minister Fakı̇baba for his declaration, happily announcing that the demand for grapes had increased enormously ("Bakan milli," 2017). Grape juice is now poised to become an economic opportunity in the international market as the second national drink of Turkey, perhaps replacing wine. A politician has again made declarations, given directives and policed the public regarding what to drink and with what kind of food.

Besides nationalism and anti-alcohol campaigns, healthy eating has been an important tool for food policing. For example, in January 2013, Erdođan gave a speech to the people in his political party, where he condemned the production and consumption of white bread:

Now we're closing the period of bread with white flour. We will produce our bread from the original flour, which is what is called wheat flour because it has nutrition and vitamins. With white bread, we're removing all the vitamins. Why white flour? Because it is shiny. We won't be fooled by this. The West understood this before we did. But we will close this gap quickly. ("Bařbakan Erdođan: Beyaz ekmek dđnemini kapatıyoruz," 2013, para. 8)

The AKP's reconstruction of the West as the "Other" makes the West not only an enemy but also a competitor.⁴ Therefore, the populist nativist approach works both to demonize the West and to compete with it. The distinction between Turkey (self) and the West ("Other"), nationalization, localization, dictates directed at sustaining a healthy population and/or the creation of economic opportunities in the national market and in foreign markets are features of New Turkey's social engineering. The motivations behind this social engineering and its populist nativist approach are various: religion, anti-West attitudes, nationalism, and neoliberalism (i.e., looking for success in international markets). All these issues polarize the public one way or the other: elitists versus natives, drunkards versus Muslims, Westerners versus nationalists.

Food for the People Versus Food for the Palace

By eating where "average" people eat and eating at the same table with them, politicians aim to show that they share the people's values (Perelman, 2013, p. 56). In the U.S. example, an important space for politicians to physically connect and meet with the voters is constituted by diners, which are small restaurants that have a casual atmosphere and serve mainly American cuisine such as hamburgers, fries, pancakes, and other quickly cooked, inexpensive meals (Perelman, 2013). In a similar way, Erdođan as a populist leader wants to appeal to the voters by visiting their homes, meeting them in parks, and eating on the floor during Ramadan. In 2018, Erdođan visited a family in Ankara for *iftar*, broke his fast with the family, and published the photographs on his Twitter and Instagram accounts ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdođan," 2018). In 2019, he visited a park in Zeytinburnu, İstanbul, and again broke his fast with a family at a park on a spread on the ground ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdođan," 2019). This seems to be an effective way to appeal to the public whom he idealizes as the proper Turks who fulfill the principles of Islam. In such settings, eating traditionally on the floor with people means being physically connected with them. For a high-ranking

⁴ See Birgöl Demirtaş (2018) for an analysis of how the AKP reconstructs the West as the "Other."

official, the mere position of eating on the floor is an overwhelming symbol of kinship with the public, and it is a means of polarizing the people as proper Turks versus others.

Aşure (Noah's pudding) is an interesting case in New Turkey in the way that it has become another tool to appeal to the public. The branding of *aşure* with the presidential pennant is a project meant to shepherd an old tradition into the purview of the new power of the government and the presidency. *Aşure* month is a religious period that follows the Kurban Bayramı (Feast of Sacrifice) month. *Aşure* is a wheat pudding containing a mixture of grains, nuts, and fresh and dried fruits. It is believed to be common across ethnic, religious, and cultural communities in Turkey and is usually made in households to be served to guests and distributed to neighbors. The heterogeneity of its ingredients signifies diversity, abundance, and prosperity. In 2014, when Prime Minister Erdoğan was elected president and the Presidential Palace was built, he became the first president to give instructions to distribute *aşure* in some of the provinces ("Cumhurbaşkanlığı 13 ilde aşure dağıtacak," 2017). Decorated with a huge presidential pennant, this dessert is called "the presidential *aşure*." It was distributed first to troops of guardsmen (*muhafız alayı*), and then a special recipe was sent to the governors of the provinces so that it could be prepared and distributed to the public ("Tarifi Cumhurbaşkanlığı'na özel," 2018; see Figure 1).

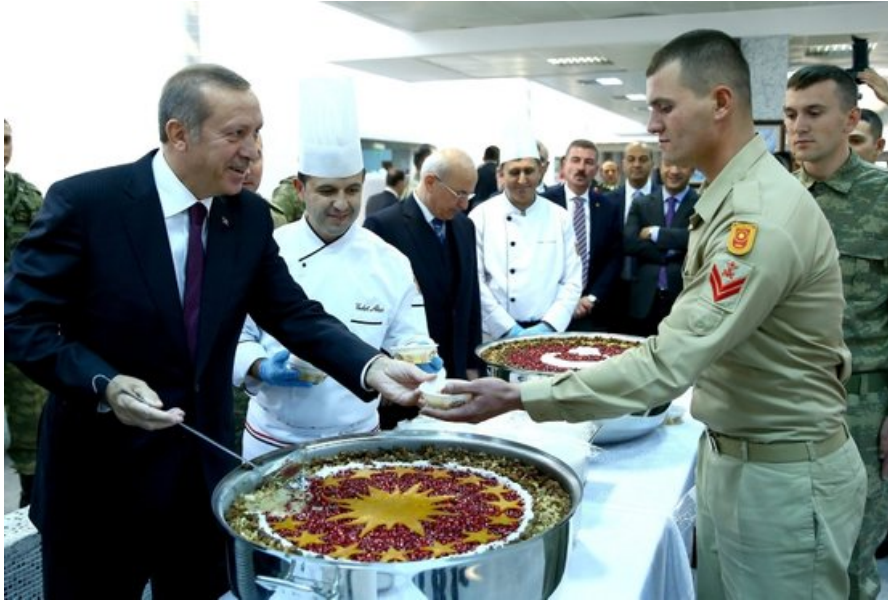


Figure 1. Erdoğan distributing aşure to the troops of guardsmen ("Tarifi Cumhurbaşkanlığı'na özel," 2018).

It is known that the Ottoman Palace used to distribute *aşure* to the public as a symbol of abundance and prosperity. By replicating the culinary tradition of the Ottoman Palace, Erdoğan has reproduced this historical practice in the Presidential Palace of New Turkey. The political aim here could be to revive a familiar tradition of the Ottoman Palace, presented with a new symbol of power—the presidential pennant. It also

means that *aşure* reproduces the myth of the authentic leader, Erdoğan, because he evokes the glory of the Ottoman Empire and combines it with the presidency as the new symbol of power. Therefore, both *iftar* tables and *aşure* show us how politicians or leaders use food to appeal to the people, to provide a space to meet the voters, and to show that they share people's values. All of these efforts become a means of polarizing the people as proper Turks (Muslims who fast and/or glorify the Ottomans) versus others.

An interesting example of this process arose when a reception was held in the Presidential Palace on August 30, 2018, to celebrate Turkey's Victory Day. This reception was held for selected government ministers and agents, retired politicians, artists, businesspeople, journalists, families of martyrs, and representatives of minority communities. The public learned of the foods and drinks served at the reception via an article written by Vahap Munyar, the chief editor of one of Turkey's most widely circulated newspapers, *Hürriyet*, who was invited to attend. He reproduced the food and drink menus in his column, and the items served at the palace surprised the media and the public because these items were not native/national, but instead exotic. Although populist nativism dominated the political scene, the palace menu seemed to represent the opposite—the non-native.

The design of the menus, as seen in Figures 2 and 3 ("Saray'daki 30 Ağustos," 2018), tells us which foods and drinks to pay more attention to. In the first two rows on the food menu are the cold dishes: Circassian chicken in *pâte à choux*, salmon-ginger sushi, Antakya-style hummus in tartlet, and veal roast beef stuffed with pickle. Next, also in two rows, are the hot dishes: sesame seabass *simit*, *döner* kebab mini sandwich, Aydın-style mini lamb *shish*, and mini turkey *shish*. In the last two rows are the desserts: raspberry macarons, chocolate brownie, Antep wrap with pistachio and dried fruit pulp with Antep pistachio. Local and foreign influences are effectively blended on the menu. Although Circassian chicken can be considered native, serving it in *pâte à choux* gives it a French touch. Salmon-ginger sushi and hummus in tartlet are served together with *döner* kebab and Aydın-style mini lamb *shish*. Macarons, brownie, and Antep pistachios are a further reflection of this blend.

The first item on the drink menu, occupying its own row, and therefore deserving special attention, is dragon fruit smoothie with chia seeds. The second row has *efuli* drink⁵ with lychee and wild berries special, and in the next row are aloe vera with *starex* fruit (which is probably starfruit/carambola) and lemonade with garden mint. The last two rows consist of freshly squeezed carrot, orange, apple, and grapefruit juices. Whereas these juices are familiar drinks located at the end of the menu, dragon fruit smoothie, *efuli* drink with lychee, and aloe vera with *starex* fruit are the exotic ones given particular attention in the menu's layout.

⁵ *Efuli* drink is still a mystery. *Efuli* means "lover" in the Black Sea region, but authorities have not revealed the secret of what *efuli* drink is.



Figure 2. Food menu of the reception ("Sarayıdaki 30 Ağustos," 2018).



Figure 3. Drinks menu of the reception ("Saray'daki 30 Ağustos," 2018).

Therefore, a blend of the exotic and the familiar, or the global and the local, characterizes the palace kitchen. Seyit Başkonak, the chief of the Social Services, said, "This is a treat from the home of the nation" (Munyar, 2018, paras. 17–25). Immediately after this revelation that dragon fruit, which has been produced in the southern part of Turkey since 2015, is served in "the home of the nation," some of the newspapers introduced dragon fruit (without referring to the palace reception) to their readers, publishing photographs of the fruit along with its nutritional value and recipes ("Ejder meyvesinin kerameti betelain," 2018).

The reception was completely ignored by the progovernment media, but became a source of criticism for the opposition. The leader of the main opposition CHP (Republican People's Party), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, together with his party members, placed the reception on their agenda and talked about it with respect to its elitism, its prodigality, and the foods consumed:

Dragon fruit, aloe vera, starex whatever, we cannot even get our tongue around them. . . . People are miserable, they cannot find a loaf of bread; they cannot see their future. But one man [meaning the dictator] in the palace is feeding himself with dragon whatever. . . . Do you have any morals? ("Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan 'ejder meyveli smoothie' yorumu," 2018, para. 4)

Faik Öztrak, the spokesman of the CHP, attacked the president and the food served at the palace in a cynical way: "While you drink your 'native and national' drinks, dragon fruit smoothies, *efuli* drinks with lychee, and aloe vera drinks with *starex* fruit, you fool the nation with aspirin" ("Kendinize ejder meyveli smoothiey," 2018, para.1).

In all of the criticisms, besides the timing of the reception (which occurred when the economic crisis was felt for the first time in New Turkey), the nativeness of the food and drinks was emphasized. For example, a popular anti-AKP columnist of the *Sözcü* newspaper sarcastically titled his article "Native and National Dragon Smoothie" (Özdil, 2018).

Given that populist nativism has dominated the political scene, one can ask whether such a political claim is made here with respect to the dragon fruit smoothie. Or is the exotic dragon fruit instead a way to imitate the Ottoman Palace, which symbolizes a rich and sophisticated empire with a diversity of fruits and vegetables coming from various geographies? This type of mimicry, known as neo-Ottomanism, is about the revival and glorification of Turkey's Ottoman history. Is dragon fruit a way to bring back the glorious Ottoman past?

Conclusion

When considering food as political communication, much academic literature focuses on food as a nation branding or public diplomacy tool, whereas the role that food plays in populism and political polarization has been overlooked. Pointing out a gap in the field, I examine how culinary traditions become a means of political communication and a polarizing political tool in New Turkey. First, I try to show how culinary items are instrumentalized for social engineering. Here, we observe that food is employed as a

means to police the public and turn a local economic opportunity into a global one. *Ayran*, for example, is constructed as native and national. It stands for health, safety, and control. It is used to establish authority and to police society by replacing alcohol. In this process, *ayran*, constructed as the native/national drink of Turkey, has been turned into an international economic opportunity. Government efforts to police the public by replacing alcohol with native/national *ayran* and grape juice are part of a populist nativist "Muslim nation" project. This project is authoritarian (as it involves giving directives to people), nationalist (with foods and drinks being labelled as native/national), and neoliberal (with these foods and drinks being turned into an international economic opportunity), and it continuously produces enemies at home and abroad. Early Republican characters—the drunkards and the ones who cast beer as a national drink—are the enemies at home, whereas the West is the enemy abroad.

Second, I discuss how food is used both to connect with and disconnect from average people. Almost a month after the aforementioned reception at the Presidential Palace, a photo-news story appeared with the title "This Time Instead of Dragon Fruit Smoothie, an *Aşure* Recipe Came out of the Palace Kitchen" ("Saray'ın mutfağından bu kez," 2018), referring to the distribution of presidential *aşure* during *aşure* month. When associated with the Presidential Palace, *aşure* comes to symbolize two distinct powers: Ottomanness and the presidency. By distributing *aşure*, Erdoğan evokes the glory of the Ottoman Empire, and by bringing back the glorious past, he brands himself as an authentic figure who knows the true interests of the people. This self-positioning also shows his attempt to appeal to the public. Just like *aşure*, *iftar* tables are also used to connect with the people. Eating on the floor instead of at a table enables the politician not only to be physically and bodily connected with people but also to polarize them as proper Turks (Muslims who fulfill the principles of Islam) versus "Others."

The Presidential Palace seems to imply the glorious, rich, exotic and spectacular Ottoman Palace. Neo-Ottomanism here is identified not only with populist nativism but also with elitism in the palace kitchen. The rationale for this elitism is that the palace's cuisine has always been more sophisticated than the public's cuisine. However, with the electoral system, the leaders and politicians have needed to show a closer connection to average people. This requirement manifests itself as a contradiction in terms in New Turkey. In trying to revive the Ottoman past, the president and his party are inevitably positioned as separate from average people. The revival of the glamorous Ottoman past via the Presidential Palace and its kitchen is highly elitist in many respects, from the ingredients that are used to the ways that they are presented. Dragon fruit, chia seeds, and sushi served at the Presidential Palace—the so-called "home of the nation"—seems to represent a conflict between the elitist and the populist nativist tendencies of New Turkey. Smoothie made with dragon fruit, which has come to embody the exotic, symbolizes the rich and sophisticated palace, and it reconstructs the dichotomy between the palace elite and the common people. This time, food is mobilized to reinforce a narrative about Erdoğan's distance from the common people and his proximity to the West.

Finally, social engineering as part of constructing native/national culinary items, efforts to polarize people through an AKP-sanctioned culinary tradition and the particulars of the palace menu are at once contradictory and consistent. Despite the government's efforts to appeal to average people and to polarize the public as proper Turks versus others by replacing alcohol with native/national and familiar *ayran* and grape juice and by distributing *aşure* to the people branded with the symbol of the presidency, the

palace kitchen has also invoked the neo-Ottoman exotic by serving dragon fruit smoothie and chia seeds. Hence, although the AKP's and Erdoğan's populist nativist Muslim nation project is anti-Western, their neo-Ottoman elitism follows Western culinary traditions by serving smoothie, sushi, tartlet, and p te   choux. As a result, the existence of neo-Ottoman elitism in tandem with populist nativism has come to symbolize a paradox in New Turkey. Neo-Ottomanism embodies both populism and elitism and simultaneously reproduces the native/national and foreign, the Western, and the exotic, and it serves both to connect Turkey's leaders with and to disconnect them from the people.

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