

# Identity and Power in Türkiye–EU Relations: A Post-structuralist Analysis of the Turkish Authoritarian Turn

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## Abstract

This article investigates the extent to which the European Union's (EU) exercise of power has contributed to Türkiye's political identity transformation, with particular focus on the period surrounding the 2015 refugee crisis. Drawing on post-structuralist theory, especially Michel Foucault's conceptions of power, discourse, and subjectivity, the article explores how asymmetrical identity constructions operate within EU–Türkiye relations. Through a qualitative discourse analysis of EU reports, official statements, and Turkish political rhetoric, this article argues that the EU's conditionality-based approach reproduces a hierarchical relationship, reinforcing Türkiye's status as a normative outsider. In response, Türkiye has developed a counter-hegemonic discourse centered on sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and strategic indispensability. This dual process reveals a dynamic of mutual identity construction: while the EU defines itself through the exclusion of Türkiye, Ankara constructs its identity in opposition to the EU's liberal-democratic paradigm. By unpacking these discursive formations, the article contributes to a critical understanding of enlargement politics, power asymmetries, and the relational nature of identity in international relations. The findings underscore how discourse functions not only as a mode of interaction but as a site of resistance, reproduction, and symbolic struggle.

## Keywords

European Union, Türkiye, identity, poststructuralism, refugee crisis, conditionality

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## Introduction

This article focuses on the relations between the European Union (EU) and Türkiye to examine how power dynamics between the two have influenced Türkiye's identity transformation. These dynamics have led their relations into a permanent state of tension between cooperation and contestation. The central research question is: to what extent have power relations in EU–Türkiye interactions reinforced the transformation of Turkish identity? EU–Türkiye relations have experienced cyclical dynamics of interaction over time (Eralp, 2009; Narbone & Tocci, 2007), beginning formally in 1963 with the signing of the Ankara Agreement, which envisioned the establishment of a Customs Union (later formalized in 1995), granting Türkiye preferential access to the European common market (Hughes, 2011). In the following years, the relationship gradually advanced toward the possibility of Turkish–EU accession. However, after 2005, Ankara began to experience a political identity shift that affected its approach to the EU, culminating in a challenge to the Union across several dimensions.

While some scholars suggest that Türkiye's relationship with the EU was driven by a dependence on Europe to affirm its international status (Kahraman, 2011), others emphasize the perception that the EU has continuously treated Türkiye as an “outsider” (Sakwa, 2010). This article argues that, while anti-Western discourse in Türkiye has long been a rhetorical tool of Islamist conservative parties (Dağı, 2005), it has gained traction within the framework of EU–Türkiye relations due to the power asymmetries around which these interactions gravitate. As the EU's normative discourse casts Türkiye as a deficient Other, it lays the ground for Türkiye's contestation and resistance. Here, these discourses are understood as counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in the (re)shaping of Ankara's political identity, consolidating power asymmetries and double standards as assets that are instrumentalized by the AKP to justify its increasingly authoritarian political agenda.

This dynamic became especially evident during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, which serves as the case study for this research. The crisis provides empirical evidence of how Türkiye's identity change has manifested in its relationship with the EU (Saatçioğlu, 2019) and how the country has begun to exercise counter-hegemonic power. While much has been written on EU–Türkiye relations, especially through institutional or security-focused perspectives, critical approaches examining power and identity remain relatively underexplored. Notably absent is analyzes of how the EU's exercise of power—particularly via the accession process—has contributed to Ankara's identity transformation.

Drawing from post-structuralist theory, this article examines how power enables international actors to stabilize their identity as superior by constructing others as inferior (Hansen, 2006; Morozov, 2010). Focusing on EU–Türkiye relations, we explore how the EU's exercise of normative and biopolitical power contributes to Türkiye's authoritarian turn. This turn is hereby partially framed as a result of de-Europeanization discourses in Türkiye, which are understood as expressions of an actor contesting EU hegemony. Drawing on the 2015 refugee crisis case and subsequent developments in EU–Türkiye relations, we suggest

that Erdoğan's constant leveraging of the EU's strategic dependency on Türkiye to control irregular migration is representative of an actor exercising counter-hegemonic power and (re)shaping its political identity. Finally, this demonstrates that examining EU–Türkiye relations through the prism of post-structuralist conceptions of power and identity contributes to a better understanding of how the autocratic drift in Türkiye has been made possible, *inter alia*, by the EU's discursive production of difference and exclusion.

The article's structure is as follows: it begins with a review of the literature on EU–Türkiye relations, followed by a theoretical framework grounded in post-structuralist thought, with a focus on discourse, power, and identity. This is followed by a contextual analysis of the EU–Türkiye relationship, situating the refugee crisis as a discursive turning point. The article then outlines the methodological approach, based on qualitative discourse analysis of political speeches, official EU documents, and strategic communications. The empirical analysis is divided into two parts: first, an examination of the EU's discursive exercise of conditionality; second, Türkiye's counter-narrative of sovereignty and resistance. These are followed by a discussion on the mutual construction of identities and, finally, by concluding reflections that synthesize the findings and propose future research directions.

## Literature Review

EU–Türkiye relations have long been a focus of scholarly debate. Much of the literature has been centered around the accession process and its implications for domestic reforms in Türkiye, exploring its compliance with EU conditionality and the Europeanization of its institutions (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2015; Hughes, 2011; Tocci, 2011; Turhan, 2012). Others have explored EU–Türkiye relations from strategic perspectives, framing the accession process as rooted in security and economic interests (Barrinha, 2008; Müftüler-Baç, 2000). However, while earlier accounts highlighted the EU's transformative potential, critical approaches have emphasized asymmetry, identity politics, and resistance. Viewing Türkiye as systematically positioned as an outsider to “Europe” rather than a genuine enlargement candidate, integration efforts have been overshadowed by cultural and civilization anxieties (Barrinha, 2014; Ertuğrul & Yılmaz, 2018). In this way, formal obstacles to Türkiye's EU membership, such as human rights concerns and the Cyprus issue, are thereby understood as instruments concealing deeper civilizational anxieties rooted in identity constructs that ultimately exclude Türkiye from any real scenario of enlargement. This sense of exclusion has been compounded by institutional stagnation and the increasingly transactional character of EU–Türkiye engagement, particularly evident since the 2015 migration crisis (Benvenuti, 2017; Saatçioğlu, 2019).

In this context, the critical literature has turned to the concept of normative power (Manners, 2002), exploring how the EU's ability to establish conceptions of “normal” projects and protect its liberal identity, but also constructs Others as normatively deficient. Diez (2005) introduced the notion of “normative

boundary-drawing,” which has been widely used to explain how the EU reproduces a hierarchy of belonging through discourse. By imposing truths and marginalizing alternatives, the EU can define “the realm of normal/abnormal” and shape identities in ways that produce double standards in its approach to other civilizations (Tocci, 2011, pp. 17–18).

From this angle, the EU’s Othering of Türkiye operates transversally through its normative discourse. Rumelili (2004, p. 32), for instance, contends that the EU’s “performance” of democratic identity entails constructing Others as failing to uphold such values. Turhan (2012) claims that the EU strategically frames its norm-based rhetoric to invalidate the viewpoints of its constructed Others. Consequently, the EU’s concerns with human rights in Türkiye appear as constitutive of its self-image as a human-rights-observing entity.

In line with this, Türkiye is often subject to a civilizational “gatekeeping” rather than technical conditionality, especially in domains such as religious freedom, human rights, and media independence. Cebeci (2019) further explores how this dynamic enables the EU to construct and sustain its liberal “ideal” identity, precisely by positioning Türkiye as its normatively inferior Other: a state that is close enough to warrant engagement, yet distant enough to reaffirm the EU’s own self-understanding as the guardian of liberal values.

Adding depth to this critique, Dias and Matos (2023) demonstrate how the EU’s discourse, particularly through the European Commission, has played a key role in producing normative boundaries between Europe and its periphery. Their analysis of the Commission’s narrative during the Ukrainian crisis shows how discourse can be strategically adapted to accommodate geopolitical needs—contrasting starkly with the EU’s more rigid stance toward Türkiye. This selective discursive flexibility reveals the politicized nature of “values-based” diplomacy, reinforcing perceptions of double standards and institutional hypocrisy.

Such double standards and Türkiye’s resulting position in a liminal space between EU membership and the external Other have generated frustration and perceptions of discrimination on the Turkish side, deeply infused with an anti-Western narrative (Dağlı, 2005; MacMillan, 2020). This became most visible after 2005, when, following the formal opening of accession negotiations, the relationship deteriorated significantly, coinciding with a shift that has been termed an authoritarian one in Türkiye under the AK Party government (Seufert, 2014).

The intensification of authoritarianism under the AKP is sustained, for instance, by empirical evidence showing a dramatic decline in human rights protection in Türkiye between 2007 and 2017, despite formal commitments to international legal frameworks (Matos, 2023). Matos identifies a growing gap between legal norms and implementation, driven by executive overreach, institutional purges, and the erosion of judicial independence. This contributes to a broader pattern of “à la carte Europeanization” in which reforms are selectively appropriated to serve domestic power consolidation. More broadly, this has been described as a process of de-Europeanization (Aydın-Düzgüt & Kaliber, 2019), in which the EU lost its role as a normative anchor in Türkiye, contributing to democratic backsliding and, as a result, reinforcing the framing of Türkiye as Europe’s Other (MacMillan, 2020).

Other scholars, however, interpret this position as a strategically articulated counter-hegemonic discourse that rejects Western norms and reimagines Türkiye as an autonomous regional power (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016; Barrinha, 2014; Sakwa, 2010). Tocci (2011, p. 18) insightfully notes that while discursive constructions of identity produce asymmetric power relations between the EU and Türkiye, these same dynamics give rise to counter-discourses that seek to reshape them. In a similar vein, Rumelili (2004, p. 37) argues that as identities are mutually constituted, “a very important dimension of self/other interaction is how the other responds to the construction of its identity,” understanding the response of the Other as “a spectrum that varies between recognition and resistance.”

Against this backdrop, Cebeci (2016) interprets de-Europeanization in Türkiye through the Foucauldian notion of counter-conduct. She argues that the AKP has responded to the EU’s governmentality by operating within the same power relations that marginalize Türkiye in EU–Türkiye relations. This involves selectively implementing EU-driven reforms to consolidate domestic authority, restricting fundamental rights and freedoms in other areas, and “overtly countering the EU’s conduct through employing rhetoric against the EU and attempting to create alternative conduct” (p. 125). This perspective suggests that although Türkiye voluntarily entered the accession process and accepted EU conditionality, counter-conduct shows that candidate states can outwardly comply while simultaneously “countering it through various—usually subtle—mechanisms” (p. 122).

These findings align with critical scholarship on post-structuralist and postcolonial approaches to international relations (IR), which emphasize how global governance actors often mask structural asymmetries beneath universalist rhetoric. Scholars such as Morozov (2010) and Sakwa (2010) show that actors such as Türkiye and Russia, when framed as “illiberal” or “authoritarian,” develop counter-hegemonic narratives to assert sovereignty and resist normative subordination. Türkiye’s case, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, fits within this paradigm (Çavuşoğlu, 2016).

Finally, the interplay of resistance and discursive reproduction is well captured by Pace and Bilgic (2018), who argue that the EU’s resilience and “liberal peace” discourse act as technologies of control. Türkiye’s identity construction in recent years has responded to these discourses not merely through rejection, but through the articulation of alternative values—emphasizing security, tradition, and a post-Western civilizational identity.

## **Theoretical Framework: Power and Identity in Post-structuralist Theory**

Post-structuralist theory offers a critical lens for understanding the relationship between power and identity in IR, challenging conventional ontologies and epistemologies. Unlike rationalist or positivist approaches that treat states and institutions as given entities, post-structuralism emphasizes that political actors and identities are constituted through discourse. It shifts the analytical focus from what power is to how power works—particularly through language, norms, and

institutional practices (Foucault, 1996). Foucault's conceptualization of power departs radically from traditional notions of power as domination or coercion. For Foucault, power is productive, relational, and embedded in everyday practices. It is not merely exercised through top-down force, but through the construction of knowledge, norms, and categories that define what is true, normal, or legitimate. In his view, power is not held but performed—and its primary operation is governmentality: the rationalities and techniques by which conduct is shaped (Foucault, 1991).

In IR, this insight has been used to analyze how states and international organizations govern populations not only through law or violence, but also by producing subjectivities. Actors are not only regulated; they are made to understand themselves in particular ways. This aligns closely with the concept of biopower, which refers to the control of populations through discourses of security, health, development, and normality—key dimensions of EU external action in its neighborhood and candidates (Jabri, 2007).

Identity, in this framework, is neither static nor essential. It is formed relationally—through the construction of “self” and “other”—and is continuously reconstituted through discursive practices (Edkins, 2007; Hansen, 2006). The logic of othering becomes central to international identity; one actor defines itself by positioning another as different, inferior, or threatening. This process is never neutral; it is a mechanism of symbolic and political domination. In the context of EU–Türkiye relations, the EU positions itself as the embodiment of liberal democracy, rationality, and order, while often casting Türkiye as unstable, authoritarian, or illiberal. This dynamic resonates with the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who conceptualize discourse as the field of political struggle over meaning. They argue that political identities emerge from contingent articulations—they are never fixed, but are always open to contestation. Hegemony, in this view, is the temporary stabilization of meaning through discourse, often enforced by institutions or dominant norms. The EU's enlargement policy and conditionality mechanisms can thus be interpreted as hegemonic practices that attempt to fix the meaning of “Europe”—and to include candidate states in that structure of meaning.

Türkiye's resistance to the EU's normative demands can then be understood not simply as a failure of democratization, but as a counter-hegemonic discourse that seeks to assert a different political identity. This discourse draws from nationalist, religious, and anti-colonial imaginaries to redefine sovereignty in opposition to European liberalism. It functions not merely as a policy response, but as an act of identity construction—an effort to escape the role of “peripheral other” imposed by the EU.

Importantly, the EU's normative power—often framed as benign or universal—is itself deeply implicated in asymmetrical power relations. Scholars such as Diez (2005) and Manners (2002) have shown that EU external action operates through normative boundary-drawing, in which some states are deemed “closer” to Europe, and others are perpetually outside. In this sense, the discourse of Europeanness is performative and exclusionary, constituting insiders and outsiders in ways that reproduce inequality.

By drawing on post-structuralist thought, this article adopts a relational and discursive understanding of both power and identity. Rather than asking whether Türkiye is becoming more or less democratic by EU standards, it interrogates how EU–Türkiye relations function as a site of identity formation—one shaped by asymmetrical discourses, contested subjectivities, and struggles over recognition and legitimacy. This framework will guide the analysis of the 2015 refugee crisis and the evolution of Türkiye’s political discourse, selected as a case study for the application of the theoretical model. It enables us to understand Türkiye’s authoritarian turn not as a deviation from liberal norms, but as a politically meaningful rearticulation of identity—shaped in dialogue with, and often in opposition to, the EU’s hegemonic narrative.

## Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative methodological approach grounded in post-structuralist discourse analysis. Consistent with the theoretical framework outlined above, the research assumes that power and identity are not objectively given but are constructed through discourse—through the ways actors speak, write, and represent themselves and others. Therefore, rather than seeking to “measure” Türkiye’s alignment with EU standards, this study explores how discourse operates as a mechanism of power, shaping subjectivities and political realities.

The central analytical tool is discourse analysis inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and further developed by scholars such as Edkins (2007), Jabri (2007), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985). This method is not limited to identifying thematic patterns in speech or documents, but aims to reveal how meaning is structured and contested through language. It pays attention to practices of categorization, normalization, and marginalization—especially as they relate to the production of political identities. The analysis focuses on the discursive relationship between the EU and the Republic of Türkiye in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, a critical moment in which both sides renegotiated their strategic partnership and, implicitly, their mutual identities. The case is considered a critical juncture: it heightened political tensions, exposed asymmetries in the relationship, and generated new narratives of sovereignty, legitimacy, and trust.

To capture this dynamic, the empirical material includes EU sources, as well as Turkish sources, particularly speeches, interviews, statements, and official documents; some media coverage and scholarly commentary contextualizing the political discourse will also be taken into consideration. The selection of these materials aims to capture discourse at the intersection of institutional power and political narrative. The temporal focus (2015–2020) enables a comparative reading of how narratives evolved before, during, and after the peak of the refugee crisis.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, it identifies dominant discursive formations in both the EU and Turkish rhetoric, particularly around the concepts of democracy, sovereignty, order, and identity. Second, it traces how these discourses interact, overlap, or conflict—paying special attention to shifts in tone, references to values, and practices of othering. The theoretical framework informs this

interpretative process but remains inductively open to emergent themes and narrative patterns. This methodological choice allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of power that transcends institutional analysis and embraces the symbolic and productive dimensions of discourse. It also enables a relational reading of EU–Türkiye dynamics—one that sees both actors not as fixed units, but as co-constituted through language, practice, and contestation.

## **Empirical Analysis: The 2015 Refugee Crisis and the Renegotiation of Power**

The 2015 refugee crisis was a defining moment in EU–Türkiye relations, exposing not only governance challenges but also discursive tensions regarding identity, legitimacy, and power. Beyond the material dimensions of border control and humanitarian management, the crisis revealed deep symbolic asymmetries in how the EU and Türkiye constructed each other through discourse, revealing the functional—rather than value-based—nature of the relationship (Saatçioğlu, 2019). Matos (2025, p. 114) argues that the refugee deal illustrates the EU’s pragmatic flexibility in migration policy, in contrast to other politically sensitive issues such as Türkiye’s democratic backsliding, suggesting that its normative power is instrumentalized to serve strategic interests. Conversely, Türkiye has repeatedly leveraged its geographic position and the EU’s dependence on it, most notably when President Erdoğan threatened to “open the borders,” using migration as a bargaining tool to advance political and financial goals. This pattern recurred whenever EU decisions diverged from Türkiye’s interests, including after the European Parliament’s 2016 resolution to freeze accession negotiations following the coup attempt and the EU’s condemnation of Türkiye’s 2019 intervention in northern Syria.

Therefore, although the refugee deal opened a new chapter of cooperation between the EU and Türkiye, it paradoxically heightened tensions. The EU’s dependence on Türkiye was instrumentalized to serve Ankara’s interests, ultimately reinforcing its Othering vis-à-vis the EU. In this vein, Turhan (2025) argues that the deal contributed to Türkiye’s symbolic distancing by framing it as a buffer zone, where the refugee “Other” could be contained. This reconfiguration reinforced Türkiye’s detachment from Europe and justified its marginalization in both the accession process and the visa liberalization agenda. Nevertheless, the EU’s othering of Türkiye was further shaped by Erdoğan’s strategic use of migration flows as leverage in negotiations, thereby exposing the EU’s security anxieties and intensifying portrayals of Türkiye as an unreliable partner. These dynamics became institutionalized as Türkiye’s classification in EU policy documents shifted from an accession candidate to a third-country framed within the domains of migration management and external relations.

### *The EU’s Discursive Strategy: Conditionality Repackaged*

The EU’s engagement with Türkiye has long relied on a discursive strategy rooted in conditionality—the principle that progress in bilateral relations depends on

Türkiye's alignment with a normative framework of liberal democracy, rule of law, and fundamental rights. This strategy is evident not only in the EU's official enlargement policy but is also sustained by a steady stream of progress reports, legal instruments, and public statements that evaluate, monitor, and often admonish Türkiye's political trajectory. The EU–Türkiye Statement of March 2016, negotiated in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, exemplifies this logic. While framed as a practical arrangement to control irregular migration, the agreement embedded expectations that Türkiye would continue implementing the Visa Liberalization Roadmap and comply with the Copenhagen criteria (European Council, 2016). The Third Progress Report on its implementation stressed that, although technical cooperation had improved, Türkiye still fell short on issues such as judicial reform, data protection, and anti-terror legislation—all framed within broader normative expectations (European Commission, 2016b).

This evaluative approach is reinforced in the European Commission's annual progress reports. The 2016 report stated that “there had been no progress on the independence of the judiciary and further serious regressions,” and described a worsening situation regarding media freedom and civil liberties (European Commission, 2016a). The 2020 report concluded that Türkiye had “continued to move further away from the European Union” and that accession negotiations were effectively frozen (European Commission, 2020, p. 3). The 2021 report reiterated that Türkiye had failed to credibly address the EU's concerns regarding democratic backsliding and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2021, p. 4).

This persistent framing reflects what Diez (2005) terms “normative boundary-drawing”: the EU defines its own identity through contrast with those who do not conform. Türkiye, in this discourse, becomes a liminal subject—close enough to engage, but perpetually not quite “European enough” to belong. Conditionality thus operates not only as a legal mechanism but as a symbolic act of power, continually locating Türkiye outside the normative core of European identity. Conditionality is not confined to political evaluations. The EU's financial instruments—such as the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT)—also reproduce this dynamic. While the FRIT has been credited with delivering humanitarian support, it has also been criticized for its limited transparency and accountability. The European Court of Auditors (2018) noted that “the Facility's monitoring and evaluation arrangements were not sufficient to assess the results of the projects funded,” and that its long-term sustainability was uncertain.

These concerns echo those raised about the broader pre-accession assistance under Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) II. The Court of Auditors warned that “EU support to Türkiye has been only marginally effective in improving governance and the rule of law” due to weak conditionality linkages (European Court of Auditors, 2018). An internal review of IPA II similarly concluded that funds were often disbursed despite persistent democratic deterioration (European Commission, 2017), undermining the credibility of the EU's transformative agenda. Crucially, these instruments are embedded in a broader discourse that consistently casts Türkiye as in need of reform, direction, and oversight. Terms such as “alignment gaps,” “shortcomings,” and “limited progress” recur across

Commission reports, creating a vocabulary of insufficiency that structurally positions Türkiye as an incomplete European actor. This reinforces a dynamic in which the EU maintains both epistemic and moral authority—even when its leverage is increasingly contested.

Thus, even in moments of close strategic cooperation, such as the refugee crisis, the EU maintained its identity as a normative arbiter. Its repeated emphasis on “track records,” institutional independence, and benchmarks portrays Türkiye not as an equal partner but as a political subject in need of tutelage. This discursive asymmetry stabilizes European self-perception and justifies a conditionality framework that extends well beyond technical compliance, reaching into the terrain of identity construction.

### *Türkiye’s Discursive Countermove: Sovereignty and Resistance*

As the EU maintained a discourse of conditionality and normative evaluation, Türkiye gradually developed a counter-discourse grounded in sovereignty, cultural authenticity, and resistance to perceived Western paternalism. This response, increasingly prominent since the 2010s and crystallized during the 2015 refugee crisis, marked a shift away from the performative language of accession compliance and toward a more assertive, autonomous political identity.

Contextually, such resistance builds significantly on anti-Western discourse, a narrative long held by conservative elites in Türkiye. Historically, Atatürk’s secularist reforms have been perceived as a source of unease by the Islamist-conservative segments of Anatolia, which would later become the backbone of Erdoğan’s electorate. Hence, Türkiye’s secularizing, top-down reforms generated a sense of exclusion among the conservative public, who experience them as cultural and religious repression imposed by a minority ruling elite (Karaveli, 2018, p. 103). Dağı (2005, p. 22) sustains this by arguing that, in Türkiye’s historical responses to Western pressures, “the West was described as the source of all problems encountered by Muslims; it was evil, degenerating and destroying Islamic civilization,” and, therefore, it was “conceived as the absolute ‘other’, generating identity issues to which Islamic thinking had to respond” (Dağı, 2005, p. 23). Within this imaginary, modernization (and eventually Europeanization) appears not as a neutral or progressive force, but as an aggressive imposition designed to silence the religious majority. Consequently, the West has been discursively cast both as an “enemy” and as the source of Turkish citizens’ grievances. Notably, although these narratives are often directed toward the “West,” Aydın-Düzgit (2016) shows that the EU is frequently subsumed within this category.

Reflecting the broader anti-Western discursive pattern, in key speeches during the migration crisis, Erdoğan framed the EU as hypocritical, accusing it of failing to meet its financial and political commitments. Following the entry into force of the refugee deal, Erdoğan contended that only €1–2 billion of the promised funds had been delivered by the EU. He declared, “The European leaders are not being honest,” and questioned, “We stand by our promises, but have the Europeans kept their promises?” (Deutsche Welle, 2016). Reinforcing this, in September 2016,

the Turkish president insisted that while Türkiye had fulfilled its obligations under the refugee deal, “the promises made by the EU to Turkey were unfortunately not been kept” (Anadolu Agency, 2016b). In another moment, he declared that Türkiye could “open the gates” and allow refugees to travel to Europe, challenging the EU’s moral superiority (Reuters, 2016). These rhetorical moves were more than political threats—they signaled Türkiye’s refusal to accept a subordinate position in the regional order.

This discursive rupture deepened in the years that followed. For instance, in 2019, Erdoğan dismissed EU critiques of Türkiye’s military intervention in Syria by invoking Europe’s own violent history:

We respond with a bitter smile to those responsible for the deaths of 50 million people in World War II, trying to lecture us on humanity. You will kill 1.5 million people in Rwanda and then try to lecture us on humanity. Look in the mirror first. There is nothing like that in our history. (Star, 2019)

This discourse again contests the EU’s normative stance in a similar way to the refugee crisis context. As MacMillan (2020) notes, anti-European AKP discourse has frequently put forward the idea that “despite its efforts to overcome its intolerant history, Europe is fated to repeat the horrors of its past” (p. 540). Thus, Türkiye positions itself as the true custodian of the EU’s values, with the refugee deal framed as evidence of its moral commitment, while the EU neglects those in need. Aydın-Düzgüt (2016) further argues that the EU is constructed as inferior not only in normative terms but also in governance and economic performance (pp. 54–55). She contends that Erdoğan has repeatedly underscored this contrast, notably during the euro crisis, when he framed Europe as both morally corrupt and materially weakened in opposition to Türkiye’s supposed democratic and economic “superiority.” Building the foundations for this assertion, Rumelili (2004, p. 45) suggests that the Turkish government has “actively resisted constructions of Turkey’s identity as inherently different from Europe by producing counter-arguments that construct Turkey as sharing Europe’s collective identity.”

In 2023, Erdoğan publicly declared that Türkiye “might part ways with the European Union,” citing the bloc’s attempts to sever ties and marginalize his country (Associated Press, 2023). This statement encapsulates a broader narrative of rejection—not of Europe per se, but of the asymmetrical logic that underpins the EU’s conditional engagement with Türkiye. Through such assertions, Türkiye seeks to reposition itself not as a deviant candidate but as a sovereign regional power capable of setting its own terms (Bechev, 2011).

The evolution of Türkiye’s discourse is also visible in formal documents. The National Action Plan for EU Accession (2021–2023), while marking continued technical alignment with the *acquis*, emphasized domestic ownership of the reform process (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). It articulated Türkiye’s intention to proceed with reforms not merely as responses to EU pressure, but as expressions of national interest. This reflects a strategy of selective engagement—accepting cooperation was mutually beneficial, while resisting normative subordination.

Türkiye's diplomatic discourse has also appealed to the EU's strategic dependence. In a 2023 meeting with EU officials, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan urged the bloc to take "bold steps" to revitalize accession talks, insisting that "the EU cannot be a truly global actor without Türkiye" (Associated Press, 2023). This narrative positions Türkiye as indispensable to European security and stability—especially in fields such as migration management, energy, and regional diplomacy—and reframes the enlargement discourse as a two-way strategic partnership rather than a one-sided civilizational project.

Beyond state discourse, this repositioning has implications for national identity. As argued by Morozov (2010) and Sakwa (2010), excluded or marginalized actors often construct alternative political imaginaries that challenge the universality of liberal norms. Türkiye's notion of "sovereign democracy"—and its associated emphasis on cultural particularism, national will, and historical destiny—has become a discursive tool for resisting the liberal template promoted by the EU. In this sense, counter-hegemonic rhetoric serves to both defend domestic political reforms and to assert a legitimate place in global politics.

This rhetorical strategy also draws on a deeper civilizational framing. Türkiye is increasingly portrayed in official and semi-official discourse as a "bridge" between East and West, or as a central actor in a post-Western order. Such language reframes the country's role from a peripheral applicant to a geopolitical fulcrum—one that can choose its alliances and norms freely. This shift is not only discursive but also strategic, reflected in Türkiye's deepening ties with non-Western powers and in its active role in mediating conflicts in the South Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East.

This suggests that Türkiye's resistance to EU power also echoes in its neo-Ottoman foreign policy orientation, particularly under Ahmet Davutoğlu's "Strategic Depth" doctrine, where Türkiye emphasized active engagement in regions historically linked to the Ottoman past like the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, positioning itself as a pivotal actor with its own sphere of influence grounded in shared history, religion, and culture (Özkeçeci-Taner, 2017; Yavuz, 2022).

Furthermore, Türkiye's foreign policy realignment is accompanied by a discursive emphasis on "respect"—a concept frequently invoked by Turkish leaders to signal dissatisfaction with perceived EU condescension. The insistence on mutual respect reflects a desire for discursive parity: the right to speak and be heard as an equal. This is not merely about diplomatic etiquette, but about epistemic sovereignty—the right to define legitimate political order without deferring to external arbiters of democracy.

In this context, Türkiye's discursive countermove should be understood not as a wholesale rejection of Europe, but as a challenge to its hegemonic discourse. It represents a demand for reconfiguration—for a new grammar of partnership based on reciprocity rather than hierarchy. This move complicates the binary of compliance versus resistance and reveals the relational nature of power and identity in EU–Türkiye relations. In sum, Türkiye's narrative of sovereignty and resistance does not emerge in isolation. It is produced in relation to the EU's discursive positioning and functions as a strategic rearticulation of national identity. It allows

the Turkish state to push back against conditionality while continuing to engage selectively with European institutions. This duality—rejection and recalibration—lies at the heart of Türkiye’s evolving identity in the international system.

### *Discursive Dissonance and Identity Realignment*

This clash of discourses produced a discursive dissonance that undermined mutual trust. While the EU continued to issue progress reports with recommendations for legal reform and democratic improvement, Türkiye began to reorient its identity outward—away from the framework of EU accession and toward a regional, post-Western role. Kaliber and Kaliber (2019) argue that Türkiye’s discourse since 2016 has increasingly emphasized civilizational exceptionalism, religious values, and geopolitical autonomy.

The EU’s external policy continued to rely on the language of “strategic partnership,” but Türkiye ceased to perform the script of the candidate state. The European Commission acknowledged this new reality in 2020, stating that “accession negotiations have effectively come to a standstill” (European Commission, 2020, p. 3). The refugee crisis was thus not only a crisis of migration management, but a moment of symbolic rupture in the EU–Türkiye relationship. The consequences of this discursive divergence are significant. As Erdoğan asserted a sovereign identity in opposition to EU paternalism, domestic shifts toward authoritarian governance were framed as expressions of national will rather than deviations from a normative path. This reframing allowed the AKP government to deflect external criticism by questioning the legitimacy of the critic—in this case, the EU—and mobilizing nationalist narratives internally (Matos, 2023; Sakwa, 2010).

## **Discussion: Discursive Power and Identity Construction**

The dynamics of EU–Türkiye relations cannot be understood solely through institutional interactions or strategic calculations. They must be interpreted as a site of discursive power—where identities are produced, contested, and stabilized. Drawing on the empirical findings above and expanding on post-structuralist theory, this section discusses how the EU exercises power through discourse, how Türkiye responds with a counter-hegemonic narrative, and how both actors engage in a process of mutual identity construction.

### *The EU’s Exercise of Power Over Türkiye*

The EU exercises power over Türkiye not only through formal instruments such as conditionality and accession negotiations, but also—and perhaps more significantly—through discursive practices that define what is “European,” democratic, and legitimate. This constitutes what Foucault (1991) termed governmentality: a form of power that works not by coercion, but by shaping the field of possible subjectivities. In this case, the EU’s discourse constructs Türkiye as a deviant

subject—one that aspires to Europeaness but fails to meet the required standards. This discursive position is evident in repeated statements that Türkiye “continues to move further away from the EU” and that “accession negotiations have come to a standstill” (European Commission, 2020, p. 3). Even during periods of intensified cooperation, such as the refugee crisis, the EU maintained its evaluative and pedagogical tone, emphasizing Türkiye’s need to reform judicial independence, protect media freedom, and respect minority rights (European Commission, 2016a, 2016b, pp. 4–10). Scholars such as Diez (2005) and Pace and Bilgic (2018) argue that this normative framing reproduces Europe’s identity as morally superior, while projecting “others” as incomplete or in need of transformation. The EU thus exercises symbolic domination, defining the horizon of acceptable political subjectivity for candidates like Türkiye.

This form of discursive power has real effects: it influences the structure of incentives, frames domestic reforms, and delegitimizes certain political choices. It also produces a subjectivity of subordination, in which Türkiye is constructed as a state that must be governed “from a distance” through technical, legal, and financial instruments—all while being symbolically excluded from full membership. Finally, if governmentality operates by shaping the conduct of others (Cebeci, 2016, p. 121), the EU’s normative stance can be understood as an attempt to direct Türkiye’s behavior. Yet, because power and resistance are mutually constitutive, such governmental practices inevitably provoke counter-discourses, through which Türkiye seeks to resist and reconfigure the EU’s attempts at governing it.

### *Ankara’s Counter-discourse and Discursive Resistance*

As expected, Türkiye has not remained passive in the face of this discursive subordination. As early as the mid-2000s, and increasingly after 2013, Turkish political elites—particularly under President Erdoğan—began articulating a counter-discourse grounded in sovereignty, cultural specificity, and suspicion toward Western intentions. This response is not only political, but also discursive: it challenges the EU’s hegemonic narrative and seeks to redefine Türkiye’s identity on its own terms. Erdoğan has often framed EU criticisms as hypocritical, stating in 2017: “The EU does not want to accept us because we are Muslim. Everything else is a pretext” (Deutsche Welle, 2017). This type of statement reframes exclusion not as a failure on Türkiye’s part, but as a reflection of the EU’s own contradictions.

From a post-structuralist perspective, this discursive resistance is a way of reclaiming agency. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue, political subjectivity is constructed through contestation—through the articulation of alternative meanings that challenge dominant discourses. Türkiye’s turn toward a “sovereign democracy” model, its increasingly multipolar foreign policy, and its domestic valorization of national values are all expressions of this counter-hegemonic identity.

Moreover, Türkiye has positioned itself as a humanitarian and geopolitical actor independent of Western oversight. During the refugee crisis, Turkish

officials repeatedly highlighted their role in hosting millions of refugees “without the need for lessons from Europe” (Anadolu Agency, 2016a). This narrative reframes Türkiye as a normative actor in its own right, reversing the typical roles assigned in EU enlargement discourse.

### *Mutual Construction of Turkish and European Identities*

The EU–Türkiye relationship is not a one-way projection of European norms onto a passive recipient. Rather, as post-structuralist theory emphasizes, identities are co-constituted through relational processes. The EU constructs its own identity—as a liberal, post-national, rule-based actor—through contrast with what it is not. In this case, Türkiye serves as a necessary “other,” against which European values are defined and reasserted (Diez, 2005; Rumelili, 2004). At the same time, Türkiye constructs its own identity through its interaction with the EU. The rejection or reinterpretation of European conditionality becomes a means of articulating a national self—one that is autonomous, sovereign, and culturally distinct. This mutual othering stabilizes both identities, but also locks them into antagonistic narratives.

As Edkins (2007) reminds us, identity is always contingent and political. The EU’s self-image as a promoter of peace, human rights, and democracy depends on having actors who are perceived as falling short of these ideals. Similarly, Türkiye’s sovereign identity gains traction precisely by delegitimizing the EU’s authority. This relational construction has profound implications. It means that reforms in Türkiye—or the lack thereof—are not only domestic matters, but also performances within a wider discursive field. Likewise, EU policy toward Türkiye is not merely about enlargement or migration management; it is a constitutive act that reinforces the Union’s own normative foundations.

## **Conclusion**

This article explores the question: To what extent have power relations in EU–Türkiye interactions reinforced Turkish identity transformation? Through a post-structuralist analysis of discourse—with a particular focus on the 2015 refugee crisis—the study demonstrated that the EU’s exercise of power has played a significant and often underestimated role in Türkiye’s political identity shift and its turn toward authoritarianism. The empirical analysis revealed that the EU, while engaging Türkiye as a strategic partner, continues to reproduce a discourse of conditionality, evaluation, and normative superiority. This discourse casts the EU as the liberal-democratic center and Türkiye as its incomplete, problematic other—a candidate that must be disciplined, guided, and assessed. Even in moments of crisis cooperation, such as the refugee deal, this symbolic hierarchy was maintained through official statements, progress reports, and policy frameworks.

Rather than promoting alignment or convergence, this form of discursive power has had the opposite effect. It has contributed to the production of a

counter-hegemonic discourse in Türkiye—one that asserts sovereignty, authenticity, and resistance to Western norms. By framing the EU as a hypocritical actor and by reimagining its own role as a regional humanitarian power, Ankara has actively redefined its identity in opposition to the European model. This discursive repositioning has served to justify internal political transformations, challenge external criticism, and reinforce a narrative of civilizational independence.

Thus, the EU's symbolic exercise of power has not merely failed to prevent Türkiye's democratic backsliding—it may have inadvertently reinforced it by offering the discursive conditions under which alternative, non-liberal identities could be consolidated. The article's core argument is that power in IR operates not only through policy instruments or material leverage, but also through discursive practices that shape the field of legitimate identity and action. This contributes to a broader understanding of how external actors, while claiming to promote universal norms, may, in fact, provoke acts of resistance and identity closure. By integrating post-structuralist theory with empirical analysis of official documents and political rhetoric, this article makes three key contributions: (a) a relational and discursive explanation for Türkiye's identity shift and authoritarian turn, challenging essentialist or purely domestic accounts; (b) it reconceptualizes EU enlargement not as a one-way transmission of norms, but as a field of symbolic struggle over meaning, hierarchy, and subjectivity; (c) it demonstrates that crises—such as the refugee influx—are not only governance challenges, but discursive junctures that reshape actor identities and redefine the parameters of international legitimacy.

Looking ahead, further research could examine how similar mechanisms operate in other asymmetrical relationships—for instance, in EU engagements with the Western Balkans, North Africa, or Eastern Partnership countries. It would also be valuable to analyze how these discourses are contested internally—how civil society, opposition parties, or marginalized groups in Türkiye respond to and reshape these identity narratives. Ultimately, this case highlights that interests, institutions, or norms do not simply govern IR—they are constituted through discourse, and it is within these discourses that identities are formed, resisted, and reimagined. In a time of global normative contestation, understanding these symbolic dynamics is not merely important—it is essential.

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