Article

Faith in Nations: The Populist Discourse of Erdogan, Modi, and Putin

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Abstract: Despite its global rise, theoretical frameworks to capture populism have been derived primarily from case studies in the Western hemisphere. To assess if and how the premises of populism travel across different contexts, we offer a comparative analysis of populist discourses in Turkey, India, and Russia, countries with different political contexts and religions. The content analysis of 1682 speeches of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin shows that they depart from their European and American counterparts because they are neither nativist nor inclusive. Instead, they introduce a new notion of "people" anchored in a religiously defined community, interpret the nation's past to achieve their own political goals, and identify different driving forces to restore their lost global role. A comparison of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin highlights the blind spots of existing studies, which fail to carefully contextualize the term, thus obscuring the country-specific constituents of populist discourses and the role of religions. Understanding the regional variants of populism not only helps us capture the reasons behind the leaders' appeal and resiliency but also their so-called unexpected actions and decisions, such as Putin's territorial and religious claims over Ukraine.

Keywords: populism; Islam; Hinduism; Orthodox Christianity; Erdoğan; Modi; Putin; security; discourse

1. Introduction

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges to democracy in the last decade has been the rise of populist parties and leaders (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Van Kessel 2015; Pappas 2019). As a result, "populism" is a critical concept in both political science research and popular discourse, making the understanding of its forms and impact more important than ever. However, despite its global presence, what we know about populism comes primarily from research on right-wing populists in Europe (e.g., Taggart 1996; Moffitt 2017; Mudde 2013; Kaltwasser 2012; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2013) and left-wing populists in Latin America (Hawkins 2003, 2009; De La Torre 2017; Frajman 2014). Likewise, the measures of populism were created based on insights from a few select cases and then applied to the analysis of parties, politicians, and discourses *in* the same regions risking presenting circular arguments. In this study, we venture out of the populism empirical "comfort zone" (e.g., geographical core) and investigate populist discourse in the context of three influential regional and global powers: Turkey, India, and Russia. These three countries represent the most dissimilar cases based on their levels of democracy and different dominant religions: Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Turkey has recently been declared a competitive authoritarian regime after a period of drastic democratic backsliding following its designation as a "free" in 2007. India has also experienced years of democratic backsliding since Modi became the Prime Minister; however, it is still viewed as an electoral democracy. Russia is seen as a closed autocracy.[1] After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin's popularity skyrocketed to 83%, and the support for the Russian armed forces in Ukraine (81%) further amplified the autocratic and authoritarian nature

of the regime. Despite the interest in Putin's decision, many continue to discuss whether Putin is a populist or not (Lassila 2018; Fish 2018; Burrett 2020), while many emphasize his authoritarianism.[2] Therefore, while Recep Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, and Vladimir Putin are all populist authoritarian leaders, their discourses are rarely studied systematically by using the main measurements of populism from a comparative perspective. Therefore, the case selection adopted here seeks to offer insights from the underrepresented cases and regions in the existing scholarship, specifically in terms of measures of populism and in theorizing its relationship to religion and democracy.

By moving beyond the comfort zone of populism, our comparative analysis tackles several interrelated questions: Are Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin populists if we apply the existing parameters of populist discourse to them? Is their populist appeal distinct from Western and Latin American versions? Is there a variation across their populisms, and what are some of their key similarities and differences? These questions are important empirically and theoretically for several reasons. First, although Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin are often assumed to be populist, their policies are often analyzed from the perspective of authoritarianism. Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin have been in power for quite a while in their respective countries, similar to other populists such as Hungary's Viktor Orban or Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski. Yet, they are seldomly analyzed as populist leaders. Therefore, this paper's insights help us understand if and how these leaders' discursive use of tropes differs from populist parties and candidates who attempt to mobilize and maintain support in the competitive electoral arena in other contexts. Second, many concepts in social science, including populism, suffer from conceptual stretching and the cat-dog problem, where distinct types are blended into a single category (Sartori 1991). We adopt Collier and Levitsky's (1997) contextualization and precising techniques to alleviate the conceptual stretching of the term "populism". The existing literature indicates that populism can be treated as an ideology, a frame, or a strategy (Mudde 2004; Weyland 2001; Hawkins 2009), yet each requires further elaboration to understand the specific variant of populism and its democratic consequences. In our comparative analysis, we show that Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin can be seen as populists par excellence because their discourses display central tenets of populism (e.g., people centrism or the treatment of issues as a cosmic war between the "good people" and the "evil elites"). However, understanding the precise nature of their populisms invites further careful analysis of how they create a Manichean world, and if and how they deploy shared beliefs and symbols from their majority religions and retell their histories to legitimize particular political projects that they pursue.

In order to better capture the regional variants of populism, we base our study on the content analysis of 1682 speeches that the three leaders delivered between 2014–2020. We analyzed all of the officially published full speeches and transcribed videos. We checked the accuracy of the texts by reviewing the videos and media coverage whenever possible.[3] A detailed assessment of the speeches pays attention to both what the politicians stated explicitly, and to their silent texts or unspoken messages conveyed through the settings of their speeches, symbols, and allusions. As noted by scholars such as Moffitt (2018), the performative aspect of contemporary populism can amplify some messages. Building on the approaches of populism that attend to its performance, we pay attention to how populism is conveyed through the use of distinct settings and deployment of symbols in the speeches.[4] Therefore, we focus on what we call *silent discourse* or *silent text*. To understand silent discourse, our analysis notes where and how the addresses are delivered, how policies are formulated and presented, and how symbols are used to construct ideas (e.g., how the leaders use religious ideas, symbols, and cultural-nationalist events, such as monuments and religious sites or who accompanies the political actors). Our research indicates that *silent discourse* often adds substantial meaning to political speeches. For instance, at first glance, the content of an address may not seem overtly religious; however, if the speech is delivered in a sanctified place or in the presence of prominent spiritual leaders, it can still evoke religious sentiments.

Our systematic comparison of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's speeches reveals that although their political appeal displays the central tenets of populism, they also significantly depart from their European and American counterparts in the way they define "people" and "elites", revisit their histories, and envision their global roles. Instead of fostering polarization based on the vilification of the conventional enemies of left-wing (e.g., financial capital) and right-wing (e.g., refugees) populists, Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin focus on broader historical struggles and global challenges facing their nations. Regardless of their strikingly different political histories and the role of religion in their respective politics, religion appears to be the primary source of national unity. In their unifying messages, they create a religiously imbued meaning of the "people", and call for national unity by weaving together the narratives of historical victories and future opportunities to lead global socioeconomic advancement by restoring the pivotal place their respective countries once played on the global stage. Therefore, despite the critical differences in their domestic contexts, a globally oriented revisionist nationalism and religiously defined national identity play a crucial role in these leaders' political discourse.

Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin converge in their emphasis on religion, security, and development in their populist claims. Yet, they blend them in distinct ways and present a new notion of a historical religious struggle to build a future community (Tepe et al. 2022). They may share similar discursive approaches; however, their appeal varies significantly: Erdoğan and Modi provoke nationalism by making overt references to religious symbols or practices in almost every speech, whereas Putin signals religious nationalism in a more subtle way. Erdoğan conflates the ideas of national and Islamic identities; he polarizes politics by vilifying the secular elites for their suppression of religion and their alleged plot to prevent Turkey from assuming global leadership in the Muslim world. Similarly, in Modi's discourse, Indian nationalism rests on a non-pluralistic understanding of Hindu beliefs and philosophies. Despite his religiously exclusive discourse, Modi's developmental policies seem to be inclusive of all faith groups, including Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious minorities, as long as these groups contribute to India's development while maintaining the dominance of the majority religion. At first glance, Putin's speeches lack frequent references to religion. Yet his widely televised performances are purposefully staged in religiously and historically significant locations. Thus, even though Putin's religious speeches are infrequent compared to Erdoğan and Modi, they still promote a religiously defined Russian nationalism. Attesting to the power of unspoken texts or *silent discourse*, Putin effectively and deliberately weaves together Orthodox and nationalist narratives and presents them as a perennial struggle for Russia's sovereignty and identity in the face of attacks from different external enemies.

The following offers a brief review of the literature on populism, its blind spots, and scholarly disputes about whether or not Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin are populist. After introducing our approach to content analysis of the speeches, we explain how the structure and the content of their populist rhetoric furthers their claims that they truly represent the people. We exemplify how each leader presents a specific history of their nation and envisions its global role by tapping into different aspects of their socio-religious contexts. Our discussion explains how the discourses of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin can open a window on the variants of populism, which can be categorized as precarity-centered messianic populism (religious and security-based populism), developmental-nationalist populism (growth-based nationalism), and redemptive pioneering populism (seeking to restore the lost glory), respectively. Our findings indicate that populism is a crucial term for distinguishing one group of leaders and parties from others based on their political appeal. However, for populism to be an analytically expedient term, initial identification is necessary but insufficient to understand the sources of the parties' and leaders' political appeal and how they legitimize the centralization of power. Thus, careful contextualization and inductive comparative studies are essential to identify the varieties of populism to determine, for instance, how the meaning of people and cosmic war changes in different contexts. Such conceptual and empirical precision enables us to go beyond determining

whether or not a leader is populist. It allows us to assess to what extent and how the main pillars of populism (e.g., the binaries of "people vs. elite", Manichean world view) shape their political discourses and their consequences. Thus, understanding the varieties of populism and the role of religion is not simply an academic exercise. Instead, it allows us to better assess how populists impact their respective regimes by clarifying how they simplify their society's pluralism and portray the future of their countries.

2. Blind Spots in Studies of Populism and Neglected Regional Variants

A significant number of studies in populism literature seek to clarify the definition of "populism" and determine the best method to capture it. Despite their differences, these studies can be generally categorized into three groups that view populism as (i) a "thin" political ideology that reduces politics to a conflict between the "corrupt elite" and the "righteous people" and seeks to make the volonté générale (general will) of the people the dominant force in politics (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012); (ii) a political strategy to leverage and mobilize support by appealing to grievances and emotions of large segments of the population (Weyland 2001; Roberts 2006; Jansen 2011; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016) or (iii) a form of political communication style, which frames social issues in a way that allows politicians or parties to present the world as an existential conflict between the people and the elites (Canovan 1999; Kazin 1998; Laclau 2005; Hawkins 2009; Taggart 2000; Jargers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2018; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Aslanidis 2016; Tepe 2021). Although the existing literature is very rich and vibrant, it still has several critical blind spots. Specifically, the treatment of populism as an ideology presumes that it is thin-centered, which means that populism cannot function without being nested in a "host" ideology, making determining populism's variations not only an analytical but also a political necessity. More importantly, regardless of how populism is conceptualized and empirically measured, the majority of the studies of populism are both informed by and applied to European or Latin American cases (e.g., Müller 2016; Mudde 2004), which makes the term geographically limited and raises serious conceptual and methodological challenges regarding its applicability to regional variations.

In addition to its conceptual blind spots at the methodological level, distinct approaches to populism tend to employ a specific set of approaches, which further compartmentalizes and undermines our understanding of populist leaders and parties. For instance, those who define populism as an ideology tend to rely on the analysis of party manifestos. Conceptualization of populism as a mobilization strategy focuses on quantitative analysis of policies, public opinion, and party organizations. Finally, the theorizing of populism as a political communication style adopts interpretive textual analysis based on a sampling of speeches. Given the plurality of approaches in this study, we argue that regardless of their specific definitions of populism, different conceptualizations and approaches are not mutually exclusive. Instead of offering separate perspectives, each approach brings to the fore various aspects of populism: ideas, mobilizational capacity, and discursive appeal. Furthermore, despite their differences, scholars tend to agree that discourse matters: we identify populism and populists from the way they deploy specific political ideas and terms (e.g., people or elite), and their ability to present political struggles as a cosmic war or a battle between the "good" and the "evil" (Laclau 2005; Kazin 1998; Canovan 1999; De La Torre 2010). There is no dispute among scholars that all populist discourses promote (i) a Manichean vision of the world, which often takes an anti-elitist tone and presents a romanticized notion of the common man, (ii) depictions of conflicts of cosmic proportions with moral significance, (iii) the necessity for a systemic change, and (iv) justification of non-democratic means (Hawkins 2009). Therefore, populist leaders skillfully pit virtuous 'people' against nefarious and parasitic 'elites', who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk.

When populism is applied to countries beyond Europe and Latin America, scholars tend to make populism secondary to the analysis of individual authoritarian leaders, which points to the lack of conceptual investigation of whether the Western construct of populism

travels to different regions. For instance, despite significant scholarly interest in Turkey's Erdoğan, India's Modi, and Russia's Putin, most studies focus on their increasingly illiberal practices and democratic backsliding (Piccone 2016; Fish and Abrams 2020). Most current research focuses on the causes and consequences of the increasing authoritarianism in these countries, but few engage in the analysis of the political discourse surrounding the growing restrictions on democratic freedoms. The few studies that do investigate the populist characteristics of these regimes fail to offer a systematic comparative assessment clearly showing what exactly makes their discourses populist. For instance, scholars unanimously agree that Erdoğan is, indeed, a charismatic leader who can mobilize the masses; yet the analyses of his leadership focus on his personal appeal or clientelist policies (Elçi 2019; Cagaptay 2020). Such studies provide excellent accounts of contextual factors that make Erdoğan's regime distinct, such as social polarization along ethnic or religious-secular lines, unstable economic conditions, and increasing media restrictions. Yet, such factors are seen as the outcome of Erdoğan's authoritarianism, not his populism. Likewise, although Erdoğan adopts a political discourse that builds on a romanticized version of the Ottoman past, dubbing the term "neo-Ottomanism", such appeal is seen as an additional strategy to promote Islam (Ghulyan 2019). Moreover, although Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have adopted many unprecedented religiously motivated practices, such as holding press meetings after Friday prayers in mosque courtyards, naming public places after Islamic-nationalist leaders, opening mosques in critical public spaces, and altering the contents of textbooks, such policies are often depicted as the outcome of the party's pro-Islamic ideology but not as its populist strategy (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021).[5] This highlights another critical shortcoming in the literature: the omission of the silent discourse, i.e., unspoken messages conveyed nonverbally, from the analysis of populist discourse. By the same token, Erdoğan's foreign policy discourse has often been defined as "neo-Ottomanism", "Islamic realism", or "civilization geopolitics", yet scholars fail to question if and how such appeals fit with Erdoğan's overall populist narratives (Balta 2018; Bilgic and Bilgin 2012; Ozturk 2021).

Similarly, Modi is often depicted as a nationalist strongman, but his complex populist rhetoric has not been put through rigorous analysis (Varshney 2017). The majority of existing studies describe Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as nationalists who turn to Hinduism, not simply for the sake of a religious appeal, but to construct a nationalist project (Nielsen and Nilsen 2021). As a result, Modi's discourse is reduced to "Hindutva", the doctrine in which Hindu nationalism is the main reason behind his controversial policies. Modi, therefore, is seen as a radical nationalist leader par excellence with his "India first" policies, as well as the emphasis on Hindu culture and heritage on the global stage. His political projects, such as establishing the International Day of Yoga at the UN, are highlighted to showcase his brand of Hindu nationalist assertive appeal (Kinnvall 2019). While many studies focus on the Hindu nationalism that Modi promotes, little is known about how he also strategically deploys populist narratives surrounding widely publicized social programs (Mcdonnell and Cabrera 2019). Throughout his tenure, the state implemented a number of social welfare programs, such as Clean India toilet-building campaigns, new pension schemes, as well as various programs for women, farmers, and the urban poor—which were all accompanied by impressive public announcements and ambitious speeches (Aiyar 2019). These policies may not be new but rather continuations of earlier pre-Modi projects; yet, Modi presented them as his own, leading the beneficiaries to believe that these public goods and services directly resulted from his effective leadership. Modi's success is often attributed to his welfarism and how his policies promote trust in him and augment his moral legitimacy in the eyes of voters (Aiyar 2019, p. 86). Reflecting his image, many describe him as a leader who addresses the long-standing consequences of neoliberal policies, socioeconomic inequalities, and widespread corruption, which marginalized a large part of the Hindu population (Chacko 2018).

Putin's regime is arguably one of the most effective and long-running forms of modern autocracy. Although whether or not Putin is populist has been widely discussed in the

literature, the answer remains unclear. For some, Putin cannot be classified as populist due to his pragmatism, yet for others, populism is "an inalienable feature of Putin's rule" (Drozdova and Robinson 2019; Busygina 2019, p. 503). Dubbed "Putinism", his approach is seen as pragmatic and opportunist but not populist since his leadership lacks critical characteristics that we observe in "classic" Western populists (Burrett 2020, p. 194; Casula 2013; McFaul 2020). Others note that Putinism lacks another crucial element of populism, namely the construction of the righteous "common man", and traces its absence to "the historical distrust of 'the people as a political subject" (Lassila 2018, p. 175). In many studies, Putin is depicted as a leader who presents himself as a bulwark against any threat to Russian sovereignty and its traditional values posed by European liberalism. This narrative of the civilizational stand-off with the West is an integral part of the construction of Russian nationalism (Oliker 2017, p. 10). Those who bring populism into their analysis contend that although Putin receives support from right- and left-wing populist parties, especially in Europe, Putin himself does not promote populist ideas. Although Putin's discourse includes many references to nationalism, religion, and conservative values, such studies argue that it is essentially neo-imperial, not populist (Shakhanova and Kratochvíl 2020).

When we review the selection of case studies in the populism literature, it shows that one of the significant shortcomings has been their reliance on single case studies. Likewise, within- and cross-region comparisons have been very limited. Only a handful of recent studies provided a comparative analysis of populism across different geographic areas beyond Europe and the Americas (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020; Gürsoy 2021; Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Moffitt 2018). The majority of studies that examine the political leadership in Turkey, India, and Russia are country-specific case studies. Although some journalistic accounts or reports compared these leaders, none of the existing scholarly works systematically compared Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's populist discourses. Thus, although populism is one of the most discussed topics in political science today, what is missing is a systematic account of populist discourse in Eurasia, South Asia, and the Middle East and comparative research of these cases. Considering the overall gaps in the literature, this article seeks to fill a significant gap by including not only the cases that remain under-researched in populism literature but also by offering a systematic comparative analysis. The following aims to address this analytical gap and explore how the specific historical, religious, and political context affects the main tenets of the populist rhetoric in the different areas of global politics.

3. Methodology

The countries analyzed in this research, Turkey, India, and Russia, have striking similarities and differences. Each has a populist figure in a leadership role, yet they vary on a multitude of criteria, such as specific regime type, dominant religion, and party politics (see Table 1). After a brief democratization period in the early 1990s, Russia has become a consolidated autocracy ever since Putin came to power in 2000. Likewise, although it was once described as "free", Turkey's democratic institutions have eroded slowly since 2007. Especially after its constitutional reforms in 2017, Turkey's democracy weakened the parliament and increased the powers of the President. However, the country remains a competitive authoritarian regime where opposition parties have a reasonable chance to gain power. India has also been headed down the road of democratic backsliding. However, according to the 2020 Freedom House report, with a score of 67/100, India is a "partly free" country that maintains competitive elections. When we review their positions in their respective polities, Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin control the ruling party. Turkey and India have strong opposition parties whose legitimacy is rooted in revolutionary wars for independence. There is no such party to challenge Putin's United Russia. Lastly, all three cases represent the dominance of three different religious traditions: Islam in Turkey, Hinduism in India, and Orthodox Christianity in Russia.

Table 1. Case Selection.

Countries	Russia	India	Turkey
Leaders	Putin	Modi	Erdoğan
Regime type	Consolidated Authoritarian	Electoral Democracy	Competitive Authoritarian
Party in power	United Russia	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Justice and Development Party (AKP)
Majority religion	Orthodox Christianity	Hinduism	Islam

Our assessment blends content analysis with holistic discourse analysis to tease out the patterns in the populist discourse of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin. More specifically, the findings are elicited from four layers of analysis: (i) automated word frequency calculations to identify the salient terms and themes in the discourse, (ii) holistic interpretation of the speeches, (iii) in-depth analysis of specific terms and metaphors in their historical and institutional context, and (iv) an assessment of the place where the speech was delivered and symbols used by leaders. The data used in this research consists of a total of 1682 transcripts of speeches made by Modi (2017–2020), Erdoğan (2014–2020), and Putin (2017–2020). In the sample of speeches compiled from official government websites of the respective leaders, we have 773 by Erdoğan, 615 by Modi, and 294 by Putin. Our analysis has fewer Putin speeches because he gives speeches less frequently than other leaders.

All speeches were collected from official government websites of the President of Turkey, the Prime Minister of India, and the President of Russia. The analysis was conducted in the original languages: English, Turkish, and Russian.[6] The analysis of textual data was conducted by NVivo. As a first step, we randomly selected speeches from different years and focused on speeches given on various occasions to understand speech patterns and themes. As the second step, we conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis assisted by NVivo coding and conceptual mapping functions. As a third step, we used Nvivo to systematically review the speeches' content, such as identifying the 100 most frequently used words and their ranking in terms of usage frequency. As a final step, we compared the speeches given on similar occasions or with a similar theme.

The content analysis of the speeches indicates striking similarities and differences between the political discourses of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin. Our review of their speeches illustrated that the three leaders differ in the number and tone of the addresses they deliver. As indicated above, while Erdoğan and Modi deliver speeches almost daily, Putin speaks less frequently and for a shorter period of time. Thus the disparities in the overall length of the speeches are not the result of a selection bias. In contrast, Erdoğan delivers speeches regularly, yet his speeches repeat a common set of phrases, metaphors, and critical points, and some of his speeches become "recycled"; he delivers a very similar speech on multiple occasions. Similarly, Modi's speeches include a core set of recurring themes and phrases regardless of the topic.

Our overall assessment of the tone of the speeches indicates that Putin's speeches tend to be tailored to the specific occasion and often have a formal style. In contrast, the tone of Erdoğan's and Modi's speeches is usually more informal, conversational, and at times emotional, whereas the tone of Putin's speech is formal and measured. Moreover, Modi and Erdoğan tend to use simple everyday expressions and common religious expressions to make themselves relatable to a large number of lower- and middle-class citizens, workers, and peasants. However, Putin's discourse oscillates from a more complex and official to a more colloquial language. In his speeches, Putin presents himself as erudite and competent, yet also a thoughtful leader. One might argue that variations in Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's tones are due to their different political and historical contexts, and their notions of the "common man". As each leader presents himself as a "common man", Modi and Erdoğan construct images of themselves as coming from a modest background, self-made, very pious, and committed to defending the "good people", whereas Putin positions himself as the dedicated servant of the state and the nation, yet his leadership role does not set him apart from ordinary folk.

4. Faithful People and Forgotten Nationhood: Looking to the Past to Envision a New Future?

Despite the question of whether Modi, Putin, and Erdoğan are populists or not, a systematic analysis of their public appeal (see Table 2) indicates that the keyword of populism, "people", is among the most frequently used words in their speeches. An assessment of their most frequently used terms shows that they rely on collectivist terms regardless of the specific topic of the speech. The use of collectivistic terms also illustrates how they introduce a sense of idealized political community. For instance, Erdoğan uses the religiously connoted term, *millet* inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Modi refers to 'the people' as a nation, while Putin uses the word люди that is more closely translated as "humans", which seems to de-emphasize a nation or a political community. The 'us' versus 'them' binary is further highlighted by other collectivist terms such as 'we', 'country', 'nation' or 'together'. The respective names of the countries dominated the leaders' discourse, underscoring the distinct tone of their populism and its close relation to religiously defined nationalism and national identity. Indeed, the most prominent feature of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's rhetoric is their emphasis on the nation and the country.

Table 2. Most frequently used words in Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's speeches.

	Varieties of Populist Discourse					
	Erdoğan (Turkey)		**Modi (India)**		**Putin (Russia)**	
1	We	16,947 1.06%	We	12,030 1.77%	We	3751 2.42%
2	Nation	11,045 0.70%	India	8984 1.32%	Russia	2022 1.00%
3	Turkey	10,335 0.65%	Country	8037 1.18%	Country	1060 0.65%
4	People	10,056 0.63%	People	6507 0.96%	Work	878 0.57%
5	Human	5337 0.35%	Governments	5353 0.79%	Development	834 0.51%
6	Allah (God)	5233 0.33%	Friends	4913 0.72%	New	602 0.25%
7	My Brothers	5077 0.32%	Works	4214 0.62%	People	568 0.20%
8	World	4818 0.30%	New	3956 0.58%	Economy	540 0.35%
9	Valuable	4090 0.26%	World	3541 0.52%	World	539 0.35%
10	Terror	3627 0.23%	Development	3016 0.44%	State	378 0.24%
11	Important	3448 0.22%	Nations	2295 0.34%	Together	355 0.25%
12	New	3391 0.21%	Farmers	1890 0.28%	Friends	350 0.37%
13	I	3365 0.21%	Scheme	1875 0.28%	Cooperation	344 0.23%
14	Together	3060 0.19%	Sisters	1829 0.27%	Decision	338 0.22%
15	Continue	2973 0.19%	Changing	1793 0.26%	International	324 0.21%
16	State	2734 0.18%	Providing	1649 0.24%	Life	320 0.21%
17	External (Foreign)	2709 0.17%	Villages	1628 0.24%	Citizens	317 0.20%

	Varieties of Populist Discourse					
	Erdoğan (Turkey)		Modi (India)		Putin (Russia)	
18	Period	2733 0.17%	Brothers	1622 0.24%	Technology	307 0.20%
19	Syria	2548 0.16%	Opportunity	1610 0.25%	Regions	307 0.20%
20	Istanbul	2547 0.16%	Life	1598 0.23%	Tasks	299 0.19%
21	Party	2179 0.14%	Connectivity	1582 0.23%	Projects	296 0.19%
22	Against	2027 0.13%	Effort	1535 0.23%	Participation	289 0.19%
23	Struggle	2018 0.13%	Poor	1439 0.21%	Create	281 0.19%
24	Millionaire	1950 0.12%	Greatness	1424 0.21%	Security	266 0.17%
25	Other	1922 0.12%	Family	1392 0.20%	Support	247 0.16%

Moreover, Erdoğan often refers to colloquial communal terms such as *kardeslerim* (my siblings) to claim affective ties with his audience. Likewise, Modi frequently deploys terms such as 'my brothers', 'sisters', and 'friends' to remind people of their collectivistic and affective ties. Interestingly, Putin also addresses his audience as 'friends', which sounds affectionate and informal in contrast to his official and measured tone and style of rhetoric. Therefore, despite their striking differences, the discourses of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin are dominated by a mixture of collectivist terms that emphasize a sense of unity, shared values, and the experiences of their respective nations. An overall review of the frequency of the main terms in these leaders' verbal appeals shows that they are clearly in line with the expectation of populism literature. Given the critical role that collectivistic terms play in all three leaders' discourse, it is important to trace how these terms are deployed to challenge other groups.

A review of the themes and contents of Erdoğan's speeches shows that central to his appeal is a sense of religiously defined historical community that challenges the secular Turkish republic. His discourse differs from other leaders in Turkey due to his construction of a new sense of nationhood that glorifies the Ottoman past and envisions its revival, in which Islam plays a central, unifying role. Erdoğan juxtaposes a romanticized depiction of an Islamic Ottoman past against the failure of the secular Kemalist republic. Such a discourse allows him to discredit the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's oldest party established by Turkey's founding leader, Kemal Ataturk. Erdoğan accuses the opposition party and Turkey's political elite of being detached from and antagonistic toward the pious "people". At the same time, he describes himself as the leader of the unifying force against the corrupt secular elites and the encroachment of the West. The controversial speech about the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque captures Erdoğan's approach to people and nationhood. In this speech, he defends the decision to convert Hagia Sofia as a much-needed step to revive the suppressed Ottoman past by the republican secular elite and reclaim the Muslim place of worship. This rhetoric helps Erdoğan to assert himself as the leader of the Muslim world in a struggle against the West's demands on the nation:

> "This is the kind of embarrassment from which Turkey saved itself today. Today, Hagia Sophia is having another resurrection, many of which it has witnessed since its construction. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footsteps of the will of Muslims across the world to come out of the interregnum. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the reignition of the fire of hope of not just Muslims but together

with them of all the oppressed, wronged, downtrodden, and exploited. The resurrection of the Hagia Sophia demonstrates that the Turkish nation, Muslims, and all of humanity still have something new to tell the world. The resurrection of the Hagia Sophia represents our memory full of heydays in our history: from Badr to Manzikert, from Nicopolis to Gallipoli".[7]

In this historical speech, Erdoğan justified his controversial decision and referred to an Ottoman document nine times to justify his decision to correct a historical mistake. The repeated messages in all Erdoğan's speeches emphasize how the secular republic derailed Turkey, and how his mission was to put the country back on the right course by adopting new policies that promote religious revival.

Modi's discourse reveals a similar pattern of reconstructing the past to demonstrate the desire to restore the suppressed Hindu identity and promote Hindu nationalism. Echoing Erdoğan's discourse, Modi is critical of India's secular history and elites. For instance, he states that India was not established on 15 August 1947, as is usually assumed. Instead, Modi emphasized that India's glorious sovereign history goes back to ancient times. For Modi, it was not the post-colonial elites embodied by the Indian National Congress who built up India following Independence. Instead, his speeches repeatedly remind people that India stands firm because of the hard work of the sages, gurus, philosophers, farmers, laborers, and agriculturalists since the Vedic period (Modi 2021a). In contrast to Erdoğan's discourse where the word Allah (God) appears as the 6th most frequently used word, at first glance, it may seem like Modi does not often deploy religious terms given that specific religious terms such as 'God' are absent from his top-25 or even top-100 most frequently used words. However, a closer reading of his speeches reveals that Modi frames various political issues, policies, and even developmental projects in religious terms. The absence of direct references is reflective of the Hindu faith which incorporates over 360 million gods and goddesses in Sanatan Dharma. In fact, in virtually all of his speeches, Modi refers to Hindu mythology and symbols even when topics are not about culture, religion, or history (Modi 2021d). For example, in November 2021, Modi attended a stone-laying ceremony dedicated to a highway project in Pandharpur, where he said:

> "Rama Krishna Hari! ... By the grace of God, I got an opportunity to unveil the renovated Samadhi of Adi Shankaracharya in Kedarnath two days ago, and today, I am connected with Pandharpur, the permanent abode of Lord Vitthal. What could be more joyful than this, the privilege of realizing God's grace? ... Lord Vitthal is the embodiment of bliss in this grand land of Pandharpur ... And today, there is the joy of service as well. As it is said that roads are the gateway to development, similarly, these roads leading to Pandhari will also be the highways that will hoist the flag of Bhagwat Dharma (service to God) even higher. This will be the gateway to the holy path." (Modi 2021f)

Economic and infrastructural development are the prevailing themes in Modi's speeches. Terms such as 'development', 'farmers', 'schemes', and 'opportunity' are featured very prominently in Modi's discourse (Table 2). In fact, "development" is one of the top ten terms that Modi uses. His developmentalism focuses on socioeconomic issues such as education, public services, and poverty elimination, especially in villages. However, these developmental policies are wrapped in Hindu religious, philosophical, and spiritual terms. For example, developmental projects are often accompanied by the phrase "*Sabka Saath sabka Vikas sabka Vishwas*", which means "if everyone supports [it], then everyone develops", alluding to the complete support that he needs from the citizens to achieve his goals of economic and social advancement (Modi 2021b). Yet, Modi also frequently refers to gods such as Rama, Radhan, Krishna, and Vishnu from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, and frames politics in religious or idealistic terms as a matter of morality and ethics from a particular Hindu perspective (Modi 2021c).

In a strikingly similar way to Erdoğan and Modi, Putin frames Russia's history in terms of a continuous struggle during the Imperial and the Soviet eras that requires fending

off Russia's enemies from the West and the East. In re-Putin emphasizes Russia's victories in protecting its nation, culture, and '*самобытность*', a unique term that can be roughly translated as one's own identity. Creating an image of a cosmic war to protect Russian's identity, Putin presents his struggles as ones against evil embodied in fascism that continue to threaten Russian people in and beyond Russian borders. For example, in the speech he delivered in September 2021, at the opening of a monument dedicated to a prominent historical figure, Alexander Nevsky, a 13th century Grand Prince of Kievan Rus (modern-day Ukrainian territory), Putin referred to Nevsky as an exemplary hero who fought off the attacks on medieval Russia, and protected the nation's traditions and faith. Such speeches capture how Putin conflates the histories of Russia and its neighboring counties, particularly Ukraine, by treating the current boundaries as arbitrary. In Putin's populism, it is the shared history and religion of Rus that defines territorial claims, not the current boundaries of sovereign states:

> "Nevsky lived during the most challenging times in Russia's history when disappearance and loss of our statehood were close to becoming a tragic reality. Almost all principalities in Ancient Rus endured the devastating Horde invasion, while neighbors from the West were striving to conquer Novgorod and Pskov. Alexander Nevsky and his soldiers stood up mightily and impregnably to fight for what was the last frontier of the Fatherland." (Putin 2021b)

Attesting to Putin's blend of religion and state, the monument was sponsored by the Ministry of Defense and the Russian Orthodox Church, the two institutions that play a critical role in the centralization of Putin's authoritarian regime (Kolov 2021). Putin's public discourse tends to focus on select historical figures that remind people of what was at stake when the Russian nation was under attack from both Western (European) and Eastern (Muslim) powers and what, and more importantly who, it took to defeat the hostile forces and show the strength of the Russian nation. The references to formidable and charismatic leaders, such as Alexander Nevsky, reinforce the idea that centralized leadership is still needed to protect the nation. Putin carefully weaves together the narratives of the past and the present, implying the resemblance between the struggles of his government and the attacks endured by historical Russian heroes. Such messages are reinforced by symbols, such as the sculptures of Nevsky's warriors, whose faces were molded after the real soldiers currently serving in the Russian military. Furthermore, presenting the claim that Russia's history, its present, and future are interconnected, Putin notes that "nothing can break the holy connection of time and generations". Hence, Putin's discourse emphasizes that Russia is strong, yet it continuously faces threats to its sovereignty and national identity from the enemies from the West and the East. In this struggle, according to Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church serves as the spiritual center that preserves Russian identity through generations. Unlike other leaders, Putin's speeches often remind his audiences that historical national heroes such as Alexander Nevsky made every decision in the interests of national self-determination and protection of the faith and the future of Russia. Prominently featuring military struggles, defeats, and victories, and some key historical figures as brave and skillful political and military leaders, Putin implicitly promotes his regime and his persona as a selfless patriotic leader, whose qualities mirror Nevsky's heroic nationalism.

5. Corrupt Elite and Shifting Enemies

Populist leaders place the struggle against the 'corrupt elite' at the center of their political rhetoric and present themselves as champions of national sovereignty. However, how exactly do those elites and enemies differ across political contexts? In Erdoğan's populist rhetoric, Turkey's founding party, the Republican People's Party, which is currently in the opposition, is portrayed as corrupt and detached from the people because it had failed to understand the needs and grievances of the common folk. At the same time, Erdoğan also routinely vilifies international, and specifically, Western elites and institutions dominated by the West. He reminds his followers that Islamophobia is rampant in the West, as well as among secular groups at home, thus linking his external and internal

enemies. Erdoğan, like Putin, also refers to abstract enemies as lobbyists or foreign interests that try to plot against Turkey. For Erdoğan, Turkish secular elites are essentially the enemies of the 'common man', and they disparage their religion and their nation by turning places of worship into modern museums and clubs, thereby threatening the core values of the "common people". In his speeches, Erdoğan often evokes quotes from nationalist poets to support his statements. For instance, in his address to the elected neighborhood leaders, Erdoğan reminded them of the range of enemies he faced; "tutelage" refers to the Republican elite, and "putschist" refers to the Islamic group and a former ally of the party that was accused of plotting the 2015 coup against the AKP:

> "Yes, we did not know who would come up against us in our struggle to preserve the legacy we inherited from our ancestors and to carry it forward. They appeared before us in the guise of putschists and juntaists. Sometimes, they took on the mask of tutelage, sometimes an international organization—images as an armed terrorist and an economic hitman. In fact, they were all identical faces of the same prism. They aimed to bring this country and this nation to its knees. . . . The most important problem of our country's politics, is that the understanding that is at odds with the values, history, and culture of the nation is still able to continue its effectiveness. However, there is no place for such fascist tendencies in the direction that Turkey is walking."[8]

Unlike Modi or Putin, Erdoğan's rhetoric is surprisingly self-centered, with 'I' being one of the most frequently used words in his speeches. This finding demonstrates that Erdoğan's populism is discursively more personalistic. In contrast, Modi refers to himself as *Pradhan Sevak*, which can be translated as Prime Server instead of 'Pradhan Mantri' or Prime Minister, which allows him to distance himself from the rest of the political establishment and emphasize his service to the people. Although Modi refrains from presenting himself as the Prime Minister, his developmental policies that seek to make citizens a part of the production-based economy carry his title, such as Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Swachchh Bharat Abhiyan, and Ayushman Bharat. These policies focus on infrastructure development and poverty alleviation, including housing projects, lavatories, and health insurance schemes.

Generally, Modi's discourse uses specific terms making him more relatable to lower-class Indian workers and peasants who are frustrated with corrupt and ineffective government. The use of simple language and frequent references to Hindu symbols and philosophies mimic the daily discourse of Hindus, and evoke a contrast between himself and other elites, such as members of the Indian National Congress Party, who still have some political influence albeit losing grip in the parliament in the recent few election cycles. Capitalizing on the resentful sentiments that many Indians harbor against the Congress, Modi routinely accuses its politicians of corruption, reinforcing his role as an anti-elite and anti-establishment champion of the 'ordinary people'. In a recent speech that he delivered on the occasion of laying the foundation of Noida International Airport in Jewar, Uttar Pradesh, Modi offered an excellent example of his binary approach to India's politics:

> "Some political parties in our country have always kept their self-interest paramount. Their perception of development was limited to their selfishness or the areas where they and their families lived, whereas we follow the spirit of a nation first. Our mantra is SabkaSaathi, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, and SabkaPrayas. The people of Uttar Pradesh and the country have observed the kind of politics done by some political parties in the last few weeks, but India did not move away from the path of development." (Modi 2021e)

Therefore, both Modi and Erdoğan refer to opposition parties as the central representation of the corrupt and selfish elites who are deaf to the needs of the 'common people' embodied in the working class, farmers, and the poor. Such discourse enables them to justify policies, particularly those that threaten democratic institutions, as long as these policies can keep the 'evil elites' out of power.

Unlike Erdoğan and Modi, who started centralizing power fairly recently, Putin has been consolidating his rule since he first assumed the presidency in 2000. One of the strategies he employed to consolidate power was removing powerful business elites, the oligarchs, who held a strong political presence in Yeltsin's regime (Goldman 2004; Sakwa 2014). He constructed an effective anti-elitist discourse that focused on revealing and punishing their corruption schemes. Oligarchs with political ambitions, including Berezovsky and Khodarkovsky, were persecuted; however, this did not eradicate oligarchs as an economic class but merely replaced them with pro-regime loyalists (Rutland 2013). Once the oligarchs became non-threatening to Putin's political power, his anti-elite appeals and attacks on oligarchs faded away from his discourse. The fulcrum of Putin's discourse moved away from domestic enemies and focused on external ones. The lack of a competitive party system in Russia, as well as the lack of a strong opposition party similar to the Indian Congress in India or CHP in Turkey that could pose a significant political threat to Putin, means that his anti-elite discourse takes a different form. Instead of seriously confronting his opponents, such as Alexei Navalny, in his speeches, Putin dismisses them and uses electoral rules and the judiciary process to minimize their appeal. For Putin, the real "enemies" are international actors whom he rarely names directly but instead hints at subtly, often blurring the line between past and present ones. For instance, in a speech he delivered in April 2021, he warned against "leftover" fascists who believe in their exceptionalism. Putin highlighted that he is not talking about terrorist or criminal groups but rather, states attempting to rewrite history. Attesting to the importance of populist discourse to the policies that are sometimes seen as unimaginable, Putin repeated a similar point on 24 February 2022, the day of the invasion of Ukraine:

> "Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people's adversary who is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people." (Putin 2022a)

Referring to similar depictions of the nation's enemies, Putin tends to focus on national security issues, emphasizing the need to protect Russian sovereignty from the infringement of 'foreign enemies'. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly, one of the most prominent and televised speeches, Putin made it very clear that the 'enemies' are the Western states that threaten Russia's national interests:

> "Russia certainly has its interests. We defend [them] within the framework of international law, as all other forms do. And if someone refuses to understand this obvious thing or does not want to conduct a dialogue and chooses a selfish and arrogant tone with us, Russia will always find a way to defend its stance. Unfortunately, everyone in the world seems to be used to the practice of politically motivated, illegal economic sanctions and to certain actors' brutal attempts to impose their will on others by force . . . Some countries have taken up an unseemly routine where they pick on Russia for any reason. It is some kind of new sport of who shouts the loudest . . . . they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough . . . " (Putin 2021a)

Importantly, none of the three leaders framed 'enemies' in racial or religious terms as blatantly as their populist right-wing counterparts in Europe (Cervi 2020). As noted above, although religion serves as the core constituent of their populist appeal, religious references were featured prominently in Erdoğan's and Modi's speeches but to a much lesser extent in Putin's rhetoric (Shani 2021; Anderson 2016). Yet despite the variations in the frequency of religious terms, all leaders use them: they make references to religion to draw connections between the past, the present, and the vision of the future. For Modi, Hindu philosophies and symbols are connected to social and economic development projects ranging from education to sanitation but always framed through a particular spiritual prism. Meanwhile, Putin uses silent discourse effectively and incorporates religion into his appeal through his

use of church settings, and the display of his close ties with the clergy. Putin skillfully links the past, the present, and the future by blending the centrality of the Russian Orthodox Church, the battles for Russian nationhood, and the struggles to defend Russian sovereignty against Western and Eastern enemies.

6. Sacralized Politics and New Futures?

A review of the texts and videos of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's speeches shows that the majority faiths of their respective counties play a pivotal role in their appeals. As mentioned above, "Allah" is one of the top 10 most frequently used words in Erdoğan's discourse, indicating how he frames many issues as religious or moral questions. Erdoğan refers to Islam not only as a central constituent of Turkishness, but he also evokes Islamic values to justify his contested policies. For instance, although many right-wing populist parties in other countries are anti-refugee due to their protectionist policies, Erdoğan, on the contrary, promotes his acceptance of Syrian refugees as a religious principle. On 11 August 2019, Erdoğan, in his 'Mevlid-i Nebi' week (a Muslim holiday celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), explained his refugee policies in the following way:

> "Especially on such a meaningful night, of course, I beg my Lord's help to both our Mehmetçik (the national term for Turkish Soldiers) and the Syrian National Army, who are currently in a great struggle in Syria. Almighty Allah blesses us all, and (May us is there a word missing?) attain the intercession of the Prophet. The oppressed people of Rohingya, Syria, and Turkistan are our brothers. When someone says, "Let the Syrians go, "remember that our Prophet was a Muhajir (refugee). The Muslims of Medina were protectors, Ansar. Now Allah has blessed us to be Ansar."[9]

Instead of framing his refugee policy in terms of universal humanitarian intervention, Erdoğan justified his policy choice as a religiously informed practice, juxtaposing his religiously sanctioned behavior against the wickedness of his opponents. Such a perspective declares any opposition to Erdoğan's refugee policies as anti-religious and anti-Muslim.

As indicated above, Hinduism also plays a crucial role in Modi's discourse. However, the multiplicity of religious terms makes it difficult to offer an accurate assessment of the weight of religious terms in Modi's discourse. Exemplifying how Hinduism is inherent to his nationalism, during the speech to military troops on 3 July 2020, Modi stated that *Bharat Mata*'s (a religious depiction of India) enemies had seen their fire and fury. In his speeches, despite India's multi-religious and multi-ethnic nature, and constitutional commitment to secularism to overcome religious differences, Modi offers a religiously reductionist definition of the nation and declares that "we are the same people who pray to the flute playing Lord Krishna, but we are also the same people who idolize and follow the same Lord Krishna who carries the 'Sudarshana Chakra'". Modi's frequent description of India as *Bharat Mata* evokes religious representation and personification of India as a (Hindu) mother goddess and amplifies the religious differences among Indians (Modi 2021e). Likewise, Modi effectively deploys silent discourse through frequent references to sacred places and symbols. He often appears at religious sites or performs nationalistic or religious rituals such as joining the soldiers' chant "Bharat Mata ki Jai" Victory for Mother India. India's Muslim minority questions such public statements as Islam prohibits the deification of symbols. Modi invokes religious values when the issues are not about national defense. For instance, in a speech about the environment, Modi, reminded of Lord Krishna's love for the environment as an "inspiration", described his policy as an effort to balance nature and economic development. According to Modi, although the world is looking for a "role model" for conservation efforts, the people of India have always taken inspiration from Lord Krishna's "love for the environment", the abode of the Hindu God. Modi uses such religious beliefs and figures to explain his political mottos such as "waste to wealth" and contends that the ideas of Hinduism offer global spiritual leadership. During his monthly radio program called 'Mann Ki Baat' on 29 August 2021, before a religious festival, Janmashtmi, celebrated by Krishna devotees all around the world, he indicated, "Friends,

when the people of the world pay heed to Indian spiritual systems and philosophy today, then we also have a responsibility to carry forward these great traditions". In such speeches, Modi shares his own beliefs and experiences, and thus speaks as a Hindu believer:

> "The festival of Janmashtami is the festival of the birth of Bhagwan Shri Krishna. We are familiar with all the forms of Bhagwan, from naughty Kanhaiya to the one taking Colossal from Krishna, from the one well versed in scriptures to one skilled in weaponry. Be it art, beauty, charm? Where all is, is not Krishna there! But I am saying all this because I had gone through an interesting experience a few days before Janmashtami. So I felt I should talk about this to you. You must be aware that on the 20th of this month, the construction work related to the Bhagwan Somnath temple has been dedicated to the people." (Modi 2021d)

Although it is largely neglected in the analyses of Putin's policies, religion plays a crucial role in his construction of Russian nationalism, and he uses references to the Russian Orthodox Church both directly and indirectly (Laruelle 2020). In fact, a wide range of religiopolitical expressions and metaphors are available for Putin because the ideological ties between religion and political aspiration have deep historical roots in Russian folklore. For example, the old Russian concept "Moscow, the Third Rome" was coined back in the 15th century. Such terms capture the struggles of Moscow to serve as the capital of the Orthodox Christian world, and indicate that there are many terms that quickly link Russia's church struggles and its national expansionist and revisionist foreign policy (Engström 2014). Despite the absence of overly religious terms, one of the critical aspects of Putin's populism is his silent performative discourse that conveys religious messages. For instance, a scene that describes Putin's performance on 22 June 2021 offers some insight. On that day, Putin participated in a ceremony dedicated to World War II where he visited the memorial to the Unknown Soldier. During the televised ceremony, he greeted and briefly talked with the decorated World War II veterans and then marched towards the memorial with red carnations in his hand. Behind him, an older woman performed a religious ritual. Likewise, Putin's images from his visits to the Church of Nikolay-na-Line for the celebration of the Orthodox Christmas were disseminated widely. In another televised appearance, Putin was captured when he was lighting the candles and performing religious rituals. Although Putin himself does not speak about it, in his televised images, one can hear a scripted speech about how the 13th century was a difficult time for Russia because of the attacks of Turks and Mongols in the East and Europeans in the West. In such performances, Putin notes that the Church of Nikolay-na-Line was built to symbolize national rebirth, self-determination, and spiritual consolidation, reinforcing his message of commitment to Russian Orthodox identity and the construction of nationalism around it. Carefully selected and widely televised images and narrations of Putin's visits to religious sites and his participation in rituals signal not only his leadership and authority but also religious piety. Putin is often presented as a profoundly religious and spiritual person.

Our analysis shows that when we review their discourses, the populism of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin sacralize politics in the sense that they attribute religious qualities to their definition of the people, the nation, and political struggles. However, unlike Erdoğan and Modi, who speak about religion overtly and use religious sites often and publicly, we need to analyze Putin's silent texts and the secondary reports on his rituals to understand the role of religion in his appeal. Mirroring Erdoğan and Modi's styles, in Putin's populism, religious values and beliefs play a crucial role, yet they are displayed through his visits to memorials, monuments, parades related to World War II, or churches. His visits to holy sites reinforces Putin's image as a pious person and servant of the "people", not the authoritative and distant persona that he usually presents. Although these instances are rare, a review of some of Putin's speeches shows that religion is an indispensable part of his definition of the people and the nation:

> "The acceptance of Christianity determined Russia's fate and choice of civilization; it became a decisive turning point in the Russian state's ecclesiastical and secular

history. The moral foundations of the Orthodox faith played a major role in the formation of our national character and the mentality of Russia's peoples, revealing the best creative qualities of our nation. This experience of moral improvement and cultural, socio-political development has become an integral part of the heritage of eastern Christianity, uniting entire peoples belonging to the Orthodox religious tradition." (Putin 2013)

Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin do not use religion selectively to justify their policies. Instead, as faith is pivotal to their construction of the people and the nation, they attribute religious qualities or sacralize many issues that may not have direct religious significance. In doing so, they create a notion of politics as a cosmic war between good and evil, thus mobilizing support behind their policies. Religion plays a pivotal role in these leaders' efforts to link different eras of their respective countries' histories and to connect the past to the future. In revisiting the histories that precede the establishment of their current states, they present their countries as ancient civilizations that were marginalized by antagonistic cultures and countries. Thus, for Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin, their policies seek to renew the religious community that is in search of reclaiming its lost position in world politics.

7. Conclusions

When we take the study of populism out of its comfort zone, i.e., Europe and Latin America, and apply the concept to countries with different majority religions and regime types, we realize that the main constituents of populism travel well. A systematic review of the political discourses of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin indicates that they rely heavily on the Manichean depiction of the world; however, subsuming these leaders under the broad label of "populist" does not explain their specific political positions and behaviors. Swift generalizations about populist leaders can be misleading but the conventional conceptualization of populism is inadequate at categorizing populist regimes based on their distinct forms. Our analysis shows that understanding populists requires a three-layered assessment: (i) the identification of the prevalence of the critical characteristics of populism (e.g., people-centrism, anti-institutionalism, Manichean world); (ii) capturing the specific meanings attributed to each of these characteristics, and (iii) understanding the overall idealized polity they portray. In other words, although the term 'populism' may distinguish a particular group of leaders from others, it is not sufficient. We need to understand how exactly populists define the people, the enemies, and the main lines of political struggle. In addition, although many political candidates and parties competing in elections deploy populist slogans and performative acts to garner support and mobilize voters, many of them stay in opposition or remain on the margins. The cases of Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin enable us to recognize how populist strongmen construct political discourse once they gain power. Populist leaders tend to centralize further and legitimize their rule through their populist appeal. Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin's unified image of the "nation" is demonstrated by their five most frequently used collectivist terms, such as "we", "nation", "people", "brothers", and "friends". In part due to the impact of the unifying role of religion against different groups, these parties deploy different notions of enemies or "evil/corrupt elites" and can easily marginalize groups that challenge their policies and projects. Thus understanding the nature of the populist rhetoric or, in Collier and Levitsy's terms, "precising" is critical to help us better link populism to democracy and understand how it impacts democracy.

Our comparative study emphasizes the importance not only of what the leaders say but also where/how they say it, what symbols they use, what acts they perform, what surroundings they choose, what policies they promote, and how they expand their appeal. For instance, although Erdoğan and Modi discursively invoke religious idioms regularly, Putin's speeches rarely contain such overt references. However, Putin delivers political messages wrapped up in religious terms; his performance sites resemble ritual sites of the common man. The locations and the background of Putin's speeches and his specific policies (e.g., requiring religious education in public schools, tax breaks, and subsidies to

the churches) strengthen religious institutions and promote a religiously defined notion of Russianness. Therefore, silent and explicit policies indicate that religious institutions and beliefs are critical to these leaders' domestic and international politics. One of the speeches Putin delivered right after the invasion of Ukraine offers an excellent example of how these leaders blend religion and nationalism to justify actions and policies that many presumed unthinkable in contemporary global politics. For instance, on 18 March 2022, Putin stated:

> "The main goal and motive of the military operation that we launched in Donbass and Ukraine is to relieve these people of suffering, of this genocide. At this point, I recall the words from the Holy Scripture: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends". And we are seeing how heroically our military are fighting during this operation. These words come from the Holy Scripture of Christianity, from what is cherished by those who profess this religion. But the bottom line is that this is a universal value for all nations and those of all religions in Russia, and primarily for our people. The best evidence of this is how our fellows are fighting and acting in this operation: shoulder to shoulder, helping and supporting each other. If they have to, they will cover each other with their bodies to protect their comrade from a bullet in the battlefield, as they would to save their brother. It has been a long time since we had such unity" (Putin 2022b)

It is not only the populist leaders' ability to deploy a religiously rooted everlasting notion of the people but also their ability to identify different groups as common enemies of the people that offer the backbone of their politics. Indicating the significance of the silent texts, the enemies are depicted overtly or implied using different settings and symbols. More importantly, the enemies are defined based on the leaders' overall political projects, which focus on restoring their respective countries' lost global status. They serve as essential tools to delegitimize political rivals. In all leaders' discourses, enemies are destabilizing forces, not only morally corrupt but religiously deviant; they undermine the shared values and derail the country's rightful trajectory. As a result, enemies are sometimes overtly described and other times subtly implied. Erdoğan's enemies cover a broad range, from the Western powers with Islamophobic tendencies to the opposition parties that seek to limit the role of religion in politics to the Kurdish Party that withdrew its support. Early in his tenure before he fully centralized his control of the state, Putin focused on powerful rivals, such as the oligarchs, as the "evil elite"; however, after the consolidation of power, he focused on other enemies such as deviant regional elites, Western powers, and liberal civil society groups that he labeled "foreign agents". India's Hindu-nationalist focus and developmentalist projects turn all forces that are not in line with the party's projects as enemies, from the Congress party that distances itself from Hindu nationalism to the Sikh or Muslim citizens of India that have different cultural and religious claims.

Our comparison also indicates that the strength of populist leaders' appeal does not lie in their overall consistency. Instead, despite their emphasis on core terms, these leaders are rather pragmatic, making significant issues less salient and vice versa by relying on their pivotal religiously anchored notion of people. Securitization of a wide range of issues, especially those related to immigration and refugees, has been one of the common threads of populist appeal in European countries. However, although Erdoğan and Putin emphasize security threats, Modi, despite Jammu and Kashmir's importance to India's politics, neither talks about the crisis nor presents it as an international security concern as overtly and frequently as other leaders. Yet, securitization is an outcome of the centrality of Hinduism to Modi's controversial policies such as the contested citizenship law that made citizenship claims accessible only for Hindu minorities in surrounding countries.

Our findings draw attention to the importance of the temporal aspect of populist leaders' discourse which is one of the most neglected aspects of populism studies. Despite their different political histories and contexts, Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin converge in their presentation of a political history that stretches beyond the establishment of their respective modern states. Each roots his current politics, political leadership style, and

policy preferences within his selective reading of history and projects an idealized future. Although many studies focus on the leaders' perception of the present issues, Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin carefully reconstruct the past to promote their vision of the national identity and its idealized role in global politics. Although Modi and Putin emphasize development and growth in their political discourse, what is critical for Modi are various policies that seek to build India's infrastructure to make India a leading country in world politics. Likewise, Putin stresses the importance of being at the forefront of technological development. Yet, in doing so, he does not glorify Soviet history; instead, he taps into images and ideas from Imperial Russia. Our comparison indicates that Modi's populism simultaneously promotes *developmentalism-based* and *Hinduism-based* nationalism. Therefore, his brand of populism is *developmental-nationalist populism* as it encompasses both cultural and growth-based nationalism. Like Modi, Putin seeks to restore the lost glory of Russia's global dominance and thus has redemptive qualities. Putin's brand of populism, *redemptive pioneering-populism,* strives to restore the role of Russia as a global leader in political, economic, scientific, and technological spheres. In contrast to Putin, Erdoğan seeks to restore the lost glory of the Ottoman Empire but brings to the fore the vulnerabilities of Islam and its unfulfilled potential. Erdoğan's populist discourse is based on identities and beliefs, bringing to the forefront the common identity of Muslimness and a world divided between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Erdoğan's *precarity*-centered *messianic populism* (religious and security-based populism), a Muslim nation is seen as under attack by secularizing elite and the non-Muslim West. Erdoğan repeatedly mentions external and internal enemies that seek to derail the nation's global role and glorifies the Ottoman Empire as a worldwide Islamic power.

As the tide of populism sweeps across the world, understanding how populism manifests itself and erodes democratic processes in different regions is more critical than ever. Capturing populism's regional variations highlights its under researched aspects by explaining how populist leaders reorganize and depict their respective politics. Our analysis indicates that although populists share common characteristics, not all populists, even the authoritarian ones, are the same. Populists succeed by pitting "the good people" against "the corrupt elite" and offering a broader narrative of politics that links the country's present to its past and domestic issues to international ones. Yet the discourse of "good people" is not readily available to all leaders. Behind their strikingly different political context and histories, our analysis of Modi, Erdoğan, and Putin shows that their respective religions play a critical role in linking various aspects of their policies, and giving them the symbols and ideas to reinforce the unity of people. Therefore, to understand why populist leaders prevail even when their policies fail, we need to focus on their spiritual and long-term promises as well as their material and short-term ones. More importantly, as our analysis of Modi, Erdoğan, and Putin shows, populism is not just about the past, but also about the future. Populists are resilient because they offer an image of the future and a trajectory of change that mobilizes people around a shared goal. Our comparative assessment also indicates the importance of focusing on a systematic analysis of populists beyond Western Europe to understand how populists limit their respective politics by obfuscating many nuanced arguments and positions with their Manichean perspective.

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Notes

1   Based on Freedom House and V-Dem assessments: https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2021 (accessed on 1 October 2021); https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2020.pdf (accessed on 1 October 2021).

2   https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/the-conflict-with-ukraine/ (accessed on 1 April 2022). https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/ (accessed on 1 April 2022).

3   Our time frame was selected to capture the changes in their discourse, ensure the speeches were delivered when the leaders were in power, and the availability of reliable full texts of the speeches from official sources.

4   As Moffitt (2017) points out, our understanding of populism needs to be expanded by including how populist messages are embodied for different audiences by the leaders. In this analysis, we note the specific purposes and intentions of the symbols, setting, or performative elements of speeches. Including them in our analysis as the silent text allows us to better capture populism as it manifests itself in distinct cultural, religious contexts and regimes. Moffitt, Benjamin. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press, 2017. p. 240.

5   For an analysis of Erdoğan's populism and use of Islam, see (Tepe 2021).

6   The authors are fluent in Russian and Turkish. Due to its official languages, the Indian government provided official translations into English when Modi speeches were delivered in Hindi. However, to better analyze the texts and meanings, a Hindi-speaking research assistant reviewed the translations for accuracy and to better assess the idioms and metaphors that were not captured by the English translation.

7   Erdogan, The Address to the Nation, 10 July 2020.

8   Erdogan, 41st Neighborhood leader Speech, 9 December 2017.

9   Erdogan, The Speech delivered on Mevlid-i Nebi week, 8 November 2019.

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