

The Discursive Governance of Population Politics: The Evolution of a Pro-birth Regime in Turkey

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This article investigates the puzzle of the emergence of Turkish politicians' discourse on population stagnation and growth despite healthy population growth and an above-replacement-level birth rate. We understand this emergence through considering how politicians link national identity and economic value to population increase. Empirically, our article traces the slogans that then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the governing party politicians used to frame the "population issue" in Turkey from 2008 to 2013. Drawing from the *Ajans Press* database of over 5,000 newspaper articles, we selected 120 of the news items including politicians' slogans: the terms children, women, economy, family, morality, and birth. We grouped them in four clusters: youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity. This allowed us to depict how politicians' slogans sustain the dimensions of population politics that we inductively generated. We show that the "three children" slogan of the current President Erdoğan preceded and replaced population policy deliberations, and affected the public discursively. Thanks to a media that is only semi-free, this discourse has acquired an existence beyond the context where it was initially expressed. We argue that the norms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation generate the discursive governance of population politics. Thereby, politicians advance governance even without introducing major policy changes.

Introduction

A country's population figures and fertility levels can be exceptionally significant for public debates. The norms, discourses, policy measures, and institutions forged to intervene in the quality and quantity of population shape the politics of population, and its governance affects a plethora of

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political, economic and social issues, while augmenting political, institutional, and societal power over the choices of individuals. Particularly in less democratic political settings, population figures are understood to affect the leadership capacity of incumbent leaders (Quine 1995). This means that while population politics refers to policies, such as parental leave, employment, abortion, family responsibilities and benefits, it also comprises indirect expressions of political power—often termed biopolitics and governmentality—in the determination and implementation of gender rights, socio-political and socio-economic regimes, and eventually regulation of political spaces. We are particularly interested in politicians' discursive construction of population politics in the absence of policies endorsing population growth.

As is now well-accepted, discourses create representations that not only reflect upon but also actively construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations. Political discourses become normative mechanisms through their influence over the public sphere in contexts where the institutional dimension of policy-making is traditionally weak (Korkut et al. 2015). We investigate how politicians affect public reasoning with slogans circulated in the media, even if they delay introducing actual changes in policy. That is, we are interested in describing a type of governance, which we term “discursive governance,” whereby norms are embedded in political discourse and circulated in the public sphere.

To explicate the operation of discursive governance, this article examines the case of the formulation of population politics. Discursive governance refers to implicit mechanisms of governance resting on narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors in political language to interpose ideas in order to affect political and social representations within the public sphere in accordance with the wishes of political authorities (Korkut et al. 2015). The methods associated with discursive institutionalism have dominated research on discursive politics (Schmidt 2008, 2010). Discursive institutionalism approaches politics as an arena where discursive interactions prompt actors to refine, reframe and reinterpret their ideas. This process is iterative and often contentious; it also informs the evolution of political institutions. The ideas that define institutions, as well as the ideas shared by political actors, are in flux, often at odds, and malleable (Béland and Cox 2011, 10). To respond to the unsettled character of discourse, discursive institutionalism foregrounds the logic of communication in which actors engage in processes of generating, deliberating, and/or legitimizing ideas about political action, in diverse contexts constrained by different institutional characteristics (Schmidt 2010, 47).

Our discursive governance method builds upon discursive institutionalism. Although the latter foregrounds deliberation, coordination, and communication in the political sphere by political actors and the public (Schmidt 2010, 48), discursive governance instead concentrates on explaining the inculcation of ideas by political authorities that affect the collective rationality of the public. We are interested in contexts in which deliberation and debate are scarce,

but fictional and at times historical references inform a 1-way communication from the “wise politician” to the public. In order to deal with the “influx” that ideas foster, political and social actors resort to novel mythical, fictional, cultural, and ideological symbols as their tools, appealing to the public’s collective memory. The ideas do not inform the evolution of institutional change, but operate as tools to generate publics amenable to new politics. To reach their aims without the need for difficult institutional changes, actors use fictionalized references as strategic discourses. In this way, they can foster collective rationalities amenable to their political goals.

Politicians’ slogans and sentiments about population politics incorporate both economic and identity dimensions, and discursively link women’s child-bearing with morality and responsibility. To bring their ideas into public discussions, politicians circulate slogans in the media. Their slogans serve to bolster a pro-birth regime without endorsing actual policies that materially support reproduction.

Sustaining a growing population is seen as politically crucial across many political contexts (Bertaux 2011; Cole 2000, 185; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Koontz 1997; Orleck 1997; Quine 1995; Robertson 2012). We are interested in the governance of population politics in Turkey, where we confront the puzzle that a discourse supporting the increase of population has emerged in a context where population growth and fertility rates are robust, as compared with other so-called developed and emerging economies. Figures from 2014 show that Turkish women on average have 2.17 children per woman, above replacement rates. The current alarmist discourse about population, we contend, reflects fears of other kinds of social change on the part of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), representing political Islam, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who assumed his office in August 2014. The recent expansion of non-agricultural employment options and the increasing affluence of the middle classes over the past decade in Turkey may have contributed to a decline in the number of children per woman from previously higher levels (Acar and Altunok 2013; Altıok 2013; Dedeoglu 2013). As a result, the slowing rate of population increase in Turkey could be an effect of what Chang (2010, 24) called “compressed modernity” in the Korean case. Kyung-Sup defines compressed modernity as a “social situation in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner with respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements, leading to highly complex and fluid social system.”

Many countries, such as Singapore, Italy, Korea, Japan, and China, have gone through compressed modernity, experiencing urbanization and economic development, and faced stagnation in birthrates. Yet, in Turkey, the politicians are presenting this stagnation not as an expected concomitant of development, but as a sign of moral and economic decline, and are seeking to encourage a moral orientation of taking responsibility for reproduction

among women and men, particularly in the younger generations. Population politics becomes an arena where the governing party attempts to enhance its control over gender and other identities by micromanaging conditions for childbirth and reproduction more generally.

If there is no acute stagnation in population size and decrease in birthrates, then why should population figures be alarming to politicians? Turkish population politics makes more sense if we consider the importance of childbearing in the national identity and the economic value of population growth for political regimes. Along with Turkey, political elites in Russia and Hungary have similar concerns. Earlier work on population politics refers to the role of women in serving the nation (Koontz 1997; Goldberg 2010 in Orleck 1997; Cole 2000; Robertson 2012) as well as the economic value of a young and healthy population (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Guerrina 2005; Lisbon Agenda 2020). In contexts such as Turkey, where childcare is considered women's duty in the absence of institutional support for caretaking (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2011), politicians' emphasis on having more children is a reflection of conservative identity politics where 'good mothers' serve the social "order," a tool of patrimonial power (Adams and Charrad 2011). At the same time, Turkey's "young and educated population" encourages economic expansion, and is seen as a "product" that the AKP government aims to exploit. A neoliberal approach to economic development is well entrenched in President Erdoğan's discourse, for example in his contention that one should run the country similar to a firm.¹ Hence, we elaborate on the politicians' emphasis on the economic value of having a young population within this political setting.

In Turkey, identity and economic value are mutually reinforcing, and we argue that the discursive construction of population politics is a form of social engineering to boost population growth. Systematically circulated creative slogans appealing to the sentiments and moral values of the audience support this process—hence discursive governance—rather than policies that would support caretaking and a family-friendly working environment. The most recent 3.6 percent increase in the number of births from 2013 to 2014 may indicate that discourse works.² The formulation of this discursive space occupies our theoretical interest, while shedding new light on contemporary gender regimes in Turkey.

In the following pages, we will first describe the slogans and sentiments circulated by AKP politicians in the discursive space of population politics. In particular, we explore the increasing significance of the "three children" slogan in framing economic and identity issues related to Turkey's future. We underline the role of the media³—only semi-free according to Freedom House—in promoting this slogan and helping to stir up a moral panic (Cohen 2011). We have grouped the slogans into four clusters, namely, youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity, and explain how national identity and the economic value of increasing

population are mutually reinforcing in the Turkish context. In the second part, we discuss the implications of our case study for understanding how discourses function as tools of governance even in the absence of policies. In conclusion, we suggest that norms embedded in political discourse generate a discursive governance of population politics. The political speech that we are analyzing is articulated by politicians and amplified by the semi-free media. While it is not our primary aim, our article also shows that in semi-democracies media boosts the resonance of political discourse even if it merely publicizes political statements. Subsequently, this discourse acquires an independent existence beyond the context where it is initially expressed, and politicians can advance governance even without introducing policy changes.

Methodology

In order to accurately describe the discursive formulations of population politics, we gathered our data using the *Ajans Press* database comprising over 5,000 newspaper articles appearing in the local and national press since March 2008, around the time that the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan started to use the “three children” slogan more frequently. We conducted a systematic investigation of the data from 2008 to 2013 tracing the usage of the “three children” slogan in AKP politicians’ discourse in order to assess whether it has increased in frequency. After the 2013 cut-off of the database, we followed national newspapers citing politicians’ discourse on the population issue almost on a daily basis. Our study describes the diverse dimensions of Erdoğan’s slogans as well as other AKP politicians’ narration of the need for a more populous Turkey. We selected the politicians’ statements from our database of news items using a keyword search looking for such general terms as children, women, economy, family, morality, and birth. Our initial idea was to bring together general keywords such as “children and Erdoğan,” “children and economy,” “birth rate and economy,” and “women and morality.” However, the database did not allow any combination searches. Therefore, we had to go through all the articles where our keywords appeared separately ($N = \sim 1600$), and decide whether or not each news article related to our research. At the same time, we adopted an inductive research method, allowing the text to help us elaborate on the framing of population politics. Our approach to frame analysis builds on Goffman’s (1974) work and later applications in Tankard et al. (1991) and Lau and Schlesinger (2005).

In deciding on relevance, we considered the connection between pro-population discourse and politicians’ identity and economy arguments, assessed the particular context where the politicians used a pro-population growth discourse, and evaluated whether the tone of the discourse changed across contexts. Interestingly, regardless of context, discourses were similar.

After our examination of the database content, we selected around 120 news items predominantly quoting then-Prime Minister Erdoğan or the Minister of State responsible for Women and Family Affairs and others regarding the population issue. Less than 10 percent of articles qualified for inclusion. Most of the excluded articles did not relate to population politics or simply repeated the discourse already seen in another source. Occasionally, we came across statements from Emine Erdoğan (the President's wife), the state-controlled Radio-Television Supreme Council or the Minister of Development. Following Erdoğan's appointment as President in August 2014, we encountered statements from the new Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in support of the "three children" discourse. Although our database did not include his statements, we refer to them in the course of our article to illustrate the impact of Erdoğan's three-children slogan on the lingering meta-narrative of population politics proposed by AKP politicians. Overall, political discourses refer to the population issue in relation to prosperity insofar as a healthy and strong population discourse suggests an expression of power, a foundation of economy, and a source of labor, capital stock, consumption and production. As noted earlier, we group the attributions of the slogans in four clusters, namely youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity, allowing us to depict how politicians' slogans reflect our inductively generated dimensions of population politics.

From the dataset, we also separated news on possible policy changes in parental leave, labor market regulations, family-friendly work environment, abortion, and the like; not all of these policies have been actualized. Given the limited formal institutionalization of a new population politics despite ongoing policy signals by the government, we consider that the ad hoc slogans in circulation generate a discursive space where politicians configure and transmit population goals ideationally. We assume that as the AKP operates population politics merely through discourses, it avoids possible socio-political and economic conflicts that a full-scale policy change such as extended parental leave or an abortion ban would instigate in gender, labor market, and social politics.

Finally, we studied the remaining news items looking for direct citations from politicians' speeches on the population issue. This helped us to verify that each citation was accurate, looking at how the same speech appeared as a news item in different newspapers published on the same day. As a sign of the role of media in semi-democratic contexts, almost all newspapers published on that particular day referred to these speeches, though at varying lengths. Thereby, we did not engage with the media outlets' framing of discourse, but rather concentrated on their reporting with citations taken from politicians' speeches in diverse venues on the issue of population. These venues varied from international and national events to constituency visits and wedding ceremonies. Of course, language is not neutral and we empirically analyzed discourse within its social context (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). However,

following Jayyusi (1991 in Leudar and Nekvapil, 2004, 247) indicating that “media texts are addressed not to a specific person or sets of persons with known properties, relevancies and beliefs, but rather to a public at large,” we take the Turkish public sphere as the social context and de-emphasize the immediate environmental factors regarding politicians’ framing of the population issue. This is due to our observation that the politicians, and especially Erdoğan, formulate their discourses not for the immediate audience, but for consumption by the general public, being sure of the role that the media will play in the subsequent dissemination in a country where media freedom is limited (Lu, Aldrich, and Shi 2014).

Slogans, Sentiments, and Population Politics

The population debate in Turkey is most famously represented by President Erdoğan’s “three children” slogan, which has gained resonance since the beginning of his tenure as Prime Minister in 2002. This slogan serves to frame socio-economic and socio-political dimensions of the population number and link it to future Turkish prosperity, identity, and power. Erdoğan articulated his ideas in an issue area that can plausibly be seen as not mattering much to the Turkish public before his interventions. Erdoğan encourages his audience to view the issue of having children in his own terms, reminding people to contribute to the fertility and fecundity of the Turkish nation. The semi-free media reinforced his discourse, and over time Erdoğan became the main authority instigating a “moral panic” using population stagnation or decline as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen 2011). Other AKP politicians, including the new Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, joined Erdoğan in this quest.

The discursive governance of Turkish population politics concentrates on boosting population growth through emphasizing the value that “three children” per family promises for the future. For example, Erdoğan has framed the population problem with the use of slogans such as: “one child means bankruptcy, two children mean bankruptcy, three children merely means stagnation” (Speech at International Summit for Family and Social Policy, *NTVMSNBC*, 3 January 2013); “for a young population, citizens should always have three children” (Speech at World Family Summit, *Günlük*, 7 December 2009); “scientifically, even two children suggest decline” (Speech at the Council for Elderly Assembly, *Milliyet*, 11 October 2009). Furthermore, in an interview on 2 September 2010 with *Kanaltürk*, Erdoğan contended that financial considerations should not affect couples’ decisions about having children. Prime Minister Davutoğlu argued that “major powers consider population as a major source. If you wish to understand the long-term development trend of a country, you need to recognize [the importance of]

population” (Speech at AKP Parliamentary Group weekly meeting, T24, 13 January 2015).

Insomuch as the governance of population politics relies on slogans and lacks substantive policy, the AKP government can delay fundamental policy reforms in maternity or parental leave, childcare, and a family-friendly working environment but introduce short-cut solutions such as extending free IVF treatment to couples and increasing financial assistance to civil servants with three or more children. Although various AKP governments have noisily signaled that they would adopt new policies, thus far they have not enacted them. The most important of these policies would have increased the maternal leave period to 18 weeks for mothers and from 3 to 10 days for fathers. One can also mention the proposal for a retirement system that would allot social security contributions for retirement to working women on the basis of their number of children; or the allocation of unemployment insurance funds to support various policies seeking to increase fertility, the direct payment of up to 1,300 TL to families with three children, and policy action with rather general goals of regulating reproductive health or protecting the family and the dynamic population structure. Davutoğlu recently joined the population politics debate by introducing a new program entitled “The Protection of the Dynamic Population Structure of Family” that would “protect” women, for example by introducing a state contribution to a parentally funded “dowry fund,” while considering women’s labor force participation only within the frame of population politics.⁴

As politicians fail to introduce these measures, discourses turn into regulatory frameworks. Abortion regulation is a noteworthy example, as it became politicized when then-Prime Minister Erdoğan claimed it was a major inhibitor of population growth. Yet, even if there have been no changes in abortion regulation (which allows abortion up to 10 weeks, or 20 weeks for rape victims and those with life-threatening medical conditions), [Diner \(2013\)](#) showed that it is highly unlikely that public hospitals would carry out abortions unless there were health complications during pregnancy. Thus public hospitals operate in agreement with the President’s anti-abortion discourse. According to the Turkish Gynecologists and Obstetrics Federation, the Ministry of Health simply removed the code for abortion from the online hospital entry forms at public hospitals, effectively declassifying abortion as a medical practice at its hospitals.⁵

In order to depict how discursive articulations replace policy actions, we first outline the AKP politicians’ strategies to legitimize and spread their interpretation of the population issue ([Reyes 2011](#)). Politicians encourage the public to engage with the population issue, referring to the morality of having children and frequently appealing to the emotions of the public. [Van Leeuwen and Wodak \(1999, 92 in Reyes 2011, 785\)](#) indicate that appealing to emotions allows social actors to skew the opinion of their interlocutors or audience regarding a specific matter. In this process, the negative representation of some

“social actors and the attribution of negative qualities to their personalities or their actions allow speakers to create two sides of a given story/event, in which speaker and audience become the ‘us-group’ and the social actors depicted negatively constitute the ‘them-group’” (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92 in Reyes 2011, 785).

This has been Erdoğan’s strategy, and not only for population politics, as he claims moral rationality to retain his base of support and to rebuff criticisms of his gender policies. To cite a related example, Erdoğan discursively set the norms for university student housing, instigating a moral crusade against mixed gender student houses, stating that “one never knows what goes on in mixed gender student housing; [they are] disorderly and anything is possible.”⁶ No legislation followed Erdoğan’s statements, but he encouraged neighbors, homeowners, and local authorities to be wary of these situations and report these houses to police. Any legislation to this effect would be impossible, given the Turkish constitutional system guaranteeing the privacy of the individual and the pro-privacy position of the European Court of Human Rights in effect. Yet Erdoğan delineated the “us-group” as his “conservative party to whom the children of the nation are entrusted” versus the critical intellectuals as the “them-group.”⁷

With respect to the population issue, the “us-group” is the family that Erdoğan as an “authoritarian father” purports to represent when he expresses that “uncontrolled moral erosion worries us. [...] We cannot tell our families that our children are free to go wherever they wish” (Speech at AKP Ankara Province 3rd Congress, *Yeni Nesil*, 22 July 2009). Although Erdoğan appeals to emotions, he also establishes his authority over the population issue by depicting the AKP as the responsible voice for the importance of having and guaranteeing the welfare of children (Aliye Kavaf, the ex-Minister for Family and Women Affairs, *Dokuz Sütun*, 16 September 2009). A further reflection of this authority was the decision by the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council that “condom advertisements affect the moral development of the youth and children,” as well as the subsequent penalty to *CNNTurk* for broadcasting these advertisements (*Birgün*, 21 September 2009). In Turkey, there is no legislation preventing adolescents from accessing birth control, yet the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council simply followed Erdoğan’s authoritative discourse to ban these advertisements, rather than deferring to the legal framework of the Republic.

An in-group inevitably needs an out-group to exist, and “othering” consolidates the out-group. Erdoğan states: “I look at the rich; I don’t see more than two children. They assume that children are burdensome. However, that [children] is the real richness. [...] I see citizens having at least three children as an issue of national survival” (Erdoğan, TV interview, *Kanalturk*, 2 September 2010). Thereby, he presents those with fewer than three children as the “rich”—the out-group for his supporters. As he put it at a speech at a wedding, “the real richness is children and, henceforth, it is not possible to

become rich with a decreasing population” (*Yenişafak*, 11 February 2009), and the out-group is selfish in declining to support national prosperity. Erdoğan appeals to emotions: “At least three children! We need to accomplish this. [...] Every newborn comes with his/her own means of subsistence. Others deceive themselves only with [their] account statements. Others played too much with these [statements]. Yet, they still could not save themselves as we see in Europe” (Speech at Local Governments and Family Symposium, *Sabah*, 2 April 2012).

By contrast, those who belong to Erdoğan’s in-group are “ideal Turkish women, who bear children for the sake of the nation, reflecting the identity aspect of population politics.” Erdoğan asserts: “I am calling to mothers. [...] As a Turkish mother, as a Turkish woman, you need to spoil these games [reference to population control]. Secondly, I am calling to fathers. [...] You need to spoil this game in solidarity with your spouses” (Speech at “Becoming a Family” project meeting, *Milliyet*, 18 June 2013). Furthermore, to give birth becomes a national duty even if it might contradict women’s integrity and choices regarding abortion. In an interview, the ex-Minister of Health Recep Akdağ was graphic, presenting abortion as disgraceful even if legal: “At the moment, abortion is legal in this county until 10 weeks of pregnancy. Those who want can have the baby in their womb removed, scraped, shoveled up” (*Milliyet*, 6 January 2012). Erdoğan declared “every abortion is Uludere” (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 May 2012), drawing an analogy between abortions and an air strike by the Turkish air force that killed 34 civilians at the Iraqi border at Uludere in December 2011. Furthermore, Erdoğan, emotively warns the nation that abortion—as well as caesarean births—are “secret plots designed to stall Turkey’s economic growth and a conspiracy to wipe the Turkish nation from the world stage” (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 May 2012); “both abortion and caesarean births are murder. I am a Prime Minister who opposes caesarean births” (*Habertürk*, 28 May 2012). Erdoğan’s description of caesarean births as murderous is a farfetched attempt to dissuade the general public from a practice that is costly for the welfare state. However, in his discourse caesarean births also indicate deception. He argues for childbirth with low costs to the welfare state, but, at the same time, reminds the U.S.-group that they “need to spoil population control games. [Their goal] is to decrease the population of this nation so that this nation falls behind” (Erdoğan, Speech at “To become a family” project meeting, *Milliyet*, 18 June 2013). Hence, in contradiction to scientific fact, he configures a costly method of giving birth as a population control tool and discourages the U.S.-group from resorting to it.

Political actors also seek to legitimize their positions by referring to a hypothetical future threat that requires our imminent action in the present (Dunmire 2007 in Reyes 2011, 786). Erdoğan states that “for a healthy and strong future, we need to maintain the proportion of the young population at a particular [i.e. high, in Turkish] level” (Speech at the Council for Elderly

Assembly, *Milliyet*, 11 October 2009), and there is no power without population (Speech at a wedding, *Yenişafak*, 11 February 2009). At another wedding ceremony, Erdoğan associated responsibility with patriotism: “I expect at least three patriotic kids from this young couple” (Speech at a wedding, *Radikal*, 4 July 2009). His ex-minister Kavaf conveyed a similar message during a constituency visit: “Children play a key role in our future” (*Hizmet*, 11 July 2009). And for the future, “we need to remain young while we are developing until we become rich. [...] The coup d’états of 1960 and 1980 stalled our population increase” (Interview with the Ex-Minister of Development Cevdet Yılmaz, *Radikal*, 14 May 2013). Essentially, the AKP politicians become the voice of reason to persuade the new generation to reproduce dutifully to ensure the hypothetical future that undemocratic military interventions sought to forestall.

Never forget that you are the offspring of the greatest civilization on Earth. I believe that you will be worthy of these lands and your ancestors and you will be in charge of the sciences of the West and perpetuate the wisdom of the East on Earth (Aliye Kavaf, Speech at the Ceremony for children under state care starting university, *Yarın*, 9.4.2009).

As AKP politicians appeal to emotions, they also present an authoritative discourse to show that they have reached their conclusions after a heeded, evaluated and thoughtful procedure—a process furthering their claims to legitimacy (Reyes 2011, 787). Thus, prosperity in Turkey, says Kavaf, is possible with a large and educated population, which requires every family to have three children (Kavaf, Speech at Opening ceremony of an orphanage in Burdur, *Hizmet*, 17 November 2009; Erdoğan, Speech at World Family Forum, *Günlük*, 12 July 2009). For prosperity, population is the “accelerating force” for Turkey (Erdoğan, TV interview, *Kanaltürk*, 9 February 2010), and even the out-group should accept that “one cannot prevent unemployment by not having children,” as Erdoğan announced at the International Istanbul Meeting of the feminist group *KADINist* (*Hürriyet*, 10.28.2010).

Calling on the “voice of expertise” also offers legitimacy and “authorization” (Van Leeuwen 2007). Politicians stand as authoritative sources, presenting information in a formal context, producing official and institutional discourse (Rojo and Van Dijk 1997, 530 in Reyes 2011, 787). Regardless of whether authority is enacted through authoritative voices, evoked by the speaker, or by the institutional position represented by the speaker, appealing to authority constitutes a strategy to legitimize actions. In our analysis, the voice of expertise becomes a tool of legitimization as politicians refer to scientists to indicate that “scientifically, even two children suggest decline” (Erdoğan, Speech at the Assembly of Elderly Council, *Milliyet*, 10 November 2009) or to academics:

[T]o reach a youthful and dynamic population. . . . we also need the support of *hocalarımız* [i.e. priests or academics in Turkish, but given

the location, probably the latter] [...] People are the foundation of the economy. If there are people, then you have labor, capital stock, consumption, and production. [...] Today, [the] elderly population is the reason for Europe's troubles (Erdoğan, Speech at University of Sarajevo, *Rota Haber*, 9.15.2012).

On another occasion, Erdoğan keenly presents examples from other countries to his audiences: "Do you know the population of India, China, or Japan? You see [these countries] among the most prosperous" (Erdoğan, Speech at the Assembly of Elderly Council, *Milliyet*, 10 November 2009). In other instances, he merely uses his title to persuade the public of his authority in the topic of population: "I uttered this yesterday at a UN meeting. I repeat. I am a Prime Minister who is against caesarean section, and I am aware that these are planned - specially planned! I know that this is a step to stall the population growth of this country" (Erdoğan, Speech at AKP Women's Branch 3rd Congress, *Radikal*, 27 May 2012).

Table 1 provides the list of slogans we discovered in our analysis of articles, grouped under four inductively derived clusters: youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity/population increase.

It appears that the identity and the economic dimensions of population politics reinforce each other: the economic future of Turkey, the continuity of Turkish identity and the resulting future power of Turkey are all enmeshed. However, there are some distinctive characteristics within each dimension.

Let us start with the economic dimension. The relationship between prosperity and population is clear. However, slogans creatively introduced to define the "foundation of [the] economy," "national sustainability," and "historical continuity" in the form of replicating the "age of conquerors," as well as "accelerating force," also relate to this dimension. The framing of the economic dimension not only refers to population growth as a guarantee of continuous economic growth, but also as an accelerator of growth. It also draws the attention of the public to the danger that "the rich," anti-democratic forces such as the military, and international "conspirators"—those seeking to "destroy" the nation—may pose to the populous and prosperous future that an increasing population would guarantee. By playing on their patriotism, this framing calls on the young generations to "spoil" the plans of those seeking to forestall the power of the Turkish nation.

This brings us to the framing of the identity dimension. As was the case regarding the economy dimension, this framing also reminds the youth of their duty to provide for continuity in Turkish identity, and also to the accentuation of identity, with slogans urging youth to be "bearers of *always* three children" and "expected to be in charge of both East and West." Population slogans associate fertility with patriotism, responsibility, merit, and health. Aiming for acceleration rather than simply healthy—replacement rate—population growth is a discourse unique to AKP, as to our knowledge none of the

Table 1. List of Slogans

Youth/Young Couple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bearer of patriotic children. ● Bearer of always three children ● Responsible for getting married ● Makers of the 1071 generation [The year the Seljuk Turks entered the Anatolian peninsula] ● Spoiler of population control games
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Under the threat of moral erosion ● Offspring of the greatest civilization on earth ● Expected to be worthy of their land and ancestors ● Expected to be in charge of western sciences and eastern wisdom ● Most valued custodies of the government ● If 1, then bankruptcy ● If 2, then decline or bankruptcy ● If 3, stagnation ● Something that the rich are contemptuous of ● Object of national sustainability ● Bearer of their own subsistence ● Exemplifier of the deception of financial calculation of costs attached.
Population control/ Abortion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tools for destroying the nation ● Impact on moral development of children ● Part of the plan to stall the future of Turkey ● Deliberate destruction of people ● Womb scraping ● Relic of military authoritarianism ● Murder
Prosperity/Population increase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthy, strong future ● Power ● Accelerating force ● Foundation of economy ● Source of labor, capital stock, consumption, production ● Healthy and strong future ● Well-educated humans

other pro-birth regimes in semi-authoritarian contexts in Europe, such as Hungary or Russia, seek accelerated growth (but see [Sperling 2015](#)).

Theoretical Implications of the Case Study

Returning to our theoretical questions, we can ask how the framing of population politics discursively—through the use of slogans—relates to the governance of populations politics. As a contribution to the literature on the politics of population (see, e.g. [Bertaux 2011](#); [Cole 2000](#); [Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005](#); [Orleck 1997](#); [Quine 1995](#)), we suggest that norms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation generate a discursive governance of population. A crucial finding of our analysis is that discursive governance of population in Turkey occurs through the injection of themes of morality and responsibility, associated with the identity and economic attributes of the population issue, into public discussions of population. This stimulates the public to engage with the population issue on politicians' terms. AKP slogans link responsibility and childbearing and associate population growth with derailing conspiracies against the nation. Erdoğan and the AKP establishment make population politics into moral politics and consolidate their position as legitimate rulers of the Turkish nation,

The procreative function of family is stressed in conservative social politics in many countries and features in the Islamist orientations of AKP politicians. Reference to morality and responsibility, especially with respect to gender issues, is one key channel for sustaining conservative social politics. Although people may disagree about the sources of moral principles, they all agree that living morally suggests the strength of will to do the right thing as required by those principles ([Johnson 1993](#), ix). When it comes to issues of morality, societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of “moral panic” ([Cohen 2011](#)). What we have witnessed in the Turkish context is instigation of moral panic around stagnating (i.e. stable) population figures, seen as a condition threatening societal values and national interests. Media, thereby, thrust moral directives into the universe of discourse ([Cohen 2011](#), 1–10) and often assist the ruling elite in weaving a discursive order ([Koller 2005](#), 206; [Pan and Kosicki 2003](#), 35). This media potential is consciously exploited by “moral entrepreneurs” to aid them in their attempt to win public support for their cause ([Cohen 2011](#), 10). Our case also shows how by simply publicizing the discourses of AKP politicians—especially Erdoğan—on population issues, the media performs as a tool for politicians' representations of morality and responsibility.

How is the territorial space of the nation effectively policed? Foucault indicates that the center of political rationality that developed in the nineteenth century was neither the city nor the territory, but society. The governmental state was no longer defined in relation to its physical territory but in relation

to its social geography, its population, and its economy (Foucault 1991 in Barry 1996, 126). Thereby, communications technology came to have a critical role in regulating the flow of objects, information and persons, facilitating the development of a liberal political and economic space. Communication networks created what Deleuze and Guattari (1987 in Barry 1996, 127–128) have called a striated space: a space within which movements and flows are regulated in ways that enable authorities to act; a space that is measured, directed and standardized. Yet, media has mattered even more in less democratic contexts, even if it merely publicized their political statements, becoming a social engineering tool for governments to propagate moral panics, which may, in turn, be significant for maintaining leaders' power. As our case study demonstrates, politicians' panic around the stagnating population growth in Turkey, as expressed in the media, serves as legitimization of their claims that the fertility and the fecundity of a nation are the primary indicators of its strength.

Let us briefly explain our thinking about how the deployment of slogans can contribute to the normative mechanisms affecting public deliberation of an issue. The mental horizons separating that which actually "enters" our minds from that which is excluded as irrelevant are by no means entirely personal. It is usually as members of particular thought-communities that we ignore and appreciate certain things. Our social environment normally determines what we attend, ignore, and organize inside our heads, affecting the way we classify the world (Zerubavel 2009, 42). Engaging with the public political discourse makes us part of a common space that constructs our identities, and "our common-sense knowledge" performs its constructive role in our everyday life (Goffman 1974 in Pan and Kosicki 2003, 37–38). In politics, metalanguage demarcates space and determines many political dispositions through shared acts, articulation (Stormer 2004, 257) and imaginations. Articulations and social representations of morality and responsibility matter to the extent that the ruling politicians use them to affect our commonsense knowledge with respect to population stagnation or decrease.

Effectively, some rules do not just regulate but also create the possibility of the very behavior that they regulate (Searle 2010, 10). Essentially, a successful mechanism of social engineering expands the impact of rules through explicit and implicit mechanisms. Public policies are explicit mechanisms, but discursive governance adopts more implicit mechanisms. Based on Searle's (2010, 91) interpretation of speech acts as the basis of all institutional realities, we present the construction of language with strategic slogans and subsequent framing with the use of these slogans as crucial tools to inculcate ideas in line with the wishes of the authority in charge. This signifies leaders' active sense-making. Thus, when new social problems arise, our model suggests, discourses in circulation provide "templates" for understanding and judging different proposed solutions. By relying on shared social representations as the basis for comparative judgments, creative slogans in circulation become accessible to a public that has little knowledge of or interest in the actual debate (Lau and

Schlesinger 2005, 79). We consider the repeated emphasis on the “three children slogan” by the Turkish ruling party in all sorts of contexts as their effort to boost the resonance of this very slogan.

Eventually, there emerges a habitus that hosts public philosophies as meta-problem definitions, which shape how specific problems are defined for the individual and affect the nature of ideas promising viable solutions to any newly defined problem in politics. Politicians choose definitions geared to bolster their cause, to mobilize “attentive publics” and, hence, to control the political agenda (Yishai 1993, 208) by means of a metaproblem definition of specific topics that might have been unfamiliar terrain for their audiences (Mehta 2011, 42–43). That is how, in time, certain belief systems may become ubiquitous as normative yardsticks. They remain powerful to the extent that they constrain the public perceptions of what is legitimate, “acceptable” and “good” (Korkut et al. 2015). Those who define the terms usually win the debates (Jordan 1994, 5). Thereafter, political actors use these collective rationalities in order to accrue support for political action without going through the established policy making channels such as debate at the parliamentary floor and following legislative procedures.

Conclusion

This article has depicted the tendency of Turkish government politicians to advance population politics with slogans rather than with specific pro-birth policies. Through discussing the morality that politicians link to their definition of population politics, we also indicated the tension between the ideology of the current government (which has been identified elsewhere as Islamist) and the reproductive rights of women. We primarily followed the way that media amplified then-Prime Minister and now President Erdoğan’s discourse on population, and reinforced his pro-birth slogans through publicizing them. We followed the role of media as an arena politicians use to affect public reasoning. As we also showed, those deploying these slogans seek to influence the public sphere and achieve collective value judgments aligned with the normative positions of politicians. This form of political action does not need to go through established legislative mechanisms.

Alongside Erdoğan, we also illustrated the discourse from various AKP politicians as well as the new Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. We reflected on how politicians refer to the population problem in different contexts, regardless of the audience or occasion. Our article shows how semi-free media in less democratic contexts can boost the resonance of political discourse. Subsequently, this discourse acquires an independent existence beyond the context where it is initially expressed. In summary, we argue that the population issue was not of much importance for the public in Turkey until the media started to circulate the politicians’ “three children” slogan and facilitated

the transformation of political discourses into norms demarcating a discursively constructed reality around the importance of having children. We note that we have not yet fully evaluated the effectiveness of this discourse in shaping the behavior of the target population, even if we do see that there is a recent increase in the number of births in Turkey; this will be done in future empirical research.

We have investigated the puzzle that Turkey—a country with a young population growing at a healthy pace—has such robust pro-natalist population politics. We have used our case study to answer the question of how this might be, highlighting two dimensions of population politics—national identity and economic value—that were expressed through pro-birth slogans. Although the identity aspect of population politics presents women with a way to behave morally, the economic value of population growth puts responsibility on the “us-group” of the nation. Population figures can become an issue for politicians to debate and to utilize for political support, even in the absence of an ageing or decreasing population.

Much of the early Republican Turkish history illustrated the extent of social engineering that the Republican forefathers carried out. Therefore, in the case of Turkey, it is not novel to ask how the state gained control of its subjects and their imaginations via social engineering, leading to “enhanced state capacity” (Scott 1998, 3). The fewer constraints there are on the state, and the more expansive its social engineering becomes (Üngör 2008, 16). Our article contributes to a re-assessment of the tactics—“the daily practices through which the techniques of government [...] define both the state and the citizen subject in Turkey” (Secor 2007, 37)—redefining the state-society boundary in this less-than-democratic context. We propose that the discursive construction of population politics in Turkey operates as a form of social engineering to boost population growth in the absence of actual policies that facilitate this outcome.

To this extent, we note that policy debates have become irrelevant to the “population problem” in Turkey, as slogans echoing the leader’s vision creatively mold public deliberation on and interpretation of population figures. Insofar as population stagnation threatening Turkey’s future becomes the metanarrative, the discursive construction of the problem and its solutions precedes deliberations on policy action to maintain the future of Turkish prosperity and identity—if they are in danger at all.

We propose that the most important tenets of this form of governance are not policy changes that may indeed serve population growth but a discursive governance of population politics via the creation of normative mechanisms supported by an encompassing argument about citizens’ morality and responsibility. In a nutshell, the circulation of discourses becomes a form of governance and transforms them into normative mechanisms conditioning public philosophies. There is a further appeal of using discursive governance to study the general tenets of “moral politics” emerging in American as well as in European politics including its Turkish and Russian variants. We believe that

in the face of judicial guarantees over general freedoms and liberties, conservative politicians may turn to discursive governance in order to prevent consolidation of specifically gendered rights, such as women's right to control their reproduction, but also of human rights for refugees, when legislative frameworks incapacitate or delay them from taking action.

Notes

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2. 3 Çocuğa az kaldı, Cumhuriyet, 18 April 2015.
3. According to the 2014 Report on Press Freedom, media in Turkey are "not free," available at, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/turkey#.VPRyRShV-rg> (last accessed 2 March 2015).
4. "Çeyiz devletten üç çocuğa 1300 lira," available at, <http://www.yenisa fak.com.tr/ekonomi/cocugu-olana-300-lira-2060434> (last accessed 15 March 2015); Aşkın ve muhabbetin ne zaman geleceği belli olmaz, geldi mi çarpar, available at, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/askin-ve-muhabetin-ne-zaman-gelecegi-belli-olmaz-geldi-mi-carpar,283593> (last accessed 20 March 2015).

5. Türkiye’de kürtaj gizlice yasaklandı, available at, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/saglik-yasam/25989956.asp> (last accessed 15 March 2015).
6. “Erdoğan’dan “öğrenci evi” açıklaması,” available at, http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YcVoc02__4ncisNYAQ (last accessed 15 October 2015).
7. “Erdoğan’dan “öğrenci evi” açıklaması,” available at, http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YcVoc02__4ncisNYAQ (last accessed 15 October 2015).

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