

Authoritarian middle powers and the liberal order: Turkey's contestation of the EU

SENEM AYDIN-DÜZGİT*

It has commonly been argued that the liberal international order (LIO) is being contested from within, with the rise of populist parties across Europe and the United States, as well as from the outside, by challengers such as Russia and China.¹ More recently, middle powers' contestation of the LIO has also started to garner attention. Although they are conventionally considered as contributors to the LIO, scholars have recently begun to discern 'unusual middle power activism' especially on the part of emerging middle powers which are increasingly contesting the LIO as they turn towards authoritarianism.² Despite this growing interest, the scholarly and policy-relevant focus so far has largely been on the foreign policy practices of these middle powers and their impact on the LIO. The question which remains, however, is why emerging middle powers under the authoritarian turn contest the LIO, as well as how they do so.

Understanding why and how authoritarian middle powers contest the LIO matters for two main reasons. First, middle powers constitute the majority of states in the international system and have contributed to the stability of the LIO in the past. Yet, many emerging middle powers have been experiencing democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century.³ Scholars have found that those emerging middle powers behaving as contesters have a destabilizing effect on the liberal order, chipping away at its stability from the margins where liberal

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¹ G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization*, vol. 75, special issue 2, 2021, pp. 225–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>.

² Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: pathways to unusual middle-power activism', *Third World Quarterly* 42: 12, 2021, pp. 3051–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1985449>; Anna Grzywacz and Marcin Florian Gawrycki, 'The authoritarian turn of middle powers: changes in narratives and engagement', *Third World Quarterly* 42: 11, 2021, pp. 2629–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1960159>; Diğdem Soyaltın-Colella and Tolga Demiryol, 'Unusual middle power activism and regime survival: Turkey's drone warfare and its regime boosting effects', *Third World Quarterly* 44: 4, 2022, pp. 724–43; <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2158080>; Umut Aydın, 'Emerging middle powers and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1377–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaib09z>; Charalampos Efstathopoulos, 'Southern middle powers and the liberal international order: the options for Brazil and South Africa', *International Journal* 76: 3, 2021, pp. 384–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020211042915>.

³ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy report 2023: defiance in the face of autocratization* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2023).

norms are less institutionalized and illiberal great powers are asserting their influence.⁴ Exploring why they contest helps us move beyond accounting for ‘unusual middle power activism’ solely in terms of these powers’ strong attachment to national sovereignty and aversion to liberal democracy, and opens up a wider space of inquiry into the drivers behind contestation. Unpacking such drivers would further our understanding of the nature of conflicts involving these powers and the ways in which they can be tackled. Second, contestation comes in different ways and forms, from foreign policy practices to discourses. Where the focus on the literature is predominantly on the foreign policy practices of these powers, we know relatively less of their discourses.⁵ Yet, discourses are arguably the most potent diplomatic weapon of these powers, as they play a key role in shaping the legitimacy beliefs of audiences in a context where the legitimacy of the constituent features of the LIO, including international organizations (IOs), is central to its functioning and sustenance.⁶ Hence a comprehensive response to the ‘how’ question would have to include an analysis of these powers’ foreign policy discourses, alongside their practices.

This article addresses this gap in the literature through a study of Turkey’s contestation of the European Union. Turkey constitutes an ideal case of an emerging middle power which turned towards authoritarianism and has intensified its contestation of the LIO in the past decade. There is scholarly consensus that as an emerging middle power with mid-size capabilities, Turkey contributed to the stability of the LIO for much of the postwar period.⁷ As it turned towards authoritarianism in the second decade of this century, its contestation of the LIO has also grown. It has increased its attacks on multilateral institutions, adopts a confrontational foreign policy where it often resorts to coercive diplomacy, and displays a strong aversion to foreign criticism on the grounds of democracy.⁸ Yet, as is also the case for most other contesters, it picks and chooses its sites of contestation. For instance, it remains a member of NATO and the G20, and steps into mediation efforts, as in its brokering from 2022 of the Black Sea Grain Initiative together with the United Nations.⁹ This selectivity begs a more differentiated account of the nature and drivers of its contestation than that which focuses solely on the country’s authoritarian turn.

⁴ Aydın, ‘Emerging middle powers’, pp. 1382 and 1394.

⁵ Edward Newman and Benjamin Zala, ‘Rising powers and order contestation: disaggregating the normative from the representational’, *Third World Quarterly* 39: 5, 2018, pp. 871–8 at p. 876, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1392085>.

⁶ Lisa Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, *Legitimacy politics: elite communication and public opinion in global governance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁷ Aydın, ‘Emerging middle powers’; Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, ‘The dynamics of emerging middle power influence in regional and global governance: the paradoxical case of Turkey’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71: 2, 2017, pp. 164–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183586>; Emel Parlar-Dal, ed., *Middle powers in global governance: the rise of Turkey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

⁸ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, ‘Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?’, *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1085–1104 at p. 1086, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab094>; Aydın, ‘Emerging middle powers’.

⁹ Alexandra Prokopenko, ‘Russia’s return to grain deal is a sign of Turkey’s growing influence’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 Nov. 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88349>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 August 2023.)

This is where we turn to the analytical value of focusing on Turkey's contestation of the EU. The EU constitutes a microcosm of the key elements of the LIO, as it embodies all the main features of the 'postnational LIO' in that it is 'not only rule-based[,] but also openly pursues a liberal social purpose, with a significant amount of authority beyond the nation-state'.¹⁰ Put simply, its membership prospect alone raises questions not just about representation—as is the case for other IOs like the UN and its Security Council—but also about the delegation of sovereignty and liberal intrusiveness, both proven to intensify the propensity for contestation in the LIO. The EU's liberal intrusiveness is not limited to its members, but extends beyond its borders.¹¹ What makes this liberal intrusiveness fairly effective is that the EU has an important international presence *through* these policies, especially where it has competences. Hence it is an actor with considerable agency in the constitution of the LIO. The EU–Turkey relationship constitutes a suitable ground to observe how and why this liberal intrusiveness is contested: Turkey is at the same time both a formal candidate for EU accession since 1999, which makes it exposed to membership criteria including alignment with EU policies, and a neighbour country, which, regardless of the freezing of accession talks since 2013, makes it a subject of key EU external policies such as trade and migration.

Building on recent works on the LIO which conceptualize its contestation in the form of diverse claims to justice,¹² this article unpacks Turkey's contestation from a global justice perspective. It shows that authoritarian middle powers can contest the LIO through both their discourses and practices. Through their discourses, these actors can target the legitimacy of the constituents of the LIO by drawing from a language of global justice as mutual recognition and impartiality, to emphasize their failure in upholding their moral duties to citizens beyond their borders as well as to those who suffer from structural or historical injustices. Their contestatory practices, however, are informed by an understanding of global justice as non-domination where state sovereignty and non-interference in states' domestic affairs are central. I argue that this inconsistency testifies to the primacy of pragmatic drivers behind contestation, where the key concern which determines the site and modality of contestation for authoritarian middle powers is to boost regime security and facilitate regime survival. As such, the article contributes to the burgeoning literature on the emerging middle powers and the future of the LIO, and provides a framework for studying the reasons and the modalities of contestation by other authoritarian middle powers. It also contributes to the literature on European foreign policy, by identifying some of its key features which enable third-party contestation and weaken its international legitimacy.

¹⁰ Tanja Börzel and Michael Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism', *International Organization*, vol. 75, special issue 2, 2021, pp. 282–305 at p. 283, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000570>.

¹¹ Michael Smith and Richard Youngs, 'The EU and the global order: contingent liberalism', *The International Spectator* 53: 1, 2018, pp. 45–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1409024>.

¹² Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac232>.

The article first discusses my conceptual approach to middle powerhood and contestation of the LIO through the lens of global justice. It then turns to the empirical analyses of how and why Turkey contests the EU in three steps. First, by using qualitative content analysis, it identifies the topics and justifications put forward by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan through which he discursively contests the EU from the viewpoint of global justice. Second, through the same analytical lens, it focuses on Turkey's contestatory practices over the topics through which it discursively contests EU. The next section zooms into the drivers behind contestation. In conclusion, I summarize the key findings and stress the significance of the analysis beyond Turkey and the EU.

Conceptualizing contestation: authoritarian middle powers, global justice and the LIO

Middle powers are commonly defined as countries that are 'neither great nor small in terms of their power, capacity, and influence and exhibit the capability to create cohesion and obstruction toward global order and governance'.¹³ Yet material capability alone is not a sufficient trait of middle powerhood. There is also a behavioural component which stipulates that these countries contribute to the stability of the international order by assuming a system-supporting role through multilateral cooperation, strengthening global institutions, exercising soft power and engaging in niche diplomacy.¹⁴ The empirical case for middle powers was initially made for countries in the West referred to as 'traditional middle powers' such as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.¹⁵ In the post-Cold War era, this category expanded to include 'emerging' or 'non-traditional' middle powers mostly from the global South, including Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey.¹⁶ It was argued that these countries differed from traditional middle powers regarding the unconsolidated nature of their democracy, skewed distribution of income and location in the semi-periphery of the international system, as well as their keenness for regional cooperation.¹⁷ Yet, while calling for certain reforms in the international order, they converged with traditional middle powers in their general support for the order and its liberal character.¹⁸

This behavioural convergence is now increasingly being questioned. Scholars argue that, enabled by the rise of multipolarity, 'middle power contestation [of

¹³ Eduard Jordaan, 'The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers', *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 30: 1, 2003, pp. 165–81 at p. 165, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>.

¹⁴ Jordaan, 'The concept of a middle power in international relations'.

¹⁵ Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim R. Nossal, *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Eduard Jordaan, 'The emerging middle power concept: time to say goodbye?', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 24: 3, 2017, pp. 395–412, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2017.1394218>.

¹⁷ Jordaan, 'The concept of a middle power in international relations', pp. 171–7; Andrew F. Cooper and Daniel Flemes, 'Foreign policy strategies of emerging powers in a multipolar world', *Third World Quarterly* 34: 6, 2013, pp. 943–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.802501>.

¹⁸ Jordaan, 'The concept of a middle power in international relations', pp. 171–7.

the liberal order] has increased and that it has come from non-traditional middle powers'.¹⁹ They claim that emerging middle powers which experience democratic backsliding adopt confrontational foreign policies, prefer transactionalism over rules-based arrangements, and weaken their support to IOs.²⁰ While behavioural foreign policy practices of these powers generally constitute the focuses of observations on their contestation of the liberal order, I adhere to a broader definition of contestation as 'discursive and behavioral practices that challenge the authority of international institutions [and] their liberal intrusiveness'.²¹ In line with the recent literature on norm contestation,²² I distinguish between contestation by means of discourse and practice. I also conceptualize both forms of contestation as relational, meaning that contestation always takes place in relation to a single actor or multiple actors, entailing a self-positioning of the contestator in relation to the contested actor(s). Contestation is discursive in so far as it 'obtains visibility for the researcher through its materiality as a discursive practice'.²³ Contestatory discourses are incurred mainly through justifications²⁴ which, in this context, target the legitimacy of the EU and hence 'the appropriateness of its authority' in the form of 'public statements involving a negative evaluation' of its actions.²⁵

Despite the pertinence of the discursive realm to contestation, discourse is not the only medium through which contestation takes place in foreign policy, where an exclusive focus on discourse may run the risk of the analysis being 'too narrow'.²⁶ This is why I also account for the practices of contestation, with reference to the specific actions undertaken by contestators. As such, I do not adhere to a critical or thick constructivist conceptualization of discourse as practice where the theoretical distinction between what the actors say and do is diminished, but stand close to a 'more pragmatic, actor-based, and action-oriented approach to discourse', where it is deployed by actors 'to justify or delegitimize' courses of action.²⁷ Hence, discourse is not conceptualized as a mirror of reality or simply as empty rhetoric; and while analytically distinct from practice, it is closely related to the latter through its potential power to alter beliefs and perceptions of policy actors.²⁸

¹⁹ Jordaán, 'The emerging middle power concept', p. 400.

²⁰ Aydın, 'Emerging middle powers'; Kutlay and Öniş, 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order'.

²¹ Börzel and Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order', p. 288.

²² Anette Stimmer and Lea Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent: when actions are louder than words', *International Affairs* 95: 3, 2019, pp. 515–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz019>.

²³ Antje Wiener, 'Access to contestation for stakeholders and normative robustness in global society', 2017, p. 6, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2994661>.

²⁴ Karin Backstrand and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance: discursive, institutional, and behavioral practices', in Jonas Tallberg, Karin Backstrand and Jan Aart Scholte, eds, *Legitimacy in global governance: sources, processes and consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 108.

²⁵ Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organisations: introduction and framework', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 14, 2019, pp. 581–606 at pp. 585–6 and p. 588, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-018-9330-7>.

²⁶ Stimmer and Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent', p. 520.

²⁷ Anna Holzscheiter, 'Between communicative interaction and structures of signification: discourse theory and analysis in International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* 15, 2014, pp. 142–62 at p. 147, <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12005>.

²⁸ Adrian Van den Hoven, 'Assuming leadership in multilateral economic institutions: the EU's "development round" discourse and strategy', *West European Politics* 27: 2, 2004, pp. 256–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0140238042000214900>.

The question which remains, however, is the basis through which contestation—both through discourse and practice—is undertaken. Contestation of the LIO can indeed be read through multiple lenses ranging from geopolitical power shifts to recognition issues.²⁹ Yet, at the centre of the contemporary challenges to the current order lie claims to justice.³⁰ What makes the LIO particularly susceptible to justice claims is the way in which ‘the promises of justice contained within liberalism ... conflict with the core requirements of order construction’.³¹ Hence it comes as no surprise that emerging middle powers’ objections to the LIO also contain multiple justice claims and pleas ranging from fairer representation in global governance³² to more equitable socio-economic redistribution.³³ Yet, contestation is incurred over not only what is considered unjust in the current order, but also with respect to how justice should be served within it. This is visible, for instance, regarding varying positions held by middle powers over the reform of the UN and its role in global governance.³⁴

This is where I turn to theories of global justice, defined as ‘the justice of specific political practices and institutions, and the normative standards by which they are regulated’.³⁵ Hence not only does a global justice perspective on LIO and its contestation guide us in detecting the types of justice claims which underlie emerging middle powers’ contestation of the LIO, but it also provides insight into their positions on how justice can be achieved. Applied to the present case, when discursive and practice-based contestations of the EU are read through the lens of global justice, it allows us to move beyond merely stating that contesting EU agency itself constitutes a contestation of the LIO, towards identifying the understandings of the LIO which inform the basis of contestation of the EU at the levels of both discourse and practice.

In what follows, we look for Turkey’s contestatory discourses and practices that draw from three perspectives of global justice, each corresponding to a certain way of understanding actors’ rights and duties in the international order: *justice as non-dominance*, *justice as impartiality* and *justice as mutual recognition*.³⁶ An international order which is underpinned by an understanding of *justice as non-dominance* is one where global justice is served primarily by respecting the integrity and sovereignty of states. States’ main duties and responsibilities in this order are thus held towards other states, where they refrain from interfering in each other’s

²⁹ Reus-Smit and Zarakol, ‘Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order’, p. 1.

³⁰ Reus-Smit and Zarakol, ‘Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order’, p. 1.

³¹ George Lawson and Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Recognizing injustice: the “hypocrisy charge” and the future of the liberal international order’, *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 201–17 at p. 203, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac258>.

³² Newman and Zala, ‘Rising powers and order contestation’.

³³ Arnulf Becker Lorca, ‘Contesting global justice from the South: redistribution in the international order’, *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac315>.

³⁴ Louise Riis Andersen, ‘Curb your enthusiasm: middle-power liberal internationalism and the future of the United Nations’, *International Journal* 74: 1, 2019, pp. 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019833739>.

³⁵ Terry Macdonald and Miriam Ronzoni, ‘Introduction: the idea of global political justice’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15: 5, 2012, pp. 521–33 at p. 522, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2012.727303>.

³⁶ Helene Sjørusen, ‘Rethinking liberal order: the EU and the quest for global justice’, *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2203–20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad240>; see also Erik O. Eriksen, *Three conceptions of global political justice*, GLOBUS Research Papers, 1/2016, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2878745>.

domestic affairs. For instance, in the case of human rights violations in a given state, respect for the violating state's sovereignty trumps concerns for the rights of its citizens. In the case of international conflicts, states are expected to recognize each other's sovereignty claims.

In an international order where *justice as impartiality* is the main organizing principle, states' duties extend also to the citizens of other states, guided by international law which upholds universal norms. Under this justice claim and in the context of international law, states can push for regime change in other states or even engage in military intervention to protect the rights of citizens beyond their borders. Conflicts between states are expected to be settled as legal disputes by impartial third-party actors. An EU foreign policy underpinned by justice as impartiality would be expected to consistently adhere to legal principles in its foreign policy actions and to promote human rights where necessary.

Finally, an international order drawing from *justice as mutual recognition* underlines states' duties towards less advantaged groups in the international system, allowing for context-dependent different treatment to overcome structural disadvantages. In other words, this view of justice stipulates that the international system should 'correct wrongs' resulting from structural inequalities and historical injustices by giving affected parties a 'due hearing' in determining the right course of action to take.³⁷ Those affected could range from refugees to culturally defined and marginalized groups. For instance, the EU's former colonial powers guided by this vision of justice would be expected to sufficiently acknowledge the repercussions of their colonial history in the present and pursue reparations with the input of affected parties. Since each of these three understandings of global political justice reflects a consistent normative position in itself, it becomes possible to tell whether political criticisms by the contesters are made from within a certain normative perspective of global justice or if they are simply pragmatic.³⁸ This implies that (in)consistency in the form of different understandings of global justice which inform discourse and practice, as well as within discourse itself, provides insight into the main drivers of contestation as normative or pragmatic in nature.

Contestation through discourse: what does Turkey say?

To understand Turkey's discursive contestation of the LIO through the lenses of global justice, it is imperative to focus on the discourses of President Erdoğan. Since assuming the presidency in August 2014, 'executive aggrandizement and associated de-institutionalization' has made him the central figure in the country's foreign policy-making.³⁹ For our data, the author and two research assistants analysed all of Erdoğan's international speeches and interviews delivered between August 2014 and October 2022—a period which roughly coincides with Turkey's

³⁷ Eriksen, *Three conceptions of global political justice*, p. 19.

³⁸ Sjursen, 'Rethinking liberal order.'

³⁹ Kutlay and Öniş, 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order', p. 1088.

souring relations with the EU and its increasing attacks on the LIO. A total of 219 international speeches and interviews—delivered on country visits, or at global multilateral forums and other international summits and symposia—were studied.⁴⁰ We also included Erdoğan's book among the data, as the EU is often a subject of discussion in the context of his views on the LIO.⁴¹

We subjected these texts to qualitative content analysis⁴² in three stages. We first identified the parts of speeches in which Erdoğan engages in negative evaluations of EU actions and agency. We then manually assigned categories to text passages regarding the argumentative justifications he uses to denounce EU actions, where our coding scheme was designed to operationalize the three conceptual understandings of global justice recounted above. To ensure consistency and reliability in the coding process, coding frames were first generated and three training sessions were held. We checked each other's coding, both during the initial organizational stage and after completion, to minimize researcher bias. A justificatory discourse coded as drawing from an understanding of *global justice as non-domination* would place sovereignty as the key concern of states, bearing a strong resistance to external interference. In tracing *justice as impartiality*, our focus was on contestatory discourses which underscore international actors' moral duties not only to their own citizens but also towards the citizens of other states, implying the primacy of individual rights and international law. Finally, contestatory discourses drawing from an understanding of *justice as mutual recognition* would give priority to accounting in international processes for the injustices suffered by those who have unequal access to resources and for specific historical experiences such as colonialism.⁴³ In the third and final step, we selected 'meaningful excerpts' which demonstrate the type of argumentative justifications in texts, the ways in which they are used and the topics in relation to which they are deployed.⁴⁴

Our findings show that over 40 per cent of all the international speeches and interviews (89) by Erdoğan engage in a direct contestation of Europe as an international actor. A closer observation suggests that read through the lenses of global justice and LIO, his justifications draw mostly from an understanding of *global justice as mutual recognition*, and to a lesser extent, the notion of *global justice as impartiality*, which are unpacked below.

⁴⁰ The speeches were retrieved from the website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/receptayyiperdogan/konusmalar>, and the interviews from <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/receptayyiperdogan/mulakatlar>.

⁴¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, *Daha adil bir dünya mümkün* [A fairer world is possible] (İstanbul: Turkuaz, 2021). The book has been translated into several languages, including English, Arabic, French and Russian.

⁴² Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative content analysis in practice* (London: SAGE, 2012).

⁴³ Repeated use of the same argument type in a single speech/interview is coded as one instance of contestation.

⁴⁴ Caterina Carta, "A rose by any other name": on ways of approaching discourse analysis', *International Studies Review* 21: 1, 2019, pp. 81–106 at p. 98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy013>.

Table 1: Frequency of the types of argumentation used in contestation by Erdoğan, 2014–22

	<i>Number of instances of Turkey's contestation of the EU</i>
Global justice as mutual recognition	68
Refugees	46
Colonialism	22
Global justice as impartiality	51
Foreign policy in the neighbourhood	33
EU membership	10
International terrorism	8
Total	119

Global justice as mutual recognition: refugees and Europe's colonial past

Erdoğan's contestation through the lens of global justice as mutual recognition is mainly incurred through two topics: the EU's failure to assume its responsibilities towards Syrian refugees, and Europe's colonial past. On the refugee issue, the EU is mainly contested on the grounds that it does not uphold its duties towards the refugees. The following statements, delivered by Erdoğan in the early and later stages of the Syrian war, are exemplary of such argumentation:

Right now, Turkey hosts 1,600,000 refugees. How many refugees does Europe host? 130,000. We have already spent 4.5 billion euros. Do you know how much support that they have given us? Only 200 million dollars ... But why are they not sensitive about this issue? They only talk. It is because they just don't care.⁴⁵

Since the onset of the Syrian War in 2011, we have not sent a single person who sought refuge in us back to Syria ... While we have been looking after four million people in the last eight years, we see that those countries which are economically better off than us have been fighting each other over 100–150 refugees. Starting with racist parties, European politicians calculate how they can capitalize on migrant-bashing.⁴⁶

Similarly, in his book on the international order, *A fairer world is possible*, Erdoğan argues that the EU's migration policies are a testament to its breach of fundamental values, as 'the EU is not in a position to defend all its self-proclaimed universal moral values while it turns a blind eye to sinking boats in the Mediterranean, building wire fences and adopting a push-back policy'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the international summit for Woman and Justice', 24 Oct. 2014 (author's translation).

⁴⁶ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the 6th ministerial conference of the Budapest Process', 19 Feb. 2019 (author's translation).

⁴⁷ Erdoğan, *A fairer world is possible*, pp. 55–6 (author's translation).

While contestation through the refugee issue takes place mainly at various international platforms, it is observed that Europe's colonial past is frequently brought up by Erdoğan when the audience is from the countries of the global South, particularly from Africa. Each of the speeches which Erdoğan has delivered in Africa or to an audience from Africa, without any exception, contains a negative evaluation of Europe through the use of anti-colonial rhetoric. For instance, on a visit to Angola in 2021, when asked how a just world order would envision relations with African countries, he responds by underlining that 'the resources of African countries have been heavily exploited by European countries, the most important one being France, which has treated the entire continent as a continent of exploitation, killing hundreds of thousands of people'. He adds that this 'cruel system, unjust system continues even today ... where the only course of action is to work together in fighting these injustices'.⁴⁸

Similarly, in his speeches at the Turkey–Africa business forums, he makes frequent references to Europe's colonial past to underline the need for solidarity between Turkey and Africa, to positively represent Turkey's involvement in the region and to delegitimize the European presence:

Turkey, with its ancient ties to the continent going back a thousand years, shares the same fate with Africans. The nature of our relations with Africa lies in sincerity, brotherhood, solidarity. We are never after short-term interests, we want to win together, succeed together, walk a path together. We do not approve of the persistence of old colonial practices with new methods. As a country which does not bear the stain of colonialism in its history, we reject their arrogant, imperious attitude towards the continent.⁴⁹

Turkey has a unique economic and development model. We are ready to share our experiences based on trust and rich human capital with our African brothers. Depleting Africa's resources and adopting neo-colonial practices are things that we would never do. Our culture and ethics, the values which we share with you, would not allow that. Both within its borders and abroad, Turkey stands against the modern colonial order.⁵⁰

He also does not shy away from directly connecting Europe's colonial past to its stance in more recent and concrete policies concerning redistributive justice. For instance, while comparing Turkey's medical aid to the region after the onset of the COVID–19 pandemic with that of Europe, he highlights that as a country with no colonial baggage, 'Turkey will continue to help African states and will not allow old colonial practices to persist through the use of new instruments' such as 'withholding the vaccines from the region and leaving it to its own devices'.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at a press conference on a visit to Angola', 18 Oct. 2021 (author's translation).

⁴⁹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the Turkey–Africa Economy and Business Forum', 8 Oct. 2020 (author's translation).

⁵⁰ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the Turkey–Senegal Business Forum', 1 March 2018 (author's translation).

⁵¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Remarks at a press conference on a visit to Angola, Togo and Nigeria', 17 Oct. 2021 (author's translation).

Global justice as impartiality: the 'double standards' rhetoric

Erdoğan's discursive contestation of the EU also draws from an understanding of global justice as impartiality, in so far as he labels the EU a discriminatory entity which upholds double standards in its wider neighbourhood when it comes to the promotion of democracy and human rights which its citizens enjoy at home. The EU's ambivalent stance towards international democracy is most often raised in the context of its actions in the broader eastern Mediterranean:

Those who create a stir when the subject is Turkey ... do not raise their voices for the death sentences in Egypt. A summit was held in Sharm El-Sheikh only five days after nine Egyptian youngsters were executed on 25 February. With whom? EU member states. Even though the death penalty is outlawed in the EU, they attended at the invitation of the person who executed these young people ... The clearest example of this double standard was their attendance in this meeting.⁵²

In a similar vein, in discussing the drivers of conflicts in the region, Erdoğan highlights that 'some EU member states even go as far as supporting coup leaders in Libya'.⁵³ He frequently refers to the EU as an entity which does not shy away from trumping democracy, human rights, freedoms and the national will of those in the region and beyond, and he repeats on various occasions that 'even at the rhetorical level, Europe is in no position to defend universal values and democracy ... It is nationalist, racist and Islamophobic'.⁵⁴ Hence, contrary to what might be expected, Erdoğan's objection to European criticisms of democracy and human rights in Turkey and elsewhere is not made from a viewpoint of non-domination, where non-interference in a state's internal affairs is of principal importance, but of impartiality, where the inconsistency between Europe's claims to international democracy and its actual foreign policy practices in its wider neighbourhood is underscored. In other words, he repeatedly underlines that the EU has no right to promote international democracy in so far as it adopts a selective approach to supporting it.

The 'double standards' rhetoric is also observed in areas which relate directly to the bilateral issues between Turkey and the EU, such as Turkey's membership prospects:

Despite all the unfair practices and political hurdles which we have faced, we have persisted with EU membership. We officially applied to the EU in 1963, the year is 2015, it has been 52 years, they have been making us wait for 52 years ... You have a large population, is the only thing they can say. Then why didn't you tell us this from the start?⁵⁵

The EU's lack of a credible and consistent commitment to Turkey's membership, despite having granted it an official membership perspective, is shown as proof of how the EU trumps its previous legal commitments where these conflict with its

⁵² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the press conference of the G20 meeting in Osaka', 29 June 2019 (author's translation).

⁵³ Erdoğan, *A fairer world is possible*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Erdoğan, *A fairer world is possible*, pp. 63–4 and p. 92.

⁵⁵ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at the Romania–Turkey Business Forum', 1 April 2015 (author's translation).

interests. The EU's lack of impartiality, at the expense of its own values, is also addressed with reference to its normative obligations towards Turkish citizens threatened by international terrorism, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

FETÖ⁵⁶ terrorists who have killed 251 of our citizens on the night of the coup live without any scrutiny in many European states. Similarly, members of the separatist organization can organize protests in the middle of Europe, targeting myself, our nation and country ... I don't think our European friends can sufficiently understand how these acts which are irreconcilable with law, democracy, freedoms, alliance infuriate our people.⁵⁷

Turkey's discursive contestation of the EU, studied through Erdoğan's speeches and writing, hence demonstrates a strong grounding in an understanding of global justice as mutual recognition and impartiality. The analysis suggests that Turkey picks and chooses the subjects of its discursive contestation from areas that fall under 'selective' or 'contingent' liberalism in EU foreign policy.⁵⁸ Scholars, for instance, have pointed out how EU foreign policy has turned increasingly in recent years towards soft mercantilism, a stronger focus on border controls and migration management at the expense of democracy and human rights, and towards a less liberal approach to the use of development aid.⁵⁹ Others have found evidence for claims that the EU contributes to poverty in Africa through regressive aid and trade linkages.⁶⁰ The EU's failure to address the injustices associated with its colonial history is a subject of major grievance across the global South.⁶¹ Enlargement policy has reportedly become increasingly ambivalent where there is a lack of a strong and consistent commitment and credibility on the part of the EU towards accession countries.⁶² Hence, when Erdoğan chooses these themes in his discourse, he does so knowing that it resonates across his audiences and can help to weaken the legitimacy of EU actions. It has been shown, for instance, that Turkey's anti-colonial rhetoric finds reception across Africa and reflects positively on the reception of Turkish policies in the region, compared to those of traditional donors like the EU and its member states.⁶³

Discourse alone may lead us to think that Turkey may in fact be positioning itself as an advocate of an LIO which prioritizes global justice as impartiality and

⁵⁶ FETÖ (Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization) is the name the government uses to refer to members of the Gülenist organization involved in the 2016 failed coup attempt.

⁵⁷ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'Speech at a meeting with EU member states' ambassadors in Ankara', 12 Jan. 2021 (author's translation).

⁵⁸ Smith and Youngs, 'The EU and the global order'; Pol Bargaúes, Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Rescuing the liberal international order: crisis, resilience and EU security policy', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2281–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad222>.

⁵⁹ Smith and Youngs, 'The EU and the global order'; Enrico Fassi, Michela Ceccorulli and Sonia Lucarelli, 'An illiberal power? EU bordering practices and the liberal world order', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2261–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad228>.

⁶⁰ Mark Langan, 'Budget support and Africa–European Union relations: free market reform and neo-colonialism?', *European Journal of International Relations* 21: 1, 2015, pp. 101–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113516813>.

⁶¹ Meera Sabaratnam and Mark Laffey, 'Complex indebtedness: justice and the crisis of the liberal order', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 161–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac233>.

⁶² Marie-Eve Bélanger and Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Politicisation and rebordering in EU enlargement: membership discourses in European parliaments', *Journal of European Public Policy* 28: 3, 2021, pp. 407–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1881584>.

⁶³ Federico Donelli, *Turkey in Africa* (London: IB Tauris, 2021).

mutual recognition in areas where the EU is failing to deliver. In order to have a better and fuller understanding of Turkey's contestation, however, we also need to look at its actual practices. In the following section I do not provide an exhaustive list of all Turkey's contestatory practices of the EU, but note those that are incurred precisely over the issue areas where Turkey's discursive contestation is most frequently observed to take place. More specifically, I am looking to see whether Turkey's contestatory practices of the EU in the areas of migration and development policy, and in the regional conflicts of the neighbourhood, are also underscored by the same understandings of global justice—or is there a different logic of action at work here?

Mapping contestation through practice: what does Turkey do?

Zooming in on Turkey's contestation through practice, I observe that Turkey indeed challenges the EU in all three areas, but that its contestation largely reflects an understanding of global justice as non-domination where state sovereignty and the pursuit of sovereign state interests constitute the main pillars of the international system.

Concerning development policy in the global South, Turkey emerges as a challenger to the EU in Africa in the sense that it instrumentalizes its own development policy to expand its trade and business linkages in the region at the expense of European actors.⁶⁴ Yet, despite discursively positioning itself as a benevolent actor as opposed to the self-interested colonial EU, it pursues its interests in the region through similar policies that are subject to its discursive contestation of the EU through the lens of global justice as mutual recognition. For instance, while it criticizes the EU for its self-interested approach to trade and aid, it uses aid as an instrument to enhance Turkey's business relations and to have privileged trading access in the region.⁶⁵ The type of relationships which it fosters with the countries of the region, also through its development policy, is mainly one of dependence, a criticism which it directs at former colonial powers. For example, it has been found that Turkey's mercantilist approach to trade contributes to depressing domestic entrepreneurial growth while its foreign direct investments have reportedly led to local job losses.⁶⁶ It has also been argued that especially after 2016, Turkish policies in the region have become increasingly more securitized, whereby it tries to expand its military presence and adopt 'a more assertive stance towards local enemies and regional competitors'.⁶⁷

As for migration policy, despite its rhetoric drawing from global justice as mutual recognition, Turkey has acted complicitly in the EU–Turkey migration deal of March 2016, which has been subject to heavy criticisms on grounds of legal

⁶⁴ Mark Langan, 'Virtuous power Turkey in sub-Saharan Africa: The 'Neo-Ottoman' challenge to the European Union', *Third World Quarterly* 38: 6, 2017, pp. 1399–414 at p. 1410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1229569>.

⁶⁵ Langan, 'Virtuous power Turkey in sub-Saharan Africa', p. 1407.

⁶⁶ Langan, 'Virtuous power Turkey in sub-Saharan Africa', pp. 1408–9.

⁶⁷ Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi and Federico Donelli, 'Turkey's changing engagement with the global South', *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1105–24 at p. 1110, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab093>.

and ethical legitimacy from the perspective of human rights and asylum law.⁶⁸ It has even expressed support for a revised version of the deal which builds on the current agreement.⁶⁹ Turkey's contestation of the deal has only been observed in the way of extracting concessions from the EU in exchange for the deal, such as more financial compensation and more importantly, quiet acquiescence to the government's steps towards authoritarianism.⁷⁰ Some scholars have defined this as 'refugee rent-seeking behaviour' on the part of Turkey, whereby it threatens 'to flood a target state(s) [in this instance the EU] with refugee populations within its borders, unless compensated'.⁷¹ Furthermore, despite the contestatory rhetoric, it has largely cooperated with European authorities, in particular FRONTEX, in enhancing its border security.⁷² Regarding the specific case of the Syrian refugees, despite the rhetorical emphasis on mutual recognition, it has so far refused to adopt a rights-based domestic discourse and policies towards the almost four million refugees that it is currently hosting.⁷³

Finally, and in relation to Turkey's discursive contestation of EU foreign policy on grounds of global justice as impartiality, especially in the second half of this decade, we see Turkey's contestation of the EU and/or its member states in the wider neighbourhood through the practice of an increasingly unilateral, transactional and nationalist foreign policy which emphasizes '[Turkey's] sovereign rights and prevailing bilateral agreements over multilateral ones' and does not shy away from projecting military power, which pits it against the EU and its member states, most notably France and Greece.⁷⁴ While it contests the EU for adopting a 'double-standard' approach to the promotion of democracy, Turkey's drastic turn away from democracy at the expense of its membership prospects coupled with its strong reaction to western criticisms on that front⁷⁵ display a fundamental inconsistency with its critiques of the EU on the grounds of impartiality. Why do we observe these stark inconsistencies between the logics underpinning Turkey's discursive and practice-based contestation of the EU, and what does this tell us about the drivers of contestation?

⁶⁸ Roman Lehner, 'The EU-Turkey-"deal": legal challenges and pitfalls', *International Migration* 57: 2, 2019, pp. 176-85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12462>.

⁶⁹ Handan Kazancı, 'Updated migration deal can revitalise EU-Turkey ties', Anadolu Agency, 19 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/-updated-migration-deal-can-revitalise-turkey-eu-ties-/2182048>.

⁷⁰ Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, 'De-centring the securitisation of asylum and migration in the European Union: securitisation, vulnerability and the role of Turkey', *Geopolitics* 27: 3, 2021, pp. 729-51 at p. 731, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1929183>.

⁷¹ Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'The Syrian refugee crisis and foreign policy decision-making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4: 4, 2019, pp. 464-81 at p. 465, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogzo16>.

⁷² Ebru Turhan and Ayselín Yıldız, 'Turkey's external differentiated integration with the EU in the field of migration governance: the case of border management', in Benjamin Leruth, Stefan Gänzle and Jarle Trondal, eds, *The Routledge handbook of differentiation in the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 502-18.

⁷³ Juliette Tolay, 'Inadvertent reproduction of Eurocentrism in IR: the politics of critiquing Eurocentrism', *Review of International Studies* 47: 5, 2021, pp. 692-713, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000176>.

⁷⁴ Hakkı Taş, 'The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean', *Mediterranean Politics* 27: 5, 2022, pp. 563-87 at p. 576, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1833160>.

⁷⁵ 'Erdogan threatens to expel 10 Western envoys', *Euractiv*, 22 Oct. 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/erdogan-threatens-to-expel-10-western-envoys>.

A consistent contesteer? Identifying the drivers behind contestation

My analysis demonstrates that when broken down into discourse and practice, Turkey's contestation of the EU displays a visible inconsistency in relation to the understanding of global justice which underpins the two. In line with the theoretical assumption that each understanding of global justice constitutes a consistent normative position in itself, the analysis thus attests that the major driver behind Turkey's contestation of the EU is pragmatic and hence interest-driven.

In this section of the article, I go one step further and show that the primary interest which underpins Turkey's contestation of the EU lies in domestic politics and the survival of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, Erdoğan, in power. I demonstrate that contestation is driven mainly by the centrality of an issue area to the government's survival prospects concerning *nationalism*, sustaining its form of *state capitalism*, and *domestic legitimacy*—the main constitutive pillars of the current governing regime. Hence, I expect more contestation over those issue areas that are considered by the government as central to its survival prospects.⁷⁶

In this context, Turkey's contestation of the EU in the global South can primarily be attributed to the government's need to carve up a space of influence in the region that would mainly contribute to the sustenance of its form of state capitalism and serve its nationalist agenda. This type of state capitalism relies heavily on sustaining a personalized network of capital accumulation and military aggrandizement.⁷⁷ As such, after the official declaration of 2005 and 2008 as the 'years of Africa' in Turkish foreign policy, the substantial rise in levels of official development assistance went hand in hand with a more than tenfold increase in Turkey's total trade volume in the region. Turkish exports to Africa increased by 11.51 per cent between 2002 and 2022, more than twice the increase in Turkey's overall trade over this period.⁷⁸ Turkey has also so far undertaken projects worth US\$78 billion on the continent.⁷⁹

Yet, it has mainly been the pro-government Turkish business community, meaning those that are affiliated with the governing party in the construction, manufacturing and business sectors, which has been the major beneficiary of Turkey's engagement in Africa.⁸⁰ In some cases, the government went as far as subcontracting humanitarian activities in the region to its preferred businesses in exchange for favourable state contracts.⁸¹ More recently, and enabled by the

⁷⁶ For a similar approach, see Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, 'Domestic politics, China's rise and the future of the liberal international order', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 635–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081832000048X>.

⁷⁷ Mustafa Kutlay, 'The politics of state capitalism in a post-liberal international order: the case of Turkey', *Third World Quarterly* 41: 4, 2019, pp. 683–706, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1699400>.

⁷⁸ Trade data were retrieved from the Turkish Statistical Institute, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=Dis-Ticaret-104>.

⁷⁹ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Türkiye–Afrika İlişkileri [Turkey–Africa relations]', <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-afrika-iliskileri.tr.mfa>.

⁸⁰ Charlie Mitchell, 'Erdoğan's ambition drives Turkey's Africa surge', *African Business*, 17 March 2021, <https://african.business/2021/03/trade-investment/erdogans-ambition-drives-turkeys-africa-surge>.

⁸¹ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, 'Building a competitive authoritarian regime: state-business relations in the AKP's Turkey', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20: 4, 2018, pp. 349–72 at p. 362, <https://doi.org/10.1>

changes in regional security patterns in the wider region between 2015 and 2020,⁸² Turkey also began to increase its military presence and engage in weapons sales on the continent. The growth of the Turkish domestic defence industry in the last decade, also dominated by pro-government firms, necessitates and enables an expansionist foreign policy. On his visits to the continent, Erdoğan is now almost always accompanied by pro-government business leaders from the defence industry, alongside construction and other sectors, and these visits often result in arms sales agreements.⁸³ The military presence, in turn, feeds into the domestic nationalist narrative which legitimizes the party's claims to making Turkey an assertive and leading player on the global stage.⁸⁴ It is this context within which Turkey's contestation of the EU in the region should be interpreted. The discursive contestation which draws from an understanding of global justice as mutual recognition can thus be explained as a strategic tool to discredit actions and presence of the EU and its member states in the region and to carve a space within which the Turkish government can maximize its domestic gains at home.

A similar drive can be observed behind Turkey's contestatory practices of the EU through the migration deal of March 2016. The first major threat to annul the deal and to allow the free movement of refugees into the EU came later that same year, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, by way of silencing the EU's criticisms towards massive purges and increased repression in the country; and during the constitutional referendum campaign in 2017, when several EU member states cancelled local rallies organized by the Turkish government in support of the referendum for a presidential system.⁸⁵ The threats on both occasions paid off in that there was a gradual toning down of the EU's criticisms of Turkey's democratic violations,⁸⁶ culminating in an official visit by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the run-up to the constitutional referendum. Merkel's visit was heavily criticized by the Turkish opposition for providing Erdoğan with support and legitimacy at a turning point in the fate of Turkish democracy.⁸⁷ Contestation reached a peak in February 2020 after a Russian airstrike killed 33 Turkish soldiers in the Syrian province of Idlib, after which the Turkish government actively encouraged and organized for the transport of refugees to the Turkish–Greek border.⁸⁸ The government justified its position by referring to the lack of European support for Turkey's policies in Syria; by doing that, it also attempted to divert the domestic

080/19448953.2018.1385924.

⁸² Levaggi and Donelli, 'Turkey's changing engagement with the global South', pp. 1117–8.

⁸³ Kate Hairsine and Burak Ünveren, 'Turkey deepens its defense diplomacy in Africa', Deutsche Welle, 28 Oct. 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-deepens-its-defense-diplomacy-in-africa/a-63586344>.

⁸⁴ See also Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 'Unusual middle power activism and regime survival'.

⁸⁵ Leonard and Kaunert, 'De-centring the securitisation of asylum and migration in the European Union', pp. 741–2.

⁸⁶ Beken Saatçioğlu, 'The European Union's refugee crisis and rising functionalism in EU–Turkey relations', *Turkish Studies* 21: 2, 2020, pp. 169–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2019.1586542>.

⁸⁷ 'President Erdoğan to present Merkel visit as show of support: main opposition leader', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 Feb. 2017, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-to-present-merkel-visit-as-show-of-support-main-opposition-leader-109171>.

⁸⁸ Amnesty International, 'Europe: Caught in a political game: asylum-seekers and migrants on the Greece/Turkey border pay the price for Europe's failures', 3 April 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/euro1/2077/2020/en>.

outrage away from itself.⁸⁹ The issue was finally resolved when both sides agreed on the financial compensation package to Turkey, which resulted in the dispersion of the entire EU budget for the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) as well as some additional EU funding.⁹⁰ Hence Turkey's contestatory practices of the EU through the migration deal and the issue of the Syrian refugees were primarily directed towards securing additional funds in an ailing economy—driven by the need for capital in helping to sustain Turkey's model of state capitalism—as well as strengthening the government's legitimacy during times where its domestic and foreign policy was challenged on the inside,⁹¹ as in the run-up to the constitutional referendum and in the aftermath of the casualties suffered in Idlib. On the other hand, the discursive contestation drawing from an understanding of global justice as mutual recognition was instrumental in providing Turkey with the moral high ground, while pushing the EU for further concessions on different fronts.

Finally, Turkey's contestatory practices towards Europe in the wider neighbourhood cannot be explained without recourse to Turkey's turn towards a more extreme form of anti-western nationalism in domestic politics. That shift followed the failed peace process with the Kurds in 2015 and the ensuing formation of a coalition between the ruling AKP and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in the aftermath of the general election of June 2015. The dispute between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus over maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean long predates the AKP governments. Even though the most recent rift was mainly precipitated by the discovery of natural gas reserves in the region in 2009, the escalation of the dispute into a full-scale multinational conflict also involving the EU mainly occurred after 2015.⁹² This conflict was enabled partly by the shifting regional balances, in particular after the Libyan civil war. Yet each instance of escalation by Turkey, such as its dispatch of drilling ships and research vessels to Cypriot waters, has been domestically voiced at the highest level as the expression of Turkish popular sovereignty, an assertive and independent foreign policy, protection of its borders and its just fight against the West.⁹³

Hence the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as others involving disputes with various western powers besides the EU (such as the US in Syria), has been effectively used by the government to 'create a sense of "we-ness" and consolidate [the AKP] base' behind the government and against 'imperial powers' whose reach extended to domestic opposition.⁹⁴ While Turkey's contestatory practices of the EU and its member states in the eastern Mediterranean can be read through the prism of the rise of nationalism and nationalist foreign policy,

⁸⁹ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, 'Erdogan's refugee gambit', European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 March 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_erdogans_refugee_gambit.

⁹⁰ Léonard and Kaunert, 'De-centring the securitisation of asylum and migration in the European Union', p. 745.

⁹¹ Hakkı Taş, 'Continuity through change: populism and foreign policy in Turkey', *Third World Quarterly* 43: 12, 2022, pp. 2869–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2108392>.

⁹² Taş, 'The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy', p. 576.

⁹³ Taş, 'The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy', pp. 576–80.

⁹⁴ Sandra Destradi, Johannes Plagemann and Hakkı Taş, 'Populism and the politicisation of foreign policy', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 475–92 at p. 488, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221075944>.

discursive contestation drawing from the language of global justice as impartiality was instrumentalized to gain international legitimacy⁹⁵ and weaken the EU and its member states' claims in the region. Furthermore, the contestatory discourse on impartiality, with particular reference to the EU's disregard for democracy in countries like Libya and Egypt, also served the purpose of weakening the EU's claim to international democracy in authoritarian states like Turkey.

Conclusion

The standard expectation that middle powers generally support the LIO is now increasingly under question. This article has shown that emerging middle powers under the authoritarian turn contest the LIO mainly out of concerns for regime security, where the centrality of an issue area to the government's survival prospects is a key factor which determines whether contestation will occur. The article has also demonstrated that this contestation is underpinned by multiple justice claims, incurred through both discourse and practice. These powers can discursively attack the legitimacy of the LIO by underlining its constituents' failures in attaining global justice, understood as upholding moral duties towards citizens extending beyond their borders and those who suffer from structural inequalities and historical injustices in the international order. They also contest the LIO through their practices, but through a minimal understanding of global justice as non-domination, whereby they seek the preservation of state sovereignty and the pursuit of sovereign state interests.

I have illustrated these arguments through an empirical study of Turkey's contestation of the EU, considering Turkey as an authoritarian emerging middle power which is subject to the EU's liberal intrusiveness both as a formal accession country and as a neighbouring state. First, through a qualitative content analysis of President Erdoğan's discourse, I have shown how Turkey targets the legitimacy of the EU at the regional and global level, by drawing on a language that highlights the EU's failure to impartially uphold its moral duties to citizens both within and beyond its borders on matters of democracy and human rights, as well as to refugees and former colonized countries of the global South, that are structurally less advantaged in the international system. Second, I have demonstrated how Turkey's practices of contestation in the same issue areas of development, migration and foreign policy that are subjects of its discursive contestation, are made with a view to pursue the sovereign interests of the Turkish state without outside interference, without bearing on impartiality or mutual recognition. In the third and the final sections of the empirical analysis, I have identified the main driver behind Turkey's contestation as the centrality of the issue area to regime security in relation to the three constitutive pillars of the current regime, namely nationalism, state capitalism and domestic legitimacy.

⁹⁵ Cüneyt Özşahin and Cenap Çakmak, 'Between defeating "the warlord" and defending "the blue homeland": a discourse of legitimacy and security in Turkey's Libya policy', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2089545>.

In connecting the concept of middle powerhood with the study of contestations of the LIO through the case of Turkey and the EU, the article engaged with and made contributions to a diverse set of literatures. In conceptual terms, by building on the recent literature on middle powers, it has shown that understanding where and how other authoritarian emerging middle powers choose to contest the LIO requires a close focus on how their area(s) of contestation relate to the constitutive pillars of regime security in these states. From a policy-related standpoint, given that democratic backsliding is on the rise in various emerging middle powers such as Mexico, South Africa and Indonesia, among others, this implies that international democracy support which is tailored to the individual regime dynamics of these states is of key importance in minimizing the prospects of contestation by these powers. The article has also built on the theoretical literature on contestation in IR and legitimacy in global governance to show that these powers do not just contest the LIO via their policy practices, but also through their discourses which target and attack the legitimacy of the existing order and its constituents where they fail to practice what they preach. By placing the EU at the centre of contestation, the study has also contributed to the literature on European foreign policy, particularly regarding the ways in which the EU enables third-party contestation of its actions by resorting to an increasingly contingent and frequently inconsistent liberal foreign policy agenda. The gaps between the EU's self-proclaimed rhetoric as the vanguard of the LIO and its actual practices arguably makes the EU more vulnerable to discursive contestation by third parties that seek to weaken its legitimacy as an international actor in pursuit of their own interests.

