

Balancing Sovereignty, Solidarity and EU Discourse: Türkiye's Contradictory Approaches to Kurdish Autonomy and Palestinian Rights

Zozan Arslan

r-0888002

Master of Arts in European Studies: Transnational and Global Perspectives

Supervisor: prof. dr. Vera Hajto (promotor)

Academic year 2024-2025

10.932 words



*Copyright Information:
student paper as part of an academic education
and examination.*

*No correction was made to the paper
after examination.*

I hereby declare that, in line with the Faculty of Arts' code of conduct for research integrity, the work submitted here is my own original work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Literature Review	7
2.1 Research in the broader academic discussion	7
2.1.1 Contradictory Perspectives on the Kurdish Minority in Türkiye: Marginalization versus Political Inclusion	7
2.1.2 Contradictory Perspectives on the Palestinian-Turkish relations: Diplomatic Leadership vs. Political Opportunism	8
2.1.3 The Role of the EU in Turkish Foreign Policy: Between Human Rights and Geopolitical Pragmatism	9
2.2 Conceptual framework: Minority Recognition and Self-Identification	10
2.3 Theoretical Framework	11
2.3.1 Theory of political conditionality	11
2.3.2 Theory of the Two-Level Game	12
3. Methodology	13
4. Analysis	14
4.1 Language and Framing of Violence	14
4.1.1 Framing of Kurdish violence	14
4.1.2 Shift in EU Tone: From Restraint to Condemnation	15
4.1.3 Gaza and Hamas: Moral Urgency versus Diplomatic Condemnation	16
4.2 Actor Positioning and Moral Self-Presentation in EU-Türkiye Discourse	17
4.2.1 Diplomatic Caution and Symbolic Endorsement	17
4.2.2 The EU's Normative Identity and Legal Framing	18
4.2.3 Türkiye's Internal Narrative: Brotherhood and Inclusion	18
4.3 Strategic Silence: The Power of Omission in EU-Türkiye Discourse	20
4.3.1 The EU's Ambiguous Discourse on Minority Rights	20
4.3.2 Denial of the Kurdish Question in Turkish Political Rhetoric	21
4.3.3 Silences and Accusations in the Gaza Discourse	22
5. Conclusion	24
6. Bibliography:	24

Abstract

This master's thesis examines the paradoxical attitude of Türkiye towards domestic repression and international solidarity, with a specific focus on the Kurdish question and the Palestinian cause in the context of EU-Türkiye relations between 2009 and 2025. Through critical discourse analysis, it analyses how the European Union responds to Turkish policies and rhetoric regarding Kurdish autonomy and Palestinian self-determination. The central research question is: "How does the European Union respond to Türkiye's discourse and policy on the Kurdish issue (2012-2025) and Palestinian self-determination (2009-2025) and what do these responses suggest about the EU's approach to Türkiye's political positioning?" The analysis is based on primary sources such as official EU documents, speeches by President Erdoğan, parliamentary reports and statements by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The findings show that the EU applies its political conditionality inconsistently: on the one hand, it remains vague about the domestic repression of Kurds, while on the other hand, it is sharp in its criticism of Türkiye's support for Hamas. Drawing on Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's theory of political conditionality and Putnam's Two-Level Game theory, it is shown that both the EU and Türkiye strategically align their discourses with domestic and international interests. This study contributes to the existing literature by placing both the domestic Kurdish dossier and foreign Palestinian diplomacy in a single analytical framework, and shows how discursive asymmetries and strategic silences contribute to a difficult but pragmatic relationship.

1. Introduction

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Türkiye has been characterized for decades by the principle of political conditionality, with democratic norms, human rights and respect for minorities as preconditions for accession to the EU. This principle means that countries wishing to join the EU must meet certain political conditions. Within this framework, both the domestic policy treatment of the Kurdish population and international support for Palestinian self-determination are two notable pillars of Turkish policy. The EU has been explicitly critical of Türkiye's Kurdish domestic policy for years, but has barely responded to the country's increasingly assertive pro-Palestinian stance. This contradiction raises questions about the EU's consistency as a normative actor.

The Kurdish question is deeply embedded in Türkiye's modern political history. The Kurds are an ethnic group with their own language and culture, and with over 30 million people they are one of the largest stateless peoples in the world (Council of Europe, 2006). During the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922) they enjoyed a certain autonomy, but with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Atatürk pursued a policy of nationalist assimilation. The İskân Kanunu (1934), for example, aimed to disperse and assimilate non-Turkish populations (Yeşiltuna, 2006). During the twentieth century, the emphasis on Turkish language and culture led to structural exclusion of Kurdish identity, resulting in violent confrontations, particularly since the rise of the armed movement Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) in the 1980s, which led to military operations and repression (Tocci, 2005). A recent example is the attack on Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAS) by the PKK in October 2024, followed by mass arrests of suspected PKK members (Al Jazeera, 2024).

International attention to this issue grew particularly in light of Türkiye's EU candidate status. Türkiye has been seeking EU membership for over 30 years, but access has been hampered by concerns about human rights, particularly regarding the treatment of the Kurdish minority. However, the EU does not formally recognize the Kurdish population in Türkiye as a national minority unless the country itself recognizes that group as a minority. Although the EU had been explicitly addressing the Kurdish issue prior to 2012, the 2012 Progress Report marked a turning point in tone and focus. For the first time, direct reference was made to the Roboski airstrike, which killed 34 Kurdish civilians in 2011. This moment became emblematic of broader concerns about Türkiye's counter-terrorism rhetoric and the tensions it raises with democratic accountability and the rule of law (European Commission, 2012). In the years that followed, the EU increasingly focused on the repression of Kurdish politicians, activists and journalists, as evidenced by the European Parliament's 2023 (EP) resolution criticizing mass arrests in the run-up to the Turkish elections (European Parliament, 2023).

At the same time, Türkiye developed a foreign policy centered on Palestinian self-determination. President Erdoğan repeatedly spoke out in favor of the Palestinian cause and openly criticized Israel in international forums such as the United Nations General Assembly:

"I also invite other states, that have not yet done so, to recognize the State of Palestine as soon as possible and take their place on the right side of history at this very critical period," President Erdogan said." (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2024, p. 1).

Israel-Türkiye relations deteriorated after incidents such as Davos (2009), this confrontation is considered a turning point in Türkiye's pro-Palestinian diplomacy. Erdoğan reacted strongly to Israeli President Peres over the Israeli military action in Gaza at the World Economic Forum. Erdoğan angrily left the stage after being denied the opportunity to speak, in a move that was hailed nationally as an act of moral courage (Engin & Şener, 2010). Following the escalation of the conflict in October 2023, Türkiye imposed a full trade boycott on Israel in May 2024, this is the first time Türkiye has taken such a far-reaching measure for political reasons that are not directly related to Turkish foreign policy or national borders (Mann, 2024). Contrary to the common assumption that the EU is consistently critical of Türkiye's domestic policies but silent on its foreign policies, the analysis will reveal a more fluctuating EU discourse. At certain moments, the EU avoids strong criticism on Kurdish issues, while using strong language regarding Türkiye's involvement with Hamas. This variation suggests that the EU discourse is not uniform, but shifts depending on the political context and priorities.

This study does not examine isolated statements by President Erdoğan, but focuses on the broader way in which the EU responds to Türkiye's discourse and policies on the Kurdish issue on the one hand, and the Palestinian cause on the other. The EU does not respond explicitly or systematically to public statements by President Erdoğan. Therefore, this study does not attempt to construct bilateral interaction where none is demonstrably present. Instead, the discursive positions of Türkiye and the EU are juxtaposed to identify discursive asymmetries. It does so by using the concept of political conditionality, and a discourse analysis of EU progress reports, EP resolutions and Erdoğan's public speeches. By using a comparative approach, it examines whether the EU applies its normative standards in a consistent manner, or whether its responses are partly shaped by geopolitical interests. This leads to the central research question:

“How does the European Union respond to Türkiye's discourse and policy on the Kurdish issue (2012-2025) and Palestinian self-determination (2009-2025) and what do these responses suggest about the EU's approach to Türkiye's political positioning?”

This thesis uses the time period 2009–2025 for the Palestinian question, as the Davos crisis in 2009 marked a major turning point in Türkiye's rhetorical stance. For the Kurdish question, the time period 2012–2025 is used, as 2012 marks the beginning of a discursive shift in Türkiye's domestic narrative, despite symbolic precursors such as the Roboski airstrike in late 2011. These different timelines reflect the different pace at which rhetorical shifts unfolded in both cases. Although these events are not the central object of analysis, they serve as symbolic landmarks for examining the evolution of Turkish discourse and the EU response to it. The research shows how the EU applies its political conditionality inconsistently and how Türkiye constructs different narratives for domestic and international audiences. While previous research has often been limited to either Kurdish domestic politics or Türkiye's Palestinian diplomacy, this thesis offers a rare comparative perspective on how both themes are constructed and contested within the same EU–Türkiye discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research in the broader academic discussion

2.1.1 Contradictory Perspectives on the Kurdish Minority in Türkiye: Marginalization versus Political Inclusion

Dr. M. Hakan Yavuz and Büşra Ersanlı offer different perspectives on the position of the Kurdish minority in Türkiye. Yavuz & Özcan examine primarily on elections and dynamics surrounding the HDP/PKK, which points to the tense relationship between the HDP and the PKK (Yavuz & Özcan, 2015). The Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) is a Turkish left-wing progressive and pro-Kurdish political party founded in 2012; it is best known as the political voice of many Kurds in Türkiye. After the June 2015 elections, PKK violence escalated, eroding trust in the HDP. The HDP's reluctance to publicly condemn the PKK was seen by many voters as complicity, leading to a loss of support in the November elections. They emphasize how the PKK's dominant role led to restrictions on legitimate Kurdish political movements. According to them, state policies portray Kurdish identity as a threat, leading to the political strategic playing field of elections and how Kurds returned to Erdoğan's party the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) instead of the PKK out of fear of violence (Yavuz & Özcan, 2015). This placed Kurds in a position of structural disadvantage and hampered their political representation.

From this perspective, addressing the Kurdish issue demands not only policy but fundamental institutional reforms. According to Yavuz & Özcan, the success of Kurdish parties relies less on mobilization around ethnic identity, and more on pragmatic alliances and political moderation, such as seeking cooperation with other opposition parties and pursuing a broad socio-economic agenda instead of exclusive Kurdish nationalism. They see this as essential for ensuring long-term stability and increasing the influence of Kurdish parties within the Turkish political landscape (Yavuz & Özcan, 2015). This marginalization approach finds support in Karakoç and Özen (2020), who analyze how public opinion among Kurds in Türkiye has developed. They demonstrate that systematic exclusion of Kurds from the political process has led to an increase in support for opposition movements, including pro-Kurdish parties. They emphasize that as long as the state continues to restrict Kurdish political participation, radicalization and political polarization among Kurdish citizens will escalate (Karakoç & Özen, 2020). Both studies frame Kurdish marginalization as a consequence of state policies.

Ersanlı, on the other hand, explores the changing dynamics of Kurdish political participation in Türkiye. In her analysis, she argues that there was an increasing visibility of Kurdish political actors in recent decades, despite state repression and attacks (Ersanlı & Özdoğan, 2011). While acknowledging that discrimination remains a factor, she contends that the Kurdish question is not only a problem of state marginalization, but also an institutional problem with external factors, like mobilization. Indeed, the level of public support for Kurdish political participation varies and depends on socio-economic factors. According to Ersanlı, the solution is not only more rights for Kurds, but also broader reforms in Turkish democracy that better protect minorities in general (Ersanlı & Özdoğan, 2011). Kaya (2013) reinforces this argument, he argues that Kurdish political participation depends not only on government policies, but also on internal mobilization and coalitions with other political groups. Kaya highlights that some Kurds consciously choose to integrate within existing Turkish political structures, while others continue to resist the state. This suggests that Kurdish political agency is not monolithic but rather shaped by diverse strategies. This creates a complex dynamic in which not all Kurds demand the same degree of autonomy and cultural recognition (Kaya, 2013).

Overall, while Yavuz and Karakoç emphasize structural marginalization and the need for state reforms, Ersanlı and Kaya focus on the internal diversity within the Kurdish community and the role of political alliances in expanding their influence. While the EU focuses on formal reforms, such as party freedom, structural exclusion, as described by Yavuz, Karakoç and Ersanlı, it remains insufficiently addressed as we will show later in our analysis.

2.1.2 Contradictory Perspectives on the Palestinian-Turkish relations: Diplomatic Leadership vs. Political Opportunism

The role of Türkiye in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under the AKP regime is characterized by divergent perspectives. On the one hand, some academics view Türkiye as a diplomatic leader with humanitarian commitment, while others see AKP policy as strategic opportunism driven by domestic and regional interests. According to Oğuz Gök (2020), during the first decade of the AKP government, Türkiye explicitly positioned itself as a humanitarian actor in the region. The rise of humanitarian diplomacy, with NGOs such as IHH as key figures, was used to exercise soft power, especially in Gaza. The IHH (İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı) is a Turkish Islamic-oriented NGO focusing on humanitarian aid worldwide, with a particular emphasis on Islamic solidarity. This strategy was not only ideologically motivated, but also aimed at strengthening Türkiye's international reputation and increasing domestic support (Gök, 2020). Humanitarian aid and diplomacy were instrumentally deployed to profile Türkiye as a moral leader in the Middle East.

Atmaca & Torun (2022) offer a different theoretical framework. They argue that the AKP government operated under competing geopolitical visions, including neo-Ottomanism and Eurasianism. Support for Palestine can be understood here as part of a broader ideological agenda and an attempt to expand influence in the Islamic world (Atmaca & Torun, 2022). This geopolitical imagination functions not only as foreign policy, but also as a strategy for internal legitimation. Yet others, such as Bozorgmehri & Hosseini (2020), criticize this approach as politically motivated. They argue that AKP policy toward Palestine was often symbolic and not accompanied by real policy breaks, as evidenced by its continued economic ties with Israel. In their view, the Palestinian issue is used by the AKP as a silver bullet to gain electoral and regional influence (Bozorgmehri & Hosseini, 2020).

This view is supported by Altunışık and Cuhadar (2010), who point out that support for Palestine was often used as a means to gain public opinion in the Arab world. Popularity in the region became more important than effective conflict resolution, and support for Hamas was both ideologically and strategically motivated (Altunışık & Cuhadar, 2010). Although the humanitarian efforts such as infrastructure projects and emergency aid were real, questions remain about their true motivations. The close cooperation between the AKP regime and Islamic-oriented NGOs such as IHH shows that humanitarian action was often accompanied by political motives, such as strengthening the AKP's role as protector of the Muslim community.

2.1.3 The Role of the EU in Turkish Foreign Policy: Between Human Rights and Geopolitical Pragmatism

These divergent approaches to the Palestinian issue also mirror the EU-Türkiye relationship. While Türkiye actively profiles itself as a defender of Palestine, the EU's stance is shaped by its cautious diplomacy towards Israel, balancing between criticism and pragmatic cooperation with Türkiye. The EU has linked Türkiye's accession negotiations to reforms around democracy, human rights, and minorities, with a special focus on the rights of the Kurdish minority. According to Aktoprak (2010), this pressure resulted in reforms, such as allowing Kurdish language broadcasts and education programs, but it remained unclear to what extent these adjustments brought structural improvements (Aktoprak, 2010). Nevertheless, the EU recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, which complicates its position on the Kurdish question. Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel (2024) point out that the EU is in a dual position: on the one hand, it demands more political rights for Kurds, while on the other hand, it supports the Turkish state in its fight against terrorism. The EU is caught between supporting Türkiye's security policy and its human rights agenda and this limits the EU's influence, as Türkiye prioritizes its national security over EU pressure (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). In addition, the Kurdish issue is becoming politically sensitive within EU countries themselves. Some European countries, such as Belgium, are home to Kurdish diaspora communities that provide political support to the PKK. This has led to tensions in diplomatic relations between Türkiye and the EU, with Türkiye regularly accusing European countries of tolerating or even protecting 'terrorist groups' (Aktoprak, 2010).

The EU supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and serves as one of the largest humanitarian donors to the Palestinian Authority (European Commission, 2023). However, the European diplomatic approach differs from that of Türkiye. As Bozorgmehri & Hosseini (2020) demonstrate, Türkiye takes a confrontational stance on the Palestinian issue, particularly through its public support for Hamas and criticism of Israel. This contrasts with the EU and its response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterized by a cautious, stability-oriented approach, often avoiding direct criticism of Israel. Instead, the EU relied on humanitarian assistance and diplomatic mechanisms, partly due to internal divisions and geopolitical interests (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). These internal divisions stem from geopolitical interests, ideological differences and divergent public opinions within EU member states, with some countries prioritizing strategic partnerships with Israel, while others emphasize human rights and international law (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024).

In its relations with Türkiye, the EU has never imposed harsh sanctions based on Türkiye's support for Hamas, while it does exert political pressure on domestic issues such as freedom of press and Kurdish rights (European Commission, 2023). This again demonstrates the EU's geopolitical ambiguity, where economic and diplomatic interests are often placed above consistent human rights principles. This thesis contributes to the academic literature by demonstrating how the EU's discourse fluctuates between normative consistency and geopolitical pragmatism. By mapping these discursive peaks and valleys and linking them to contextual factors, this study builds on previous research on Kurdish marginalization, Palestinian self-determination and EU strategic narratives (Yavuz & Özcan, 2015; Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024).

2.2 Conceptual framework: Minority Recognition and Self-Identification

In this thesis, the concept of minorities is central to analyzing how the EU influences Türkiye's political stance towards the Kurdish minority in domestic policy and the Palestinian issue in foreign policy. In order to determine who is considered a minority, the thesis uses one legal definition and one legal instrument that emphasizes different aspects of minority status, in addition there is also an academic definition about national minorities. According to Šmihula (2009), a national minority is often defined as a group that is numerically smaller than the rest of the population, does not hold a dominant position, and has cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic characteristics that differ from the majority. In addition, members of the group show a will to maintain their own identity and are usually citizens of the state in which they live. An extra criterion is that the group has been present on the territory for a long time, which distinguishes 'traditional minorities' from recent immigrants (Šmihula, 2009).

The legal definition of the concept of minority in international law is complex and subject to debate. However, an influential study by Francesco Capotorti for the United Nations offers a workable interpretation. According to Capotorti, a minority is "a group numerically smaller than the rest of the population of the State to which it belongs and possessing cultural, physical or historical characteristics, a religion or a language different from those of the rest of the population" (Capotorti, 1979, p. 7). This definition emphasizes both the objective characteristics, such as language and culture, and the distinction from the majority of the state population. Capotorti's approach has since become an important starting point in the international debate on the protection of minorities.

The legal instrument is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM). This legal instrument does not provide a strict definition of a national minority, Article 3 states that individuals have the right to identify themselves as a minority without suffering any disadvantages. On the other hand, the Explanatory Report (paragraph 12) recognizes that the concept of minorities depends on the national context, and that states themselves determine which groups are recognized as minorities (Council of Europe, 1995). This is at odds with Article 3 of the FCPNM. This instrument is relevant to this study because it shows that the recognition of minorities is subject to political and legal interpretation. Türkiye does not recognize the Kurds as a national minority within its constitutional framework.

As Akgönül (2013) also argues, in the Turkish context, recognition of a group as a minority is not a neutral legal process, but a state controlled political mechanism. While the FCPNM argues that self-identification is central, Akgönül points out that in Türkiye this recognition is not applied to Muslim groups such as the Kurds despite clear cultural and linguistic differences (Akgönül, 2013). This recognition is restricted and politicized in Türkiye, limiting formal recognition only to non-Muslim groups under the Treaty of Lausanne. By incorporating these concepts into the analysis, this study examines how the EU's emphasis on minority rights particularly the right to self-identification influenced Türkiye's political discourse and policymaking. In addition, the Palestinian issue in Türkiye's foreign policy is analyzed within this conceptual framework to highlight the contrast between Türkiye's external advocacy for minority rights and its domestic policies towards the Kurds. Although Palestinians are not a minority within Türkiye, Türkiye positions itself as a defender of Palestinian rights on the international stage, often invoking human rights.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Theory of political conditionality

The theory of political conditionality, as elaborated by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, provides an important basis for this study of the influence of the EU on the policies of candidate countries or long-term candidates such as Türkiye. In their work, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier analyze how the EU exerts external pressure to promote policy adjustments, often through a reward for compliance model, where tangible benefits are linked to compliance with EU rules (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). This framework provides insight for understanding the inconsistencies in Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies.

Building on this theory, political conditionality is defined as the setting of political conditions by an external actor in exchange for benefits, such as access to markets or membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). The core of political conditionality is based on the external incentives model, in which states are motivated to adopt EU rules if the benefits of compliance outweigh the costs of adjustment (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). This is a rational model that predicts compliance based on cost-benefit analysis by the target state.

The model focuses on four factors that determine the effectiveness of policy adjustment. Firstly, the determinacy of conditions, where the more specific and legally binding the rules, the more likely compliance is (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). This means that clear and concrete requirements ensure fewer differences in interpretation and greater compliance. A second factor is the size and speed of the rewards, where faster and more substantial rewards increase the likelihood of policy adjustment. A third factor is the credibility of conditionality, where a credible reward or punishment is crucial for success (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Finally, the veto players and adoption costs, where higher costs for domestic actors reduce the likelihood of compliance. If people are in favor of the change, it will cost less to implement that change. There will be less resistance, and the process will be smoother. If not, the implementation will be more expensive. If the threat of sanctions is not taken seriously or if promises are not kept, this can undermine the effectiveness of conditionality.

Additionally, there is a lack in the model as it focuses primarily on formal compliance rather than effective implementation, leading to risks of backsliding after external pressure has disappeared (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Türkiye has experienced external pressure from the EU over the years to improve its human rights practices. This could include improving the minority treatment issue of Kurds and ending the repression of Kurdish political movements (Tocci, 2005). But backsliding could occur when external pressure subsides leading to Türkiye possibly reverting to repressing the Kurdish minority.

The literature on political conditionality includes several debates on its effectiveness. While external pressure frequently influences democratic regimes, its success varies with context, especially in authoritarian systems. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) distinguish two forms of political conditionality: democratic and acquis conditionality. The first focuses on compliance with democratic norms such as human rights and the rule of law, while the second revolves around the adoption of the EU acquis, EU legislation and policies. Compliance with these laws ensures that the country can function effectively within the EU framework (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Therefore, the theory of political conditionality is considered a very useful tool to analyze the inconsistent deployment of EU pressure on Türkiye's policy.

2.3.2 Theory of the Two-Level Game

Robert D. Putnam introduced a groundbreaking framework for analyzing the interplay of domestic and international politics in negotiations. Putnam distinguishes two levels of negotiations, with level I being the international level. Here, national governments negotiate international agreements with other countries. Level II is the national level, so the same governments must have these agreements approved by domestic interest groups, legislators, or the public (Putnam 1998). Putnam argues that there are dual pressures, national leaders are under pressure from both international partners and domestic stakeholders. What is rational at the international level can be politically difficult at national level, and vice versa. He talks about win-sets, which are the set of international agreements that can also be approved at the national level. The larger the win-set, the greater the chance of an agreement, but the smaller the domestic negotiating power. International pressure can sometimes make domestic reforms possible that would otherwise be politically impossible. At the same time, internal political constraints can limit a leader's flexibility in international negotiations. The theory emphasizes that successful diplomacy often depends on a clever balance between domestic politics and international strategy.

The core concepts of Putnam's theory are essential to understanding the complexity of the model, such as a win-set, which is the set of all possible international agreements that can receive sufficient domestic approval. The size of the win-set determines both the probability of agreement and the distribution of power advantages in negotiations (Putnam, 1988). He also talks about the issue-linkage, a strategy of linking multiple policy issues to create collaborations that increase the win-set by satisfying multiple domestic interest groups (Putnam, 1988). In addition to the concepts of win-sets and issue-linkage, Putnam also introduces the idea of synergistic linkage, whereby international negotiations can be used to implement internal policy changes that would be politically unachievable without external pressure. This mechanism underscores how national leaders can leverage international obligations to push through domestic reforms. In some cases, international pressure provides legitimacy for policy decisions that would otherwise encounter resistance from domestic stakeholders. This phenomenon was evident, for example, in the 1978 Bonn Accord, where national governments used international economic agreements to overcome internal political obstacles. In this way, Putnam's theory not only illustrates the tensions between the two levels of negotiation, but also how international agreements can be used strategically to influence domestic reform processes (Putnam, 1988).

Putnam's theory has generated debate about how leaders navigate domestic constraints and international opportunities. While acknowledging that domestic institutions limit leaders' power, questions remain about whether smaller states can better leverage constraints for stronger international outcomes (Putnam, 1988). However, this thesis uses Putnam, because his greatest contribution lies in integrating domestic politics into the analysis of international relations. Putnam's two-level game explains how Türkiye balanced international expectations against domestic constraints. Concepts such as credibility, win-sets, and issue linkage guide the analysis of how the Turkish government strategically deployed both incidents to avoid compliance and enhance internal legitimacy.

3. Methodology

In this research design, qualitative and critical discourse analysis is the central method. This method of analysis is particularly suited to investigate how political actors construct narratives of legitimacy, justice and sovereignty. This thesis analyzes discursive asymmetries and rhetorical strategies across a timeline (2009/2012-2025) focusing on Türkiye's Kurdish question and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the context of the EU-Türkiye relations.

As Gee (2005) emphasizes, discourse is not just about language use, but about how language produces and reproduces social practices, identities and ideologies. Discourse analysis therefore makes it possible to trace how institutional texts strategically construct or conceal meaning within political contexts. This thesis applies discourse analysis along three analytical dimensions. First, it looks at word choice and framing, to analyze how key terms such as 'massacre' are used or avoided. Secondly, it examines the construction of actors: how do political actors present themselves and frame others in their discourse. Third, it specifically focuses on omissions and silences in discourse, to reveal strategic gaps in communication. This approach is inspired by previous studies that emphasize similar dimensions within political discourse, including the strategic use of framing (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), actor construction (Skillington, 1997), and the analytical value of omissions and silences (Schröter, 2014). Each primary source will be closely read and coded for recurring themes, terminologies, and rhetorical strategies. The analysis focuses on the following sub-questions: How is violence discursively framed? Which actors are morally positioned? What is explicitly concealed or neutralized? Although the EU rarely responds explicitly to specific statements by Erdoğan, a comparison between themes in both discourses allows to identify discursive responses through silences, reframing or ideological distance.

For overview and analytical clarity, the primary sources analyzed are divided into two categories. The first category are official EU documents that form a central part of this analysis, in particular the European Commission (EC) Progress Reports on Türkiye (2012 & 2024) and reports of the EP, including the 2022 EP Resolution on Türkiye, the Minutes of the 61st EU-Türkiye Joint Parliamentary Committee (2009) and Motion B10-0115/2025. These documents are analyzed to explore how the EU discursively shapes its political conditionality, how it (in)actively responds to developments in Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies, and how omissions, word choices and narrative strategies are deployed in the EU-Türkiye relationship. The second category are primary Turkish sources, such as President Erdoğan's speech on Roboski in Parliament on May 30, 2012, quoted in Daily Sabah, and his speech on Gaza at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on March 1, 2025, published by the Directorate of Communications. His speech to the AKP parliamentary group on October 30, 2023, as well as his speech to the UN Security Council on Gaza on February 28, 2024, both officially published by the Directorate of Communications and the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye respectively, have also been consulted. Furthermore, reference is made to a statement on the denial of the Kurdish question, quoted in Dettmer, J. (2015) via Voice of America. Finally, the official response of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the 2024 EU Progress Report has also been included. These speeches have been selected to analyze state positioning, rhetorical framing and discursive denial or justification, particularly in the context of minority rights, legitimacy claims and role-taking on the international stage. Lastly, normative frameworks, such as the FCPNM (1995) and Capotorti's UN legal definition (1979), are used as a reference to contextualize the treatment of minority rights in the EU discourse on the broader Kurdish question.

While this methodology provides a solid analytical framework, it has some limitations. First, EU-Türkiye diplomacy is highly politicized, with official documents often reflecting strategic or political interests of actors rather than an objective assessment. Moreover, since official transcripts of

President Erdoğan's speeches are not always available through government channels, this study partly uses journalistic sources such as Daily Sabah, Al Jazeera and Voice of America. These were selected based on their institutional position and relevance: Daily Sabah functions as a pro-government media and thus often reflects the official line of the Turkish presidency, while Al Jazeera and Voice of America are internationally recognized media with editorial control. Quotes have been verified or checked against other public material where possible. Although this is a methodological limitation, it is transparently justified.

4. Analysis

4.1 Language and Framing of Violence

This section focuses on the first analytical dimension of this study: word choice and discursive framing. Following the model of Pan and Kosicki (1993), framing is understood here as the structured way in which language constructs meaning along four dimensions: syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures. These include the use of the passive voice, the omission of actors, euphemistic designations, and the moral tone of expressions.

4.1.1 Framing of Kurdish violence

We are taking Roboski as the starting point for examining Türkiye's discourse on the Kurdish minority. On May 30, 2012, Erdoğan gave a speech and adopted a defensive and nationalistic tone when speaking about the massacre:

"Tragic incidents such as this one have transpired in every military throughout the history of the world. Catastrophic mistakes have been made in the struggle against terrorism." (Daily Sabah, 2012)

The incident was acknowledged as a 'mistake' and also normalized with the word 'every military', that suggests that such events are not unique but common in military history, which downplays the gravity of this incident. While acknowledging the incident, the discourse remained vague about responsibility. Phrases such as "Those that caused this mistake will be made to pay the price" use a passive structure that avoids explicit blame (Daily Sabah, 2012). Erdoğan explicitly rejected attempts to let the state be made the scapegoat:

"We will not let the state be made the scapegoat," stated the Prime Minister who went on to explain that the government has done more than their share when it comes to the Uludere incident." (Daily Sabah, 2012)

When it comes to EU discourse, the EC remained remarkably restrained in its use of rhetoric. In its 2012 Türkiye Progress Report, the Commission describes the event as follows:

"The killing of 34 civilians in Uludere (Şırnak) in a military air strike in December 2011, and the absence of a transparent public inquiry into the events, also damaged confidence. There has been no discussion of political responsibility." (European Commission, 2012, p. 7).

The formulation 'the killing of 34 civilians' reflects a preference for neutral expression, which downplays the moral gravity of the incident. Instead of terms such as 'massacre' or 'attack', the EC opts for 'killing', which softens the impact of the violence. Moreover, the emphasis is placed on

procedural shortcomings such as ‘absence of a transparent public inquiry’, rather than on structural human rights violations or ethnic violence. The passive construction ‘there has been no discussion of political responsibility’ deflects responsibility and avoids assigning blame and deprives the victim collective, which means the Kurdish minority, of their political recognition. This avoidance reflects the EU's ambivalence to recognize Kurdish identity as a minority group despite the fact that it meets criteria such as cultural distinctiveness and historical continuity, as set out in Šmihula's (2009) definition. This also reflects a low determinacy of conditions, the EU does not formulate explicit standards or requirements, meaning that compliance is not clearly enforced (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). The credibility of conditionality is also weak, without a strong condemnation or concrete consequences, compliance by Türkiye becomes unlikely.

An additional passage in the report underscores this technocratic tone:

“Judicial and administrative investigations are ongoing. However, there are concerns about their transparency and effectiveness. Allegations of intelligence failure and operational negligence have not been cleared up.” (European Commission, 2012, p. 34).

The formulations in the 2012 Türkiye Progress Report are vague and bureaucratic in tone. For example, terms such as ‘concerns’ are used instead of more direct and normatively loaded concepts such as ‘violations’ or ‘failures’, which downplays the seriousness of the situation. Expressions such as ‘ongoing investigations’ and ‘allegations of intelligence failure have not been cleared up’ are also classic examples of bureaucratic language that prefers procedural neutrality over moral involvement. These constructions are almost completely devoid of active verbs, concrete actors or evaluative adjectives. For example, in the sentence ‘There has been no discussion of political responsibility’, the passive voice is used without a clear subject, which abstracts responsibility and thus depoliticizes it. In addition, nominalizations such as ‘investigations’, ‘concerns’ and ‘allegations’ are used, which results in a distant and technocratic formulation. By avoiding explicit terms such as ‘responsibility’, ‘accountability’, or ‘justice’, a discourse is created that reduces violence to an administrative error rather than a serious violation of human rights. This is precisely the risk of formal conformity without actual implementation that Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier warn about and that leads to backsliding. This depoliticized discourse is at odds with the FCPNM principle of self-identification of minorities (Article 3), which requires not only recognition of violations but also of minority status. In contrast to the discourse on the Kurds, Türkiye's approach to the Palestinian conflict shows a more explicitly moral tone.

4.1.2 Shift in EU Tone: From Restraint to Condemnation

While the EU is reluctant to mention domestic human rights violations in Türkiye, we see a different rhetoric in the context of foreign policy, particularly after the Hamas-Israel crisis of October 2023. The 2024 EU report shows an evolved and sharper tone: “Türkiye did not condemn the 7 October terrorist attack, and took a stance in support of Hamas, listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU, which is in complete disagreement with the EU's position.” (European Commission, 2024, p. 84). This shift to harsh and charged register shows that the EU does take a morally condemning tone when it comes to Türkiye's foreign policy, openly and explicitly criticizing and making clear that their position is different with these words: ‘which is in complete disagreement with the EU's position’ (European Commission, 2024, p. 84). The use of ‘complete disagreement’ reflects a strong lexical opposition and leaves little room for diplomatic ambiguity. The phrase ‘did not condemn’ shows that the EU thinks that Türkiye should have done something, namely condemn Hamas. Also, ‘took a stance in support of Hamas’ sounds accusatory, as if Türkiye is deliberately choosing the wrong side. The EU does not reduce its own win-set domestically, because there is now more public support for

tough language. This shows how domestic politics (Level II) influences international statements (Level I).

This asymmetry in discursive strategies can be understood using Putnam's Two-Level Game model (1988), which explains how political actors must simultaneously navigate between international (Level I) and domestic (Level II) constraints. In the case of Roboski, the EU adopts a reserved and technocratic tone to avoid bilateral tensions with Türkiye at the international level (Level I) and to preserve internal consensus among member states (Level II). In contrast, the sharp, morally charged language about Türkiye's support for Hamas is more easily accepted within the EU's domestic political context (Level II) and may even serve as diplomatic positioning on the international stage (Level I). This makes clear that discursive choices are not merely ethical in nature but are strategically embedded in multilateral negotiation dynamics.

4.1.3 Gaza and Hamas: Moral Urgency versus Diplomatic Condemnation

With regard to the Palestina/Gaza conflict, we won't be taking Davos as starting point, but Türkiye's discourse and Erdoğan's opening speech at the 4th Antalya Diplomacy Forum 2025.

The aim was to present Türkiye's vision on international conflicts, multilateral cooperation and a just world order. The target audience consisted of international leaders, diplomats, policymakers and academics. This speech was chosen because it sharply outlines Erdoğan's foreign policy and diplomatic positioning, which is essential for an objective analysis of his international rhetoric:

"The issue that has been agonizing global conscience and justice the most and for the longest time is the atrocity in Palestine, especially in Gaza. For one and a half years, Israel has been committing a blatant genocide against the Palestinian people, disregarding the most basic human rights and trampling on international law. It is not only our fraternal but also humanitarian responsibility, a requirement of our humanity to raise our voice and object in strongest terms to this atrocity." (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2025, p.95)

Erdoğan opens his discourse with strong language in which he describes the situation in Gaza as one of the issues that has agonized 'global conscience and justice' the most deeply and for the longest time. By using terms such as 'genocide', 'atrocity' and 'trampling on international law', the situation is not presented as a political incident, but as a fundamental violation of universal values. In contrast to his defensive speech about Roboski and normalizing the incident, a strong rhetoric is displayed here. Erdoğan deliberately opts for a rhetoric in which the moral duty is central: 'to raise our voice and object in strongest terms' and 'it is not only our fraternal duty but also humanitarian responsibility, a requirement of our humanity', by using universal concepts such as 'humanitarian responsibility' and 'our humanity', the discourse is repositioned as a collective responsibility that surpasses national interests. The syntactic structure of this passage is also active and direct. Erdoğan uses active verbs here such as 'committing a blatant genocide', 'raise our voice' and 'disregarding'. This contributes to a discursive positioning in which it becomes clear who the perpetrator is (Israel), who must act (the international community), and what the moral stakes are (human dignity and justice).

4.2 Actor Positioning and Moral Self-Presentation in EU-Türkiye Discourse

This chapter applies the second analytical dimension: the construction of actors, which is based on Skillington (1997). It examines how political entities, in particular the EU and Türkiye, position themselves and frame other actors in their official register.

4.2.1 Diplomatic Caution and Symbolic Endorsement

This passage shows how Türkiye's position on Gaza was presented in the context of the EU-Türkiye dialogue, which focused on regional responsibility and Palestinian statehood. In the context of the 61st EU-Türkiye Joint Parliamentary Committee (2009), Turkish representative Yüksel stressed Türkiye's historical responsibility to ensure peace and stability in Gaza:

“Mr. YÜKSEL also emphasised Turkey's historical, cultural and geographical ties with its neighbours, which allows Turkey to play an active role in promoting peace and security in the region. He talked about Turkey's involvement in Gaza and the top priority of the formation of a Palestine state and about Syria's positive contribution, which can be assured by a policy of engagement.” (European Parliament & Turkish Grand National Assembly, 2009, p. 7).

It is important to mention that this passage is taken from the official minutes of the meeting prepared by the Secretariat of the EP. It is not a direct quote from Mr. Yüksel, but a summary of his contribution as recorded by the EU body itself. The wording therefore reflects the interpretation of the secretary and not necessarily the exact wording of the Turkish representative. Here, Türkiye positions itself as a natural, legitimate power in the region. The reference to ‘historical, cultural and geographical ties’ normalizes Türkiye's foreign actions as natural rather than strategic. The commitment to Palestinian rights and the emphasis on ‘engagement’ and ‘peace’ projects a moral authority that serves international justice.

The EU positions itself as a rational mediator. In its responses to Türkiye's performance in Davos, the EU with Joost Lagendijk who was then chair of the EU-Türkiye Joint Parliamentary Committee maintained a diplomatic tone:

“Mr. LAGENDIJK confirmed Mr. YÜKSEL's comment on historical, geographical and cultural ties across borders and emphasised the importance of Turkey's foreign policy for the EU as Turkey is playing the role the EU would like to play. Referring to Erdogan's outburst in Davos Mr. LAGENDIJK said there was a danger that Turkey was seen too much on the side of Hamas, which would be detrimental for Turkey's role in Israel-Palestine peace negotiations. Furthermore, the chairman pointed out the strong link between Turkey's accession to the EU and its policy in the Middle-East. In his view it is the negotiations with the EU that allowed Turkey to play the role it is playing now. Finally Mr. LAGENDIJK raised the question to the CHP of whether their party agreed with Turkey's foreign policy.” (European Parliament & Turkish Grand National Assembly, 2009, p.8)

For example, Lagendijk says that ‘Turkey is playing the role the EU would like to play’. In doing so, the EU shows that it values Türkiye as an important player in the Middle East, but at the same time that it itself is not currently playing that active role. The EU is therefore deliberately keeping a low profile but remains normatively present. When Lagendijk says that ‘there was a danger that Turkey was seen too much on the side of Hamas’, he uses cautious language. The word ‘danger’ suggests that something could possibly go wrong, without directly accusing Türkiye. The formulation ‘was seen too much’ also makes it clear that it is about how others may see it, not about what Türkiye has

actually done. In this way, the EU avoids open criticism, at the same time, Lagendijk asks the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) whether it agrees with Turkish foreign policy. In doing so, he is attempting to make Turkish internal differences of opinion visible, without taking a hard position himself. CHP is Türkiye's secular opposition party, founded by Atatürk and the counterpart to President Erdoğan's ruling party AKP. This formulation is diplomatic because it points out risks indirectly without making a direct accusation, thus avoiding confrontation but still getting the message across.

4.2.2 The EU's Normative Identity and Legal Framing

Although there is no direct response to Erdoğan's speech, the EP clearly speaks out on the situation of the Kurdish community in its 2022 resolution. The Parliament positions itself as a normative actor, with moral authority grounded in human rights and international law:

“Remains deeply concerned by the situation of Kurdish people in the country and the situation in south-east Turkey with regard to the protection of human rights, freedom of expression and political participation; [...] condemns the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, including the prohibition of languages from groups such as the Kurdish community as a mother tongue in education and in all areas of public life by the Turkish Constitution; reiterates that this constitutes a violation of international law, which protects the rights of persons to assert their membership of an ethnic or religious minority and to express themselves in the traditional language of their minority; stresses the urgency of resuming a credible political process involving all relevant parties and democratic forces and leading to a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue;” (European Parliament, 2022, para.30)

The formulation ‘remains deeply concerned by the situation of Kurdish people’ shows the EU's continued attention to structural problems, with the intensity reinforced by the adverb ‘deeply’. Unlike Erdoğan's emotionally charged and inclusive language, the EU explicitly mentions oppression with ‘condemns the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities’ and refers to legal barriers such as the ban on the Kurdish language in ‘all areas of public life’. The legal basis is crucial: the EU states that these restrictions constitute a ‘violation of international law’, in this way, the EU legitimizes its moral position by appealing to universal standards. Both Türkiye and the EU use synergistic linkage, exploiting external events to score domestic political points or reduce resistance. Finally, the resolution emphasizes the importance of ‘resuming a credible political process’, which not only criticizes the lack of dialogue but also problematizes the one-sidedness of Türkiye's discourse.

4.2.3 Türkiye's Internal Narrative: Brotherhood and Inclusion

In contrast to the EU legal discourse, which focuses on human rights and international norms, Türkiye's domestic narrative emphasizes national unity, presenting the Kurdish question as a matter of solidarity, not legal obligation. It is important to note that although there is a Kurdish repression in Türkiye, Erdoğan also advocates Kurdish cooperation in his speeches. President Erdoğan spoke at a parliamentary meeting of his ruling AK Party in the capital Ankara on Oct. 30, 2024. The aim was to strengthen national unity, with an emphasis on reconciliation with Kurdish citizens and rejection of terror. The target audience was Kurdish citizens, political parties, and the broader Turkish public. This speech was chosen because Erdoğan explicitly addresses the Kurdish public, lays out his vision of brotherhood, and reframes the position of the Republic crucial for an objective analysis of his domestic Kurdish discourse:

"This Republic is the Republic of everyone who, regardless of their faith, belief, way of life or lifestyle, feels connected to this homeland, this people and this land of every individual. And this Republic is the Republic of the Turk, but of course just as much of the Kurd." (T.C. İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024; author's translation)

The choice of the formulation 'everyone who [...] feels connected to this homeland' underlines a discourse of inclusive citizenship that is not determined by ethnic or religious characteristics, but by emotional and cultural ties. By explicitly mentioning terms such as 'faith, belief, way of life or lifestyle', Erdoğan attempts to create the impression of a Republic that is open to diversity. This choice of words functions as a normalization technique, it suggests that it is self-evident that all citizens, regardless of background, are equally part of the nation (Skillington, 1997). Erdoğan then introduces a form of symbolic equation between Turkish and Kurdish identities with the sentence 'this Republic is the Republic of the Turk, but of course just as much of the Kurd'. The use of 'but of course' functions rhetorically here to present the inclusion of Kurds as self-evident and logical. Yet the syntactic order in which the 'Turk' is mentioned first and then the 'Kurd' implies a subtle hierarchy within the nation state. Turkish identity remains discursively dominant, while Kurdish identity is allowed for but not taken as a starting point. In terms of actor positioning, this passage shows how Türkiye presents itself as a republic that bases its moral authority on opening up the nation state to the Kurds, without challenging fundamental power relations. In the same speech, this quote appears:

"From here, from our Honorable Parliament, from the rostrum of the people, I am addressing you, my dear Kurdish brothers and sisters: we expect you to sincerely and firmly grasp this outstretched hand. [...] Whatever was necessary to strengthen the brotherhood between Turk and Kurd whatever it was, in whatever way we have done, tried and experienced." (T.C. İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024; author's translation).

This passage opens with a performative reference to the location of the speech 'from our Honorable Parliament, from the rostrum of the people', this formulation has a ritualizing function and confers institutional authority on Erdoğan's message. He does not speak as an individual, but as a representative of the people and the nation. The formulation 'my dear Kurdish brothers and sisters' is an affective form of address that is intended to suggest an emotional bond between the state and the Kurdish population. The choice of words 'brothers and sisters' conveys an image of familial solidarity, a discursive strategy of reconciliation. At the same time, the sentence 'we expect you to sincerely and firmly grasp this outstretched hand' contains an implicit shift of responsibility. By emphasizing the grasping of the outstretched hand, Erdoğan presents the state as the one who has offered reconciliation where the ball is in the other's court. The combination of 'sincerely and firmly' reinforces this expectation: not accepting this gesture could be interpreted as a rejection of peace or of the nation itself. Erdoğan presents himself as an actor with moral authority. At the same time, he shifts responsibility to the other, which fits perfectly with Putnam's theory of domestic approval as a bargaining tool. Finally, he emphasizes the triple enumeration 'done, tried and experienced' which functions as a retrospective legitimization of the policy. It states that the state has tried everything, which neutralizes any further criticism of the sincerity of that policy. The sentence structure suggests exhaustion of all options, and reinforces the image of Türkiye as a just actor who not only acts, but also learns and gains experience in the pursuit of peace.

4.3 Strategic Silence: The Power of Omission in EU-Türkiye Discourse

This section applies the third and last analytical dimension of this study: omissions and discursive silences, based on Schröter (2014). These silences are not merely accidental or innocent; they function as strategic means to avoid political risks, mask normative contradictions, and bridge institutional divisions.

4.3.1 The EU's Ambiguous Discourse on Minority Rights

While Erdoğan uses explicit denial and rhetorical closure, the EU opts for a much more cautious discourse on the Kurdish issue. The EU discourse in the 2012 Türkiye Progress Report adopts a technocratic and cautious tone in its treatment of minority issues. Although the report explicitly refers to tensions and human rights problems, ethnic designations are avoided in describing affected population groups. This ties with Capotorti's (1979) legal definition, while international law supports the right to recognition and self-identification of minorities, the EU pragmatically avoids these definitions in politically sensitive contexts. For example, when it comes to restrictions on the right to demonstrate and express oneself, the text does not explicitly mention the Kurdish community as the primary target group of these measures (European Commission, 2012). This lexical restraint fits within a broader EU discourse that operates within a nationalist framework, in which minorities are only recognized when the state officially recognizes them as such. In doing so, the EU implicitly circumvents the criteria for national minorities as formulated by Šmihula (2009), including cultural distinctiveness, numerical minority position and historical continuity. At the same time, the report does mention structural problems, such as disproportionate police violence during demonstrations and restrictions on political participation. Although in practice these issues mainly affect the Kurdish population, they are not framed as such within a minority framework. Here we see an application of the lack of determinacy, or in other words, the vague and non-binding formulation of conditions undermines the effectiveness of EU conditionality. Because the EU does not set explicit requirements for minorities such as the Kurds, the incentives for reform remain vague and therefore easy to ignore (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004):

“However, in general there was a shortfall in the implementation of the constitutional right to hold demonstrations and meetings. Excessive administrative restrictions on freedom of assembly persist, such as substantial prior notification requirements for demonstrations, and sometimes the confinement of demonstrations to designated sites and dates that are unsuitable. The Newroz (New Year) ceremonies in the South East were restricted to only one day. On several occasions there were scenes of violence, disruption of demonstrations and disproportionate use of force by security forces against demonstrators — especially in rallies related to the Kurdish issue, students' rights, the environment, activities of the Higher Education Board (YÖK) and trade union rights. Two students were sentenced to eight years in prison for displaying a banner protesting against tuition fees during a rally attended by the Prime Minister.” (European Commission, 2012, p. 23).

The report here does explicitly mention repression in other areas, for example, it states that there is a ‘shortfall in the implementation of the constitutional right to hold demonstrations and meetings’ and specifically mentions ‘disproportionate use of force by security forces against demonstrators’, ‘especially in rallies related to the Kurdish issue’ (European Commission, 2012, p. 23). We can conclude that here there is clear reference to structural restrictions on the right to demonstrate, and an explicit link is even made with the Kurdish question and student demonstrations. These differences indicate that the EU does not follow one consistent discursive strategy, but a hybrid discourse:

reserved and technical where this is diplomatically desirable, and more explicit when repression is clearly visible in the public sphere and difficult to ignore.

4.3.2 Denial of the Kurdish Question in Turkish Political Rhetoric

To illustrate how such discursive silences function in practice, President Erdoğan's speech on 15 March 2015 in Balıkesir was chosen because of its crucial impact on the Kurdish-Turkish peace process and its clear political purpose. Speaking shortly before the June elections, he publicly denied the existence of a Kurdish problem, despite ongoing peace negotiations with the PKK. This points to a strategic move to appeal to nationalist voters and secure support for constitutional changes. The immediate target audience was the domestic, conservative electorate, but the message also reached Kurdish leaders and international observers. The speech marks a turning point in Erdoğan's discourse because he adopts an insulting tone towards the Kurds in contrast to his previous statements. Here, denial and omission clearly emerge as strategic tools and we can suggest that he spoke there with a cold and critical tone about the Kurds. The context here is that shortly before the 2015 elections, Erdoğan publicly denied that there is a Kurdish question, despite years of peace negotiations with the PKK. With his statement, he tries to appeal to nationalist voters and portray criticism of his policies as unfounded:

"The only thing in their eyes is the Kurdish question. What are you talking about? There is no such thing, there is no Kurdish question," he thundered. (Dettmer, 2015)

Erdoğan refers with 'their eyes' to Kurdish politicians and activists, such as those from the HDP, who continue to push for recognition of the Kurdish issue. With 'The only thing in their eyes', Erdoğan minimizes the broader socio-political discontent by pretending that Kurds are fixated on one obsessive theme. This reduces their collective experience to something irrational and one-sided. The real complexity is thus concealed. By explicitly naming 'the Kurdish question', he seems to acknowledge the term, but he immediately neutralizes it by denying its validity. The use of 'question' suggests that it is an abstract debate, not a reality with material consequences such as oppression or violence. The rhetorical question 'What are you talking about?' takes away any weight from the conversation. It is a strategy, as if the subject is not worth discussing. With this, he implicitly denies the history of state violence and exclusion. And with 'there is no such thing', he provides no nuance, no acknowledgement of past mistakes. This is what Schröter characterizes as a sort of silencing by denial: the silencing does not happen through silence, but by pretending that the problem never existed (Schröter, 2014). Here the concept of win-sets from Putnam becomes visible by publicly denying the existence of the Kurdish problem, Erdoğan reduces the win-set on the domestic side (Putnam, 1988). In doing so, he positions himself more strongly against both domestic opposition and international pressure, because internal concessions are ruled out on the discursive level.

After this he says:

"They [the PKK] burn down the equipment of businessmen, contractors. Why do you do that? We constructed one [airport] in Iğdır, one in Ağrı, one in Kars. Has this state discriminated against you?" (Dettmer, 2015)

Erdoğan uses a vague, hostile reference to 'They', which makes the other party seem impersonal and distant. By not explicitly mentioning the Kurds, he avoids direct responsibility for repression. With 'We constructed [...] Has this state discriminated against you?', material infrastructure such as airports is presented as proof that there is no inequality. This framing replaces political rights with

economic achievements. This reasoning also reflects a rational cost-benefit logic from the political conditionality theory, Erdoğan emphasizes economic investments (rewards) to undermine political grievances (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Thus, it seems that the costs of reform are not justified, because benefits have already been delivered, which is typical for situations where formal compliance seems more important than actual implementation.

He added: “We never had a Kurdish problem in this country. But it's being kept on the agenda on purpose.” He added: “What Kurdish problem? ... What have you not got? ... What else do you want? For God's sake, what don't you have that we do, you have everything.” (Dettmer, 2015)

This is an insulting speech, especially given the historical and political context of the Kurdish issue in Türkiye. Erdoğan does not acknowledge the decades long oppression of Kurds, and his tone suggests that Kurds are ungrateful and that their complaints are unfounded. This is not only disrespectful to their experiences, but also undermines the legitimacy of the peace process. The condescending rhetoric reduces a complex ethnic and political struggle to exaggerated complaints, and suggests that Kurdish demands are unjustified and politically motivated. The choice of words of 'never' is important, Erdoğan not only erases the current problem, but also rewrites the past. This conceals the violence, the assimilation policy, and the structural exclusion that are historically demonstrable. With 'kept on the agenda on purpose' the intention of the others is seen as malicious. According to him the problem is not real, but an agenda item which again leads to the denial of legitimate demands. 'What have you not got? What else do you want?' Erdoğan uses a rhetorical attack here, in which he portrays Kurds as ungrateful or greedy. This is a form of discursive delegitimization, the demands are not discussed in substance, but laughed away emotionally. The formulation 'you have everything' is deliberately misleading. Kurds may have access to services or functions, but cultural recognition and political autonomy remain lacking.

Between Erdoğan's 2015 statements and his 2024 speech, there is a clear shift in tone and content. While in 2015 he denied the existence of a Kurdish problem and used polarizing language, in 2024 he speaks of brotherhood and national unity. This shift does not reflect an ideological break, but a strategic adjustment to changing political circumstances, such as elections, security situations and domestic pressures. Erdoğan adapts his discourse depending on the audience and the timing, indicating a use of language in the context of domestic legitimacy and international positioning.

4.3.3 Silences and Accusations in the Gaza Discourse

This speech by Erdoğan on September 24, 2024, at the UN in New York was chosen because he strongly criticizes Israel, addresses the failures of the UN system and calls for recognition of Palestine. The target audience was international: world leaders, UN members and media. The speech shows how Erdoğan uses geopolitical issues to profile Türkiye as a moral leader and is therefore relevant for an objective analysis of his international rhetoric. In the speech Erdoğan gave he pleaded for a ceasefire in Gaza:

“The united nations security council! What are you waiting for to prevent the genocide in Gaza and to say ‘stop’ to this cruelty, this barbarism? What more are you waiting for to stop the massacre network that endangers also the lives of its own citizens along with the Palestinian people and drags the entire region into war for the sake of its political prospects? And those who unconditionally support Israel! For how long will you continue to bear the shame of looking on this massacre, of being its accomplices?” President Erdogan said.” (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2024, p. 2).

Erdoğan uses strong terms such as ‘genocide’, ‘cruelty’ and ‘barbarism’ to denounce Israel. This loaded language creates a moral frame that distracts from Türkiye’s own role. When he speaks of a ‘massacre network’ that even threatens its own citizens, he deliberately omits that Türkiye has had economic ties with Israel and provided political space for Hamas. His rhetorical question ‘What more are you waiting for?’ closes the debate and implies that silence is complicity, as is evident from the term ‘accomplices’.

In contrast to Erdoğan’s emotionally charged and accusatory tone, the EU takes a more measured but no less critical approach to Türkiye’s stance towards Hamas. The 2024 Türkiye Progress Report states:

“Türkiye has some level of preparation in the area of common foreign security and defence policy (CFSP), and made no progress overall in the reporting period. Türkiye is an active and significant player in the area of foreign policy, which constitutes a pivotal aspect of EU-Türkiye relations.” Although this still sounds formal, sharper language immediately follows: “However, its foreign policy remained at odds with the EU’s priorities under the CFSP, notably due to the lack of alignment with EU sanctions against Russia and the labelling of Hamas, listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU.” (European Commission, 2024, p. 17). The problem is not just the lack of reforms, but ‘being at odds with EU priorities’. The contradiction is here discursively reinforced through terms such as ‘notably’ and the emphasis on the discrepancy in the qualification of Hamas.

In 2025, the EP goes even further in its resolution: “Calls on the Commission and the Council to consider terminating negotiations regarding Türkiye’s accession to the EU and ceasing all pre-accession funding; stresses that Türkiye is not a European country;” and “whereas President Erdogan and Turkish senior officials have met with senior members of EU-listed terror organisations, such as Hamas, and Türkiye has provided passports and identity cards to Hamas members; whereas Türkiye has openly expressed support for Hamas’ mission and movement; whereas Türkiye has donated hundreds of millions of euros to Hamas and has increased its support to the organisation since the 7 October 2023 Hamas massacre and kidnapping of Israelis;” (European Parliament, 2025). Here we have an active accusation of support for terrorism. Terms like ‘massacre’, ‘kidnapping of Israelis’, and ‘openly expressed support’ mark an escalation from distance to condemnation. Türkiye is no longer seen as a candidate member state with shortcomings, but as a threat to the European community of values.

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted defensively on EU’s accusatory language:

“We reject the unfair assessments by the EU in the 2024 Türkiye Report, particularly on the political criteria and internal political dynamics. The Report highlights that Türkiye has played a constructive role in the Eastern Mediterranean, improved its relations with Greece and enhanced trade cooperation with the EU. Given Türkiye’s constructive approach, as noted in the Report, we expect the political blockages on Türkiye-EU relations imposed by the Council Conclusions of 15 July 2019 to be lifted” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024).

Türkiye’s response includes terms such as ‘unfair assessments’ and ‘constructive approach’, attempting to redefine its own position against the EU’s condemnatory tone. Instead of addressing the accusations of support for Hamas, Türkiye shifts the focus to positive developments such as ‘enhanced trade cooperation’ and ‘relations with Greece’. This response reflects Putnam’s idea of issue-linkage, Türkiye attempts to link positive foreign relations with Greece to its desire to continue the EU process, while at the same time avoiding sensitive domestic issues.

5. Conclusion

This master's thesis has shown that the discourse of Türkiye and the EU on the Kurdish question and the Palestinian cause is not only ideologically colored, but is also strongly strategically deployed. A discursive analysis has made it clear that both Türkiye and the EU shape their political messages on the basis of changing domestic and international interests.

Türkiye profiles itself internationally as a defender of human rights and solidarity through its outspoken support for the Palestinian cause, while at the same time it structurally marginalizes the Kurdish minority domestically and limits their political participation. This duality is discursively legitimized through morally charged language about Gaza on the one hand, and through denial, relativization or nationalistic rhetoric with regard to the Kurdish question on the other. The EU, in turn, applies its political conditionality inconsistently: while it sharply criticizes Türkiye's foreign support for Hamas, it remains remarkably reserved in its assessment of the domestic human rights situation, especially with regard to the Kurds. This selectivity undermines the EU's credibility as a normative actor and points to a certain geopolitical pragmatism in its foreign policy.

By placing both dossiers, the domestic Kurdish question and the Palestinian diplomacy abroad, in one analytical framework, this study shows how discursive asymmetries and strategic silences contribute to a fragile but functional relationship between Türkiye and the EU. Language does not function here merely as a means of communication, but as a political instrument through which legitimacy, identity and power are constantly (re)negotiated.

6. Bibliography:

- Akgönül, S. (2013). *The minority concept in the Turkish context: Practices and perceptions in Turkey, Greece and France* (S. Okur, Trans.). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004249721>
- Akgül-Açıkmeşe, S., & Özel, S. (2024). EU Policy towards the Israel-Palestine Conflict: The Limitations of Mitigation Strategies. *The International Spectator*, 59(1), 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2309664>
- Aktoprak, E. (2010). The Kurdish opening and the constitutional reform: Is there any progress? *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, 9, 643–667.
- Al Jazeera. (2024, October 25). *PKK claims attack on Turkish defence company near Ankara that killed five*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/25/pkk-claims-attack-on-turkish-defence-company-near-ankara-that-killed-five>
- Altunışık, M. B., & Cuhadar, E. (2010). Turkey's search for a third party role in Arab–Israeli conflicts: A neutral facilitator or a principal power mediator? *Mediterranean Politics*, 15(3), 371–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2010.517101>
- Atmaca, A. Ö., & Torun, Z. (2022). Geopolitical visions in Turkish foreign policy. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 24(1), 114–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1992189>
- Bozorgmehri, M., & Mir Hosseini, F. (2020). Turkish foreign policy and the Palestinian issue: An Iranian perspective (2002–2020). *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 11(1), 169–195.

Capotorti, F. (1979). *Study on the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities* (E/CN.4/Sub.2/384/Rev.1). United Nations.

Council of Europe. (1995). *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and explanatory report*. Council of Europe.

Council of Europe. (2006). *Resolution 1519: The cultural situation of the Kurds*. Parliamentary Assembly. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17477&lang=en>

Daily Sabah. (2012, May 30). *Uludere was a mistake and we will do whatever necessary*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2012/05/30/uludere-was-a-mistake-and-we-will-do-whatever-necessary>

Dettmer, J. (2015, March 17). *Erdogan speech may hurt peace process with Kurds*. Voice of America. <https://www.voanews.com/a/erdogan-speech-may-hurt-peace-process-with-kurds/2683297.html>

Engin, E., & Şener, G. (2010). Predicting the image of Turkey and the Prime Minister Erdoğan through content analysis of national news media coverage of Davos incident. *Selçuk İletişim*, 6(3), 68-75.

Ersanlı, B., & Özdoğan, G. (2011). Obstacles and opportunities: Recent Kurdish political struggles in Turkey. *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, (12).

European Commission. (2012). *Turkey 2012 progress report*. European Commission.

European Commission. (2023, November 21). *The Commission finalises the review of EU aid to Palestine*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5941

European Commission. (2024). *Türkiye 2024 report: Commission staff working document SWD(2024) 696 final*.

European Parliament. (2025, February 11). *Motion for a resolution on the recent dismissals and arrests of mayors in Türkiye (B10-0115/2025)*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2025-0115_EN.html

European Parliament, & Turkish Grand National Assembly. (2009). *Minutes of the 61st meeting of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee (31 March – 2 April 2009, Brussels)*.

Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Gök, G. O. (2020). “Humanitarianism” transformed? Analyzing the role of transnational humanitarian NGOs in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East in the 2000s. In H. Papuççular & D. Kuru (Eds.), *A transnational account of Turkish foreign policy* (pp. 227–258). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42897-6_10

İletişim Başkanlığı. (2024, October 30). *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: “Kürt kardeşim, senden bu eli samimiyetle, sınımsız tutmanı bekliyoruz”*.

<https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-kurt-kardesim-senden-bu-eli-samimiyetle-simsiki-tutmani-bekliyoruz>

İletişim Başkanlığı. (2025). *Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın 4. Antalya Diplomasi Forumu açılış konuşması*. T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı. <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/yayin/4-antalya-diplomasi-forumu-acilis-konusmasi.pdf>

Karakoc, E., & Özen, H. E. (2020). Kurdish public opinion in Turkey: Cultural and political demands of the 'Kurdish street'. In B. Gurses (Ed.), *The Kurds in the Middle East: Enduring problems and new dynamics* (pp. 21–39). Lexington Books.

Kaya, C. (2013, May 20). Ethnic minorities and political participation. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/20/ethnic-minorities-and-political-participation/>

Mann, S. (2024, May 3). *Türkiye imposes a total export and import ban against Israel*. Global Sanctions and Export Controls Blog. <https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/turkiye-imposes-a-total-export-and-import-ban-against-israel/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye. (2024, October 31). No: 226, 31 October 2024, regarding the European Commission 2024 Report on Türkiye. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-226_-avrupa-komisyonu-2024-turkiye-raporu-hk.en.mfa

Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M. (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication*, 10(1), 55-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1993.9962963>

Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. (2024, September 24). *Not only children are dying in Gaza; the United Nations system is also dying* [Speech transcript]. <https://gadebate.un.org/en/79/turkiye>

Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427–460. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706785>

Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2004). Governance by Conditionality: EU Rule Transfer to the Candidate Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 661-679. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1350176042000248089>

Schröter, M. (2014). Silence and concealment in political discourse. In J. E. Richardson & J. Angermüller (Eds.), *Discourse approaches to politics, society and culture* (Vol. 48). John Benjamins.

Skillington, T. (1997). Politics and the Struggle to Define: A Discourse Analysis of the Framing Strategies of Competing Actors in a 'New' Participatory Forum. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 48(3), 493-513. <https://doi.org/10.2307/591142>

Šmihula, D. (2009). Definition of national minorities in international law. *Journal of US-China Public Administration*, 6(5), 45–51.

Tocci, N. (2005). Conflict Resolution in the Neighbourhood: Comparing EU Involvement in Turkey's Kurdish Question and in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict. *Mediterranean Politics*, 10(2), 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390500141568>

Yavuz, M. H., & Özcan, N. A. (2015). Turkish democracy and the Kurdish question. *Middle East Policy*, 22(4), 73–84.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285573349_Turkish_Democracy_and_the_Kurdish_Question

Yeşiltuna, S. (2006). 1934 İskân Kanunu ve Türk Basınındaki Yansımaları [The 1934 Settlement Law and Its Reflections in the Turkish Press]. *Tarih ve Toplum*, 6(2), 45-59.