Photo by Erhan Demirtas/NurPhoto via Getty Images. Ballot papers burning are pictured on April 20, 2017 in Istanbul, Turkey during the protesters march in opposition to perceived voting irregularities in Sunday’s constitutional referendum.
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In response to Turkey’s constitutional referendum on April 16, 2017, which replaces the parliamentary system with an executive presidency, PoLAR and APLA commissioned a series of responses from scholars and activists focused on democracy and human rights in the region. In this first installment, Valeria Verdolini and Francesco Vacchiano highlight the situation of Gabriele del Grande, who was detained without charge in Turkey from April 9th to 23rd. On April 24th, he was deported back to Italy. These pieces were written during his detention.

On April 16, 2017, the referendum initiated by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was passed, further consolidating presidential authority and dismantling many of the safeguards that limit executive power. Despite the guise of democratic process, the referendum raises severe concerns regarding the—already fragile—future of democracy and human rights in Turkey.
The violently dismantled coup in July 2016 appeared to many to be less a bona fide coup than an opportunity through which Erdoğan solidified his power, cracking down on many forms of dissent. The positions of academic colleagues and the independent press in Turkey have become increasingly precarious and, in many cases, actively under threat.

This is yet another in a string of referendums that have highlighted the increasing entanglement of executive power, nationalism, and populism taking place on a global scale, signaling also a growing danger to the capacity for dissent and academic freedom. The role of the press, academic communities, and knowledge workers more generally continues to come under question – also on a global scale. As our last series on Trump’s Executive Order explored, and as the March for Science (April 22, 2017) highlighted, in the United States today knowledge and facts frequently fall victim to both executive buffoonery and the threat of executive action. In Turkey, with the referendum, the formal state of emergency that has prevailed since last summer seems to have solidified into a crisis for the state of democracy, speech, and information—a crisis that, as our Turkish colleagues have been warning us, has long been brewing.

Specifically, over 7,000 Turkish academics have been “purged” from their posts. A number of Turkish academics who signed the petition “Academics for Peace” in January 2016, calling attention to the Turkish government’s oppression of the Kurds in Turkey, were dismissed from their positions. As of March 2017, at least 383 out of the initial 2,212 signatories have been purged from their jobs, banned from traveling abroad, and denied recourse to legal dispute. In terms of freedom of the press, Turkey does not fair much better. According to the Center for the Protection of Journalists, Turkey jailed more journalists than any other country globally in 2016; and in the days leading up to the referendum escalated the crack-down on the press. Data from independent human rights monitoring groups estimate that 231 journalists are currently jailed in Turkey, and that 149 media outlets have been shut down. This is not to mention the 4000+ judges, and thousands of other citizens, who have lost their posts or been imprisoned.

Note: this section of the introduction has been edited to reflect the status of current events:

In PoLAR/APLA’s second series engaging with current events, we will be publishing pieces from a number of academics providing a variety of insights into, and responses to, the unfolding challenges to democracy and rights in Turkey. Through this, our first installment, we also sought to help spread the word about the case of the Italian journalist, Gabriele del Grande, who was held in Turkey, without formal charges, between April 9 and April 24, 2017. He has subsequently been released, just two days after we published this first installment of our series. Del Grande was detained in Hatay Province in Southern Turkey while doing research for his current book project on the situation in Syria. Until April 21, he had no access to a lawyer. He has long conducted ethnographically informed and politically engaged work around issues of freedom, political dissent, and borders in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. These two tributes by del Grande’s friends and colleagues, Francesco Vacchiano and Valeria Verdolini (both ethnographers and activists), were meant to raise awareness about his case and the struggle to free him.
Below, please find links to solidarity efforts with Turkish academics and journalists, which will be updated continuously during our series.

#AcademicsForPeace, #freegabriele

“We will not be a Party to this Crime”: a demonstration of solidarity with academic freedom worldwide.

“Academics for Peace”: documenting the purges that have taken place at Turkish universities since the petition was signed. Many have been dismissed from their posts, and even detained or jailed through statutory decrees.

Research Institute on Turkey and Bostonbul, both 503(1)c non-profits, GIT-NA and concerned academics in North America are launching a campaign to raise an initial fund of $105,000 and to support Academics for Peace. If you would like to take part in this solidarity campaign, here are some links:

Donate at this link.

Share this information with your network and encourage them to get involved.

Tweet about it: https://twitter.com/RIoTurkey/status/841720000293527552

Share it on Facebook: https://goo.gl/JjEZU9

Heath Cabot is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. She is also co-editor-in-chief of PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review. She is a political and legal anthropologist whose research examines citizenship, ethics, and rights in Europe, with a focus on Greece. She is author of On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece (Penn Press 2014).
Gabriele Del Grande is an Italian activist, free-lance journalist and writer who has published extensively on migration and borders in the Mediterranean. He is the author of the blog Fortress Europe, the first independent initiative aimed at documenting the deadly effects of the European policies of mobility restriction and control. For almost fifteen years, he has been following the routes of the migrants who head to Europe, narrating their longing for a better life and free movement, but also their clash against the apparatuses of immobilization and control that they run into along the way.
He is one of the best contemporary Italian journalists, one who brings together a profound vision of reality with a deep respect for people. He cares about people, not just their stories. He has been imprisoned in a detention center for foreigners in Turkey since April 9, 2017, isolated from the other detainees and not allowed to establish contact with his family.

His interest in people’s lives and worldviews has led him to various spots on the southern shore of the Mediterranean and beyond. He was the only foreign journalist who reached Gafsa, in Tunisia, during the long miners’ strike in Spring 2008. His stay, which resulted in his ban from the country, enabled him to hear, early on, the outcry for social justice that, three years later, would sweep the squares of the Arab countries and end in the fall of many of their long-lasting regimes. In 2011, he was with the people who took to the streets in Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli, in an attempt to spread word of their claims for freedom and dignity. After the outbreak of the Syrian war, he entered the country several times, documenting the forms of self-organization of the local communities and the struggle of the common people to keep their humanity under inhuman conditions.

In 2013, he was sitting with some friends in a café in Milan’s central station, when he was approached by a Syrian asylum seeker who asked for information on how to reach Sweden. According to European Union regulations, moving freely across Europe is forbidden to asylum seekers. For this reason, the man was looking for one of the many traffickers who organize the clandestine journey at heavy prices. In a matter of a few seconds the crazy idea took shape: staging a fake marriage to bring the guests to their intended destination, and filming the journey to turn it into a public act of civil disobedience. In this peculiar way, the road movie “Io Sto Con La Sposa” (“On the Bride’s Side”) was thus conceived and realized in the following months. The film was presented at the Venice Film Festival in 2014, accompanied by a festive cortège of fake brides, and won three special awards. Since then, the film has been used to raise awareness and denounce the multiplication of internal EU borders and unwelcoming attitudes toward refugees in Europe. Beyond this, the movie is also a hopeful celebration of solidarity among people, a timely and creative critique of walls, nationalism, and communitarianism.
Now Gabriele is detained in Mugla, not far from the Aegean coast of Turkey, in one of those detention centers for foreigners that he has relentlessly denounced throughout the years. It would not be surprising to discover that this center is funded directly by Brussels, perhaps through one of the many “cooperation programs” that promote “migration management” in teamwork with the authoritarian regimes which neighbor Europe.

Gabriele is not an anthropologist, but his work is the form of journalism that most resembles the way in which anthropologists approach people and become committed to their daily concerns. For this reason, he is frequently invited to universities and other academic forums to present his work.

We demand his immediate release. He is held without any formal charge under a regime of exception in which “administrative detention” has become the usual way to deal with the undesired: the same fate as many non-European migrants and a condition which reminds us that around 150 journalists are held in prison in Turkey for their work of investigation and denunciation.

Francesco Vacchiano is an anthropologist and a clinical psychologist with interests in migration, medical and psychological anthropology, European borders and boundaries, bureaucracies and politics of citizenship, as well as societies and institutions in North Africa. He has been doing research in Morocco, Tunisia and in the Mediterranean region on some of the main profiles of contemporary human mobility (“unaccompanied minors,” refugees, and “victims of trafficking”) and on the policies and practices of their inclusion/exclusion. He is a researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon.
My dear friend Gabriele del Grande, journalist, documentarian, and war correspondent was stopped by Turkish authorities in Hatay Province in Southern Turkey on April, 9th 2017. He was there doing research for his new book project “A partisan told me,” about the grassroots narratives of the War in Syria and refugees stories.

His work started more than 10 years ago, with the blog “Fortress Europe,” in which he sought to count all the deaths in the Mediterranean. Tracking this number, which became enormous over the years, was a way to give dignity to, and recognize the existence of, the “stories without bodies:” the missing in the sea and the contemporary tragedy of migrations.

After covering the war in Syria five times with international news organizations, he directed a civil disobedience documentary, “On the Bride’s Side,” chronicling a real road trip from Milan to Sweden with five undocumented refugees dressed up as a wedding convoy. The documentary was the chance for me to meet him for the first time, and we shared risks, smiles, and political activism crossing Europe in a group of twenty activists and refugees.
As I write, Gabriele del Grande is still in administrative custody in the migration center of Mugla, in the South-West of Turkey, a former prison transformed into a center for the detention, identification, and expulsion of migrants after the EU-Ankara agreements of March 2016.[1]

It is paradoxical that a spokesperson for migrants’ freedom of movement, who is constantly repeating “stop war not people,” is now facing his own detention owing to his work for people’s dignity and the voices of subalterns. He was finally able to speak to a lawyer on April 21st, and he could call home only after 10 days in detention, during which no one had the possibility to communicate with him directly. The Turkish authorities have not presented to him or his lawyer a formal accusation, and they have not stated the reasons for his administrative detention. For these reasons he declared a hunger strike on April 18th, and his partner, family, and a group of friends are also participating through a collective relay of hunger strikes to support the cause. Every day someone new publicly goes on strike, as a way of directing and demonstrating support and affection for Gabriele.

In the literature on detention (as in the case of Marion Dunlop, British suffragette in 1909; Bobby Sands in Northern Ireland in 1981; and most famously, Mahatma Gandhi in 1943), the hunger strike represents a strong political statement against institutional power. Even as the body is formally not free, the hunger strike is a symbolic exercise of power demonstrating possession of the body, and of its liberty and freedom, even in spaces of detention. The words of Michel Foucault came to my mind: biopower and “anatomo-politics of the human body and biopolitics of the population” (Foucault, 1978: 138; Foucault 2003). Hunger-striking and hunger-striking solidarity chains are a typical case of bio-resistance, and despite the material conditions in which they unfold, a powerful exercise of freedom.

Even though I have been reflecting on the “masses,” biopolitics, and the disciplining of the population, on the micro-level the power for self-determination is still the only exercise to act freely in a context of oppressed rights and the violation of liberty. The hunger strike is such an act of self-determination in the face of structural violence. This is our opportunity to choose, on Gabriele’s side.

Valeria Verdolini is a postdoctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Milan-Bicocca. She has a PhD in the Sociology of Law, and teaches “Inequalities and Social Mobility” at the University of Milan, LLM program on Law and Sustainable Development. She followed the Tunisian Arab Spring as a researcher. As an activist, she works on prisoners’ rights (with Antigone NGO), and refugees’ protection and rights. She took part to the documentary “On the Bride’s Side” (2014).
SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY


[1] In March 2016, the European Union and Turkey initiated an agreement meant to effectively close the Aegean route into Europe via which more than a million people entered Europe in 2015-16. Turkey agreed to accept asylum seekers with cases deemed by the EU authorities to be illegitimate, and in exchange, the EU promised to except Syrian refugees currently housed in Turkish camps. The EU also promised 6.2 billion euros to Turkey to assist with the over 2 million refugees currently housed in Turkey; to make it easier for EU Turkish citizens to receive visas. The “deal” has been widely criticized by human rights advocates and academics for how it outsources a migration “problem” to a country that, many agree, cannot be deemed “safe” in the terms demanded by international refugee law.
On April 16, 2017 at around 5pm, an hour before the voting for Turkey’s landmark constitutional referendum was completed, the eleven member Supreme Board of Elections (YSK) decided that ballot envelopes lacking YSK’s official stamp should be considered valid unless they were proven to be forged. [1] Holding ultimate authority over elections, YSK thereby abandoned the utility of its own seal against forgery and asked election officials not to weed out unvalidated envelopes from the ballot box. [2] After the count of approximately 1.5 million voting slips that came in unstamped envelopes, the number of votes in favor of constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) turned out to outweigh those against it by 51.41 percent to 48.59. [3] Although the margin is very tight (1.3 million votes), the referendum results grant the transition from a parliamentary system to presidential one, in which the next president may hold unprecedented power over legislative and judiciary bodies.
Enraged by the controversial win of the government’s “yes” campaign, “no” voters have taken to the streets to protest the referendum results. Protestors were aligned with two political fronts in the opposition camp: the secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP). Although both CHP and HDP condemned the YSK’s decision, the lenses through which they see the controversy over the referendum’s legitimacy are fundamentally different. Is it the missing seal of YSK, as CHP argues, that overshadows the referendum results? Or, as HDP argues, must other “seals,” figured in terms of the political silencing of Kurds, be taken into account in contesting the referendum’s legitimacy? The fine line dividing these two fronts could help us better understand not only the controversial win of “yes” votes, but also the forms of action through which that win could be challenged.

**Unsealed Ballot Envelopes versus Sealed off Towns**

The day after the referendum, CHP submitted a dossier to the Council of State to appeal the YSK’s decision and demanded the renewal of the referendum. The CHP’s objection can be read as a move to expose and contest the AKP’s ubiquitous control over state institutions since the coup attempt in July 2016. CHP argues that by capitalizing on the failed coup to purge thousands of civil servants from state institutions, the AKP government brought the state away from the rule of law. The YSK’s critical decision was taken as another example of the transformation of the state into a “rogue” state. According to this argument, then, the unstamped envelopes found in ballot boxes are not so much a sign that voters tampered with the election as that the current state itself is fraudulent.

The CHP’s appeal might quickly reach a cul-de-sac since the YSK’s decisions are not open to judicial review. Unless the contours of its objection are expanded, this form of political opposition could die out with the exhaustion of the appeals process. More importantly, the political insistence on proper placement of the official seal valorizes the sovereign’s signature as the only safeguard of justice, while discarding the forms of violence folded into it. In order to discern the kind of repressive force the sovereign’s seal bears, we need to turn to the pro-Kurdish camp of the opposition.

The HDP’s “no” campaign stretches back to 2014 when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ran for the presidency with the ambition to expand the executive power of the presidential office. Around that time, the presidential candidate of HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, had become a popular figure
among Kurds, leftists, feminists, ecologists, millennials, and so on. Called by his followers “Selo” and often compared to Alexis Tsipras, the charismatic leader of Syriza in Greece, Demirtaş—as a young and witty lawmaker—stood in stark contrast to what Erdoğan symbolized: a patrimonial leader reminiscent of Ottoman sultans.

Although Erdoğan ultimately won the competition, HDP succeeded in creating a vibrant and creative political opposition. Following the 2014 presidential election, a parliamentary election was held in June 2015; HDP obtained an unprecedented level of success, and became the second largest opposition party in Parliament. In the immediate aftermath of this victory, however, the AKP government began to seal decrees against the HDP through both militarized and juridical-political means.

Armed with a set of decrees against HDP bearing the seal of President Erdoğan and the government, a full-force military operation was launched in Turkey’s Kurdistan in July 2015. Heavy artillery, tanks, and warplanes were deployed by special military and police forces to crack down on armed youth groups in urban settlements where HDP had gained landslide victory. The state declared round-the-clock curfews in these urban centers, and the siege lasted for at least 169 days in 10 cities and 39 districts. From July 2015 to December 2016, the operations claimed the lives of reportedly 1,200 civilians and displaced around 1.5 million.[5] By the time the referendum took place, some curfew sites, which had already been leveled to the ground, were still sealed off to civilians, and the displaced could not even locate their ballots. Military operations were supplemented by police raids targeting the political activists, locally elected mayors, and lawmakers of HDP, including the public face of the “no” campaign, Selahattin Demirtaş. Through these mass incarcerations and collective punishments, the seals of the state ended up erasing any possibility of pursuing a “no” campaign in Turkey’s Kurdistan.

For the Kurds, the source of the illegitimacy of the referendum seems to be too grave to be contained within YSK’s envelopes. From this perspective, the AKP government was able to deploy the repressive force of the state not because it turned the state into a rogue one, but because the state has always been rogue in Turkey’s Kurdistan. Hence, Kurds associate the seal of the state not with justice but with death and refuse to accept what comes with it—inrimination, denial, and obedience. Despite the unlevel playing field on which the referendum campaign was con-
ducted, voters of the besieged towns voted “no” by at least 70 percent. In the aftermath of the referendum, HDP therefore asserts the victory of “no” votes and claims the streets to pursue a new political struggle.[6]

The implementation of the approved constitutional amendments depends on how the “no” camp, consisting of CHP and HDP, organizes itself and establishes alliances until the next election in 2019, when the newly-approved presidential system would become effective. Are the politics of the HDP and CHP incommensurable? There is a palpable potential for two parties to destabilize the AKP’s plan to elevate Erdoğan as the ultimate leader of Turkey. Yet, there is a lingering question as to the extent to the “no” parties are willing to carry on the struggle. Will CHP merely oppose the AKP’s power within the Turkish state, or join the HDP’s politics of refusal? We shall see this in the coming two years as the divergences between “no” voters take new turns both on the street and behind closed doors. What is obvious at this point is that the “no” campaign has not ended, but rather has been rekindled through new languages, objections, and inspirations.

Serra Hakyemez, Neubauer Junior Research Fellow in the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from The Johns Hopkins University. Based on her archival and ethnographic research on terror trials in Diyarbakır, Turkey (2008-2009, 2013-2015), her dissertation, Lives and Times of Militancy, examines what the “political” looks like within the space of law where Turkey resumes its war of terror against the Kurdish movement through myriad judicial and penitentiary technologies. Hakyemez is currently completing a book, Laws of Terror: Becoming Political in Criminal Courts, which approaches the political vulnerability of Kurds before the law as generative of a grammar of defense that is at once aspirational, corporal, and collective. Hakyemez's research has been awarded by the American Council of Learned Societies, National Science Foundation, and Wenner-Gren Foundation. Her publications in peer-reviewed journals and opinion pieces draw on the literature on ordinary ethics, political community, and human rights to examine the imbrications of law and violence in Turkey’s war of terror. She will begin an assistant professorship position in the Global Studies and Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in Fall 2017.

Contact: Hakyemez.serra@gmail.com or serrahakyemez@brandeis.edu.
Academia.edu: https://brandeis.academia.edu/SerraHakyemez
NOTES


[6] For the HDP’s current chair Osman Baydemir’s speech on the referendum results, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lR8OUOW4m-M
“In democratic states, no single man can shape social life according to his thinking. The new era of restoration will help our society to make peace with itself, to stand on its own intellectual formation, cultural values, and history, not on those of this or that leader.”
The recorder captured these words after a historic vote in Turkey. Contrary to the reader’s expectation, perhaps, the vote in question was not last week’s referendum where the peoples of Turkey voted on a set of constitutional amendments to hand President Erdoğan powers unprecedented in Turkey’s relatively short history of parliamentary democracy. No, this was back in 2007, after the July general elections that gave him full confidence to take the country on a new path that would eventually end in his version of “presidential democracy”.

My interlocutor at the time was not a member of the opposition, but a former MP and founding-member of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP). He was not lamenting Erdoğan’s decade-long attempts to shape society to his thinking, but was lambasting the founding figure of modern Turkey as we know it.

As I turned off the recorder, he asked me to write it down: “We will destroy the legacy of Atatürk.” A decade later and at the apogee of his power, Erdoğan may be facing the destruction of his own legacy.

Despite being gifted by a prominent Turkish EU lobbyist with the sobriquet “conservative democrat,” much favored by the Western liberals at the time, Erdoğan has never been a true democrat. Seemingly following liberal democratic principles by protecting minority rights, he was capable of clamping down on those rights whenever it suited him on the grounds of majority rule. Thus, his intentional failure to consolidate government and his subsequent war on the Kurds after their surge in votes in the June 2015 election were to be expected.

Whenever different factions oppose his antidemocratic behavior, Erdoğan comes down heavy on dissent with his police state. Signing a peace petition such as the one initiated by Academic for Peace becomes a “terrorist” act. Hundreds are imprisoned or fired from their jobs.

His approach towards democracy, which he understood as majoritarianism backed by crude electoral politics, was instrumental. For the last couple of years, he ruled Turkey as if regime change had already taken place. However widely contested by the “No” voters and refuseniks inside the country, and by international bodies like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the April 2017 referendum turned his de facto presidential rule into de jure law of the land.
With this slimmest of victories, and even with that majority put into question by odd rulings of the Erdoğan-stacked electoral commission, the Turkish President completely revamped the hitherto existing political infrastructure of Turkey that was embodied in parliamentary governance and some separation of powers. Following last year’s coup attempt, apparently orchestrated by a clandestine network led by a once-Erdoğan acolyte, Fethullah Gulen, the President-in-office moved to consolidate his powers by changing the Turkish regime from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system alla Turca, inspired by the US presidential system without the checks and balances. He fired judges, civil servants, even teachers who came under his suspicion. He jailed more journalists.

During his two decades of public service under a populist agenda, the “government” gradually replaced the “state”, to the point that the presidency became a synecdoche for the government. Today, Turkey is a sharply divided society run by a President and his party-state. His party is the new Gemeinschaft (in Turkish, cemaat), providing a sense of belonging and identity to many from all classes of society, but especially the unemployed, underpaid, or underschooled.

Many have equated Erdoğan’s vision with neo-Ottomanism, a revival of the Ottoman imperial legacy. In the words of my AKP interlocutor from a decade ago: “We cannot refuse our imperial past. Turkey is not a new state; this year is our 936th anniversary in these lands [referring to 1071, the Turkish occupation of Anatolia]!! From the Seljuks to the Ottomans, the State has endured without interruption…but we still haven’t gotten over the fact that for the last 200 years, Turks have continuously lost [land]. To constantly lose and lose so big led us to this complicated psyche that we need to overcome.”

AKP politicians’ neo-Ottomanism, then, is in many ways a conservative response towards healing their bruised ego, which they interpret as a damage to the nation.

There is another aspect of Erdoğan’s neo-Ottomanism worth mentioning, a bent that he uses to justify his alla Turca presidential ambitions, which turned out to be more in line with Russian presidentialism than the US system presidential system. Sure, the Turkish state has never been fully democratic, but for Erdoğan, it is more important now to achieve success by becoming a full-fledged post-developmental technocracy. Unlike common understandings of the term, Erdogan’s technocratic vision gives no independence to experts and their rule per se. Instead, it is more
about curbing the powers of the bureaucratic classes from whom he once benefitted and replacing them with enhanced patronage relations. Embodied in numerous material infrastructural projects in the areas of energy production and transport, Erdogan’s technocratic predilections, his desperate need to “cut the red-tape” —along with his stacking the judiciary and police with “his people”— earned him the label of the new autocrat.

In the midst of widespread allegations of vote rigging and election-fixing by the Higher Election Board, many people in Turkey believe that, after the April referendum of last week, one of the last remaining pillars of democracy since the declaration of constitutional monarchy in 1876 and first general elections during the Ottoman Empire is today untrustworthy. Over fifteen years in office, the AKP has built and maintained its political legitimacy through elections. Yet the party has never received more than 49.5% of the votes.

Erdoğan desperately characterizes the April referendum results as a decisive win, but are they really more of a defeat and cause for him to fear losing his mandate? When electoral politics fails to provide legitimacy to AKP power in the eyes of the masses, one wonders: what remains for its naked rulers? By forcing a divisive constitutional change, the rulers of modern Turkey have equally destroyed the political legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which they so cherished. Last week’s constitutional referendum might well be the last vote for some time by which the peoples of Turkey express their will, however constrained. But since the Gezi protest large parts of the population express their will outside of the ballot box, politics in Turkey is far from over.

Figen Yüksekdağ (left) and Selahattin Demirtaş (right) were co-chairs of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which became the second largest opposition party in the Turkish Parliament after the annulled November 2015 elections. Both are currently in jail without a conviction.

Bilge Firat is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University. Trained as a political anthropologist, her expertise is in lobbying and international negotiation strategies between the European Union and Turkey. Most recently, she studies energy transport infrastructures in Eurasia. Read her recent PoLAR piece: “Political Documents and Bureaucratic Entrepreneurs: Lobbying the European Parliament during Turkey’s EU Integration.” Website: http://scholars.library.tamu.edu/vivo/display/n45862549
One apocryphal account says that, when asked what he thought of Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi replied, “I think it would be a very good idea.”[1] In the present, the political form so closely associated with Western civilization—democracy—appears aspirational as well. Recent elections in countries conventionally considered part of the democratic west appear to threaten the democratic form itself. Across the globe, we have seen rhetorical and electoral assertions of ethnicized sovereignty against outsiders, particularly against “others” within nation-states and migrants. The Turkish referendum is the latest in an apparent surge of populist longing for authoritarian, “strong man” leaders (notwithstanding Marine LePen in France).

In transforming the parliamentary state into an executive one, the Turkish referendum, even setting aside its irregularities, underscores the degree to which democracy is contingent. The form itself contains the tools of its own destruction, most notably the popular referendum. The bare majoritarian referendum has long been the tool of authoritarians, who can mobilize 50 percent plus one voters legitimately or illegally to add a democratic veneer to their actions. At the risk of invoking Godwin’s law, it is worth remembering that during the Third Reich, referenda were a preferred vehicle for producing legitimacy. Recognizing the anti-democratic allure of the referendum is not simply a retrospective characterization; contemporary political scientists remarked upon this fact.
For example, Zurcher (1935) wrote: “Proving to be superfluous in a representative regime and too radically democratic, it [the referendum] has suddenly been accepted as a leading constitutional practice in a Germany which is dedicated to the extirpation of political democracy” (91).[2]

In the U.S., the conservative writer Andrew Sullivan has been sounding the alarm since at least March 2016, directing his readers to Plato’s Republic, where Socrates asserts to a student, “tyranny is probably established out of no other regime than democracy.” Indeed, in his most recent piece for New York magazine, Sullivan considers an American alt-right blogger who explicitly proclaims the movement goals to be, “the liquidation of democracy, the Constitution and the rule of law, and the transfer of absolute power to a mysterious figure known only as the Receiver, who in the process of converting Washington into a heavily armed, ultra-profitable corporation will abolish the press, smash the universities, sell the public schools, and transfer ‘decivilized populations’ to ‘secure relocation facilities’ where they will be assigned to ‘mandatory apprenticeships.’” It is not alarmist to treat such fantasies with some seriousness. After the U.S. election, Masha Gessen, a writer who knows firsthand how autocracy works, reminded us that the autocrat “means what he says,” and warned against our tendency to “practice denial when confronted publicly with the unacceptable.” Whether it is young Russians seeking stability through Putin, or alt-right trolls calling Trump “daddy,” the current political landscape offers a multitude of examples where democracy itself appears to be losing its appeal for anxious voters, who crave the reassuring promises of authority.

The pieces in this installment of PoLAR/APLA’s series “Emergency for Turkish Democracy” consider this conundrum: that the democratic form itself provides tools for its own destruction. Elektra Kostopoulou’s piece squarely addresses this paradox. Aimilia Voulvouli unpacks the political economy of the new “Anatolian revolution,” and supporters of the “Yes” vote. And Ayşe Parla considers the way hope compromises realistic assessments of political events—and can even make citizens complicit in anti-democratic changes they oppose.
This last point—how hope can undermine recognition of threats to democracy—is especially urgent in the present moment. The reasons any given electorate may long for an authoritarian leader will be shaped by many forces, including shifts in economic fortunes (e.g., neoliberal policies, rising inequalities within and between states, globalization, and deindustrialization), local political histories, and crises like climate change. Beyond populism and authoritarianism, another important shared feature of Brexit, Trump, the Turkish referendum, LePen's rise in France, and the erosion of Hungarian democracy, to name just a few recent events, is that these shifts were enacted through putatively democratic means.

One of the many dystopian novels that returned to bestseller lists following Trump’s election in the U.S. was Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*—now a terrifying (in a good way) series on the Hulu streaming service.[3] Atwood’s cautionary story imagines Gilead, a misogynistic theocracy that violently replaces the United States government. In 2017, ideologies that could produce such a regime are voiced ever more loudly in everyday life (and laws), and speculative fiction seems far less incredible than in 1986. Although the story provides no solutions, the handmaid narrator does offer a concise warning about how blind we can be to impending political doom: “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it” (Atwood 1986: 56).

Recent events suggest there is far too much complacency about what procedures of democracy can safeguard. A democratic system requires more than vigilance: it requires participation. The Turkish referendum offers us yet another dire warning, in case we needed it, that hope is not enough. In some countries it is possible for citizens to embrace the political responsibilities of democratic citizenship and participate more actively in self-governance. In others, as this series demonstrates, democracy is far more imperiled. As scholars and as citizens, we have an obligation to recognize how precarious this political form is, and to practice solidarity with those whose states have already foreclosed the means to defend their rapidly disappearing democracies.

*Jennifer Curtis is Honorary Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and Associate Editor of *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. She is the author of *Human Rights As War By Other Means: Peace Politics in Northern Ireland*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Her work focuses on grassroots social movements and human and civil rights politics and law. She is currently completing an ethnographic monograph on race, sexuality, and rights advocacy in red state America, based on fieldwork in Missouri. This book, *Strange Fruit of Liberty: Race, Sexuality, and Rights in Red State America* is under contract with *University of Pennsylvania Press.*
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[1] This statement was first reported on January 17, 1967, in a CBS news special entitled “The Italians.”


It was during a visit to a private hospital in Kayseri, a central Anatolian city in Turkey, hometown of Abdullah Gül (former President of the Republic and founding member of the ruling Justice and Development Party, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) — a city considered to represent the so-called New Turkey (Yeni Türkiye) — that I saw a headscarved woman wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt. To me, that was very unusual. As an outsider, it was my understanding that pious Muslim women were not supposed to show their skin. During my years in Istanbul working for a conservative university, I had witnessed my colleagues and students coming to class wearing their trenchcoats (pardesü) even during summer, in 30-35 degrees celsius. Yet even one of these colleagues confessed to me, when I told her that I was moving to Kayseri: “I could never live in a such a conservative place.”

To be honest, at that point I began to think that perhaps my decision to relocate to İç Anadolu (Inner Anatolia) was not a very smart move. I remember wondering: if a conservative woman
found Kayseri very “old-school,” so to speak, how was I supposed to live there? Of course, my anthropologically adventurous self prevailed, and immediately reminded me that this would be a fantastic opportunity to conduct fieldwork in the heart of *Yeni Türkiye* and immerse myself in trying to make sense of the growing support for the government in these regions, which pro-government media referred to as “the Anatolian Revolution” (*Anadolu İhtilali*).

This was a phrase emblazoned on the TV news headlines on referendum night on ATV, a well known pro-government channel, in total harmony with government narratives about the recent developments in Turkish politics especially after the attempted coup of July 2016. “The Anatolian Revolution” is an expression sometimes used to describe the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923). However, the increasingly widespread use of the term by pro-government groups in contemporary Turkey is twofold: First, it narratively frames the government and its supporters’ backlash against the attempted Coup as a kind of second War of Independence. “The triumph of July 15 can be compared to the victory of Çanakkale[1]” said one the speakers at the Democracy and Martyr’s Meeting (Demokrasi ve Şehitleri Mitingi) that took place in Kayseri (one of many organized throughout the country) to celebrate the “will of the people” to resist the coup attempt. Second, the phrase refers to the geographical areas that supported the “Yes” vote, which are traditionally the electoral strongholds of AKP. These are the districts of the Anatolian region of Turkey (Kayseri among them) that voted “Yes” in the April referendum loud-and-clear.

Foreign Media attempted to decipher the referendum vote during the days that followed the closing of the ballot. Most news outlets argued that “No” prevailed in the most affluent western part of the country, and in the predominantly Kurdish populated areas of the southeast, owing to the hostile climate that government policies in the Kurdish areas have caused; whereas the poorer Anatolian regions favored “Yes.” I followed the news from across the Turkish border in Lesbos in my home country, Greece. The narrative presented by the Greek Media followed similar trends, suggesting that poor, un-educated, non-westernized Turks prefer to be ruled by an authoritarian “Sultan,” whereas wealthy, educated and westernized citizens are attracted by a European-style liberal democracy.
If that’s the case, then why did cities like Kayseri, with three universities[2] and a large student population, which is affluent and considered to be one of the so-called “Anatolian Tigers,” back “Yes?”

“Anatolian Tigers” (Anadolu Kaplanarı) is a term used to describe a number of Anatolian cities of Turkey that have displayed impressive growth rates, as a result of the economic activity of conservative entrepreneurs that backed the electoral success of the predecessor of AKP, the Islamist-oriented Welfare Party (Refah Partisi – RP) in the 1990s (Öniş 2001). They are considered to be the product of the 1980s neoliberal restructuring of the Turkish economy, which at the same time created a constituency nurtured by an ideological framework characterized by a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” This “mixture of nationalism and Islam” (Öniş 1997: 750) shaped the character of the “Anatolian bourgeoisie,” an odd group of what I, in my work, frame as “Islamic protestants” (Voulvouli 2017 forthcoming) that operates within a framework of “disenchanted” Islamic values. Over the years, those city’s elites were able to shop in lavish shopping malls with designated praying areas, drive big cars in designer pardesüs, have extravagant weddings with esteemed guests from the Islamist political elites. These characteristics are neither particularly poor nor overtly “traditional,” and they generate a proliferating image of the New Turkey. One, clearly secularist interlocutor, born and raised in Kayseri, told me that even if he decided to move he wouldn’t know where to go, since more and more Turkish cities are becoming like Kayseri—which disappointed him enormously.

My ethnographic work suggests that it is this proliferating ideological framework that backed AKP’s rise to power and continues to sustain it fifteen years later – support which undergirds the rise of this increasingly authoritarian government. The political divide in Turkey is not the spirit of “tradition” versus “modernisation.” Rather, it is the use of Islam more as an idiom and as an influence for people to engage in financial activity. It is – drawing on Max Weber (1930) – the Islamic ethic and the “spirit of capitalism”. After all, as the 8th President of Turkey Turgut Özal once said, “rich Muslims are better than poor Muslims” (Bali 2002). Or – to return to my introductory account – as a friend of my mine commented when I told her about the short-sleeved woman wearing Hijab: “as long as her head is covered she, her husband and her family can make a good living.” Her heart (or arm) doesn’t have to be in it.

Aimilia Voulvouli is an ERC Postdoctoral Fellow at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece and case worker at the Greek Asylum Service. Prior to that, she spent four years in Turkey as an Assistant Professor in Istanbul and Kayseri. She has taught at the University of the Aegean in Greece, where she also served as a Postdoctoral Fellow funded by the Greek State Scholarship Foundation. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Turkey and Greece on collective action. Her research interests include political anthropology, social movements, environmentalism, crime, and the bureaucracy involved in asylum procedures.
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[1] The Battle of Çanakkale is considered to be the basis that formed the Turkish War of Independence.

[2] Four until recently as one university was shut down after July 15 due to its alleged connection with the Fetullah Terrorist Organisation (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü – FETÖ) that refers to supporters of Fetullah Gülen, the self-exiled, US based cleric who has been targeted as the mastermind of the coup attempt by the government.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Panos, Nazlı, Hüseyin and Kıvanç for being patient enough to talk Turkish history and politics with me.
More than ten days after the contentious constitutional Turkish referendum of April 16th, developments in Turkey seem to confirm that the country is moving from bad to worse: human rights abuses, violent censorship, massive retaliations against any form of opposition. This is hardly a surprise. In the past decade or so, the regime of Tayyip Erdoğan has become synonymous with autocracy. Hence, the outcome of a referendum that inextricably links the fate of millions to the will of one man (and his cronies) unambiguously forms but a step in a much longer process of growing authoritarianism.
It would be easy, then, to dismiss any references to democracy in Turkey as pure propaganda. The referendum allows for President Erdoğan, now well into his second decade in power, to convert Turkey into a “one-person” system. The vote results may have been tampered with. The regime undoubtedly coerced or cracked down on hundreds of thousands of voters. Yet it is important to highlight that President Erdoğan has chosen to manipulate rather than outright reject democratic proceedings in order to assume almost absolute power. In this sense, the example of Turkey resonates both with historical precedent and contemporary developments in a number of so-called “western” democracies. Erdoğan’s rise to, and consolidation of, power unsettles the binary juxtaposition between democracy and autocracy, inviting a re-consideration of how democracy operates; as well as some of the factors that may contribute to its self-destruction.

If anything, the Erdoğan phenomenon is a reminder that totalitarianism at play does not resemble a B-rated Hollywood movie, in which an evil genius enslaves the country. It can be born out of procedural democracy, rendering the reality and concept of citizenship more indeterminate. Erdoğan represents but one example of the widespread rise of neo-totalitarian populism on a global scale. To contextualize, we need to move beyond ideological assumptions and artificial regional barriers to a comparative examination of democracy’s real function (or dysfunction) in the context of the 21st century state; and as a case in point, the Turkish state.

When Tayyip Erdoğan first came to power as prime minister of Turkey in 2003, his hallmark victory shocked, inspired, and terrified. His Islamic party, AKP, led a popular takeover of the secular political establishment, allegedly in the name of the country’s forgotten people(s). This was a carefully constructed image of popular resistance against the domestic elites’ apparent monopolization of the country’s political, economic, and educational apparatuses. The takeover was accompanied by the premise of democratization and integration with neoliberal globalization which, initially, attracted different levels of support among dissimilar, or even mutually hostile, groups. Domestic ethnoreligious minorities; the EU; international trade advocates: all saw the rise of political Islam as an opportunity to spread neoliberalism and pluralistic democracy, two rather different yet closely intertwined agendas. As of the last decade, however, this type of support has started to evaporate.
Among the so-called Kemalist opposition in Turkey (CHP), the accelerating autocracy of Erdoğan’s regime proved to be a vindictive justification of their former predictions. Others struggle to find the reason why, or the moment when, things started to go really wrong. A matrix of circumstances could be identified along these lines: the global recession of 2009 that destabilized the Turkish bubble of neoliberal development, causing the Turkish lira to crash in 2016 to an all-time low; the Turkish military involvement in Syria that has opened a Pandora’s box of internal disasters with many external ramifications; the goal of EU membership that appears to be increasingly unrealistic; and last, but not least, the Kurdish political opposition (HDP) which, under the leadership of the charismatic Selahattin Demirtaş, has drawn a significant number of votes away from AKP.

Most importantly, HDP has started to appear as a tangible political alternative to the tired Kemalist narrative, which continues to revolve around a self-indulgent identification with secularism. Ideologically, Kemalism means “western progress.” Politically, it supports the rule of a western-like internal elite. The growing gap between this version of secularism and the country’s ethnoreligious, socioeconomic, and geographic realities has rendered the secular party (CHP) practically unelectable; and AKP practically undefeatable. President Erdoğan’s own political persona has evolved through the systematic elimination of challenges (and of challengers) both within and outside his own party. Hence, Demirtaş’s rise signaled a much-needed alternative not only for Turkish Kurds but for Turkey as a whole. This became clear in the general election of 2015 when, exceeding all expectations, and despite campaigns of intimidation, HDP drew an unprecedented 13.12 percent of the Turkish vote and AKP’s wrath.[III]

Regardless, while coverage of Erdoğan’s many outrages remains prominent in the world press, we pay little attention to the fact that, for the time being, he exists in the vacuum created by a lack of a cohesive democratic alternative. His turn to bigotry, authoritarianism, and violent suppression has been the clear outcome of persisting popular support. This becomes even clearer when we situate contemporary realities in relation to preceding circumstances.

Turkey was born in the aftermath of World War I, from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, to become, right from the outset, a one-party (initially, a one-person) state molded by military mobilizations. This was followed by the gradual crystallization of deeply hierarchical socioeconomic and political elites which, nevertheless, failed to prevent political instability and domestic military turmoil. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the country experienced three military coups and numerous failed political coalitions,
which resulted in further oppression of ethnoreligious difference, lack of economic opportunity, and ideological indoctrination. From this point of view, the first years of AKP (which overlapped with the first decade of the 21st century) formed a short-lived interruption to long-term patterns of uncertainty, and to the widespread exclusion of large indigenous groups from the democratic political process. In the past few years, however, Erdoğan has revived old-fashioned authoritarianism in a “neo-populist” guise.

The 21st century has witnessed accelerated economic globalization and international military interventions with varied, and at times extremely violent, effects. In contrast, democracy remains the political offspring of the nation-state, with nationalism the main institutional apparatus of popular representation. In this unsettling contradiction, charismatic neo-populists thrive. They can benefit both from the forceful winds of globalization, which undermine existing national barriers, protections, and restrictions; and from the fear, anger, and uncertainty caused when globalization fails the people. Alarmingly, this phenomenon resonates directly with developments in the democracies of western/central Europe in the mid-20th century.

Hence, approaching the Turkish referendum, or political autocracy in general, through the lenses of “middle-eastern” exceptionalism implies a misunderstanding both of democracy’s controversial histories and of contemporary global realities. The failure to take into account that developments in the US, the EU, Britain, Russia, and elsewhere resonate directly with Turkey, is consistent with our tendency toward binary understandings of economic/cultural development, democracy, and progress.

The semiology of the Turkish referendum is in fact becoming increasingly familiar. Democracy often survives by reproducing topological and ideological deformities, which sometimes take the shape of the authoritarian. In this context, both political survival and full destruction seem imaginable. But the answers as to what the future holds are not to be found exclusively in the deformities of a given regime. This is not a debate about how terrible autocratic populism is, but rather, about what happens if its opponents fail to reimagine, reshape, and eventually reclaim their connection to a coherent majority of people(s)—or are barred from doing so through violence, propaganda, or straightforward war.

Dr. Elektra Kostopoulou In joined the Modern Greek Studies Program at Rutgers University in 2013. Her research and publications address regional histories from the perspective of global queries, with a specific focus on the intertwined histories of the late Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece. Her most recent book project, Of Minarets and Minotaurs: The Story of Autonomous Crete (1898-1913), addresses regional autonomy as an example of the convoluted layers of colonialism, empire, and nationalism in the Eastern Mediterranean. She has been the recipient of various awards, fellowships, and grants and has taught at numerous universities in Europe, Turkey, and the USA. Her most recent courses aim to draw connections between late Ottoman history and the current migrant/refugee crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean in an attempt to find in academic engagement with the region new opportunities for solidarity and tangible action. Email: ek528@scarletmail.rutgers.edu or kostopoulou@outlook.com.
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[I] The title is a play on piece published in the Guardian on April 27th, 2017. The author, Ibrahim Kalin is a spokesperson for the Turkish regime, see https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2017/apr/27/erdogan-turkey-referendum-democracy-military.


It is by now common knowledge that the April 2017 referendum in Turkey to move from a parliamentary to a presidential system is likely to grant sweeping executive powers to the country’s president. What may have escaped the outside gaze, however, is the extent to which the landscape of dissent was steeped in hope in the months leading up to the referendum, despite the fact that all the odds were stacked against a “No” outcome. For starters, the vote was held in a state of emergency. The emergency was ostensibly declared in response to the failed coup attempt of July 2016, but functions as a catalyst for a nation-wide purge, including the sacking and imprisonment of more than a hundred thousand public employees, politicians, journalists, academics, and ordinary citizens. Furthermore, the two sides were not remotely equal in campaign opportunities. The “Yes” campaign dominated print and airwave in the virtually government-controlled media, while “No” supporters were bullied at campaign events, designated as terrorist sympathizers by senior officials, and faced detentions. Most significantly of all, numerous members and thirteen MPs from HDP, the third largest party in the parliament and the strongest opposition to AKP, are behind bars, including the party’s co-presidents.
If people who were integral to an effective no campaign were “being held hostage,” as Yervart Danzikyan wrote in his column, to what extent did we, the “No”-sayers, become hostages ourselves by participating in the referendum travesty? Did our hope fall prey to what Erik Erikson termed the “maladaptive optimism” of the infant who, in her boundless desire, fails to register the bounds of the possible? If hope is to be rescued from optimism, it must be fallible, Eagleton writes. This short intervention, then, could be read as a plea against recent calls by some dissidents for optimism, before and in the aftermath of the referendum.

Leaving aside the effective and affective deployment of hope for political mobilization, I ponder the ramifications of hoping under conditions so compromised that the vote was never legitimate in the first place. Long before the egregious breach of the YSK declaration that changed ballot validity criteria during the last hours of counting, the referendum had already lost legitimacy when the main opposition party, CHP, acquiesced to lift the constitutionally protected parliamentary immunity of the MPs. This was a decisive—and for Turkey’s democracy, disastrous—move that pushed the button on the arrests of Kurdish politicians. In early 2015, in what may have been the shortest speech in Turkey’s parliamentary history, Selahattin Demirtaş, known affectionately as “Selo Başgan” in local parlance and dubbed “the Kurdish Obama” in international media, repeated the same sentence three times: “We won’t let you become an executive president.” This prescient allusion referred to President Erdoğan’s plans for a presidential regime, plans already in the works. And Demirtaş’ taunt proved more prophetic than Erdoğan may have credited at the time: HDP achieved a historic breakthrough in the June 2015 elections. Not only was a pro-Kurdish party passing the formidable ten percent election threshold for the first time and dealing a severe blow to AKP’s majority rule since 2002 by gaining 80 seats. Perhaps even more threateningly, HDP was extending its base to include even devoted CHP voters who were disarmed by Demirtaş’ inclusive rhetoric, environmental and human rights sensibilities, extraordinary wit, and bağlama-playing charm. In the absence of consensus for a coalition-formed government and the suspicious eruption of violence across the country, AKP moved to snap elections in November 2015 that restored its parliamentary majority and weakened HDP, but could not get rid of it entirely. Hence, the final crackdown on the Kurdish movement through incarceration of its leadership and membership.
Given that the dice were already loaded, how did our insistence on hope for a “No” outcome obscure rather than enable? What if we were to suspend the common assumption that hope is necessarily conducive to transformative politics and consider instead governance through hope, \[III\] whereby our clinging to hope might have garnered consent for an illegitimate referendum? As courageous as it was, the effervescence of a campaign that persevered in its hope of a “No” outcome foreclosed adequate consideration of other political possibilities that a refusal of hope might have made possible — whether in the form of boycott, or short of that, a sustained confrontation with unlawful politics, present and past. Proclamations of hope in Turkey’s future all too often go hand in hand with curtailed recognition of its violent and genocidal past. As exacerbated as the contemporary siege of civil liberties may be, an oppositional politics of hope premised primarily on the exceptional nature of the current government risks oblivion of the exceptionalism that has plagued Turkish politics ever since its inception. One could go all the way back to the legacy of single party rule in the first twenty-two years of the Republic. Or one might consider more recent history for an all too easily blotted out precedent, namely the 1982 “referendum,” \[IV\] which took place on the heels of the 1980 military coup which ushered in the current constitution written under the auspices of the junta dictatorship of Kenan Evren. Or one could recall that the current electoral system, introduced after the 1980 coup, sets a countrywide ten percent election threshold for parliamentary seats, an exceptionally high threshold that has kept the Kurdish contingency at bay.

Image of “No” voters enacting the signifier “h-a-y-i-r” (“no”), distributed widely on social media.
To me, the highlight of the “No” campaign was a series of choreographed photographs comprised of corporeal enactments of the signifier “h-a-y-i-r” (the word for “no.”) In each picture, people spell out the word by substituting their bodies for the letters. Poses range from the most undemanding, standing-straight posture for the letter “I” (often claimed by the senior person in the group) to challenging contortions of the body such as two people joining one leg while poised in a headstand to form the letter H. In one picture, workers in uniform conclude the R in a salute; while in another, two workers, unable to have assembled enough bodies to complete the spelling, substitute brooms in lieu of the letters H, A, and I, and get a little extra help to form the Y. In a solo picture, a middle-aged woman reclines, leisurely, over her pile of cucumbers and gazes straight into the camera. The word “Hayır” is spelled in front of her with nineteen cucumbers. She herself cannot be bothered. Whether she is too confident or too cynical is not clear, but the photograph brims with irony. The double pun on hayır/hıyar is not lost on the native speaker—hıyar, an anagram of hayır, means both cucumber and “a fool.” Through substituted letters, missing bodies, and their unavoidable admission of the limits to which different bodies can be stretched to fulfill the acrobatics required, such corporeal performances index, wittingly or unwittingly, the joys and the limits of the “No” campaign.

Perhaps all hope is compromised to some degree in its inevitably prospective nature. But for Walter Benjamin, there is an added moral and political complacency to the kind of hope that does not take adequate stock of what he called the catastrophic nature of the past.[V] Such hope is bound to remain romantic at best, or worse, risks being “bullish about life.”[VI] Rather than waxing optimistic about Turkey’s future potential for democracy, a hope that orients itself squarely towards reckoning with history seems particularly apt for a political geography that continues to eschew confrontation with its catastrophic past. In that, the unlawfulness of the YSK decision is perhaps the only source of hope that remains of the referendum: not because the results have a chance of being overturned, nor because the margin was so unexpectedly close, but because it invites us to confront the compromised conditions of possibility on which hope for a “No” result was based in the first place.
Ayşe Parla received her Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from New York University in 2005. She is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Sabancı University, Istanbul and a member this year at the Institute for Advanced Study.

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The essays in this final installment on the Turkish referendum address the question: what now? Both essays eschew a narrow focus on the referendum’s immediate implications in favor of a broader consideration of time, emotion, and the political imagination. Deniz Yonucu emphasizes the importance of the past for understanding the present. She critiques the discourse of exceptionalism that surrounds the referendum by placing it within the context of the ongoing Kurdish political struggle. Kurds and other marginalized groups, she notes, have long been living in an effective state-of-emergency, and have suffered, not just from the actions of Erdoğan and the AKP, but also from the inaction of the CHP, the country’s primary opposition party and vocal proponent of the “No” vote during the referendum. This history hangs over the CHP’s current efforts to establish a strong opposition bloc in the 2019 parliamentary elections, and highlights the ongoing significance of enmity towards Kurds in the Turkish political imaginary.
In their essay, Oguz Alyanak and Funda Ustek-Spilda query the significance of the present for thinking about the future. They address the “melancholy of lost hope” that has set in for many following the referendum. For Freud, melancholy (or melancholia) is the pathological version of mourning. It is pathological because it knows no end; the grief of the past is perpetually projected into the future. Alyanak and Ustek-Spilda recognize how the politics of the present could encourage such a melancholic response—a retreat into hopelessness. But they encourage reflexive engagement instead. “Losing hope in hope itself risks leaving us to wallow in apathy,” they write. Echoing Jennifer Curtis’s contribution to this series, they argue that, even in the best of times, hope is insufficient to sustain democracy, for democracy thrives, not just on hope, but on participation. They note there are pockets of opposition and resistance that are even now operating in the wake of the referendum. For the authors, these are not just democratic practices undertaken in hope for a different future, but are themselves a “practicing of hope for democracy.”

William Garriott is associate professor in the Law, Politics, and Society Program at Drake University. His research and teaching focus on the relationship between law, crime, and criminal justice, broadly conceived, with specific interest in drugs, addiction, policing and governance. He is the author of Policing Methamphetamine: Narcopolitics in Rural America as well as editor of the volumes Policing and Contemporary Governance: The Anthropology of Police in Practice and (with Eugene Raikhel) Addiction Trajectories. He currently serves as co-editor (with Heath Cabot) of PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review.
It has been three weeks since Turkey’s controversial referendum and the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the founding party of Turkey and the second biggest party in Parliament, has already started discussing potential candidates for a heterogeneous “no” block for the 2019 elections. Although the CHP, which represents itself as the main opposition party, objected to the election results on the basis of fraud and submitted an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, the party’s leader also stated his disapproval of the protests taking place in the streets and called on the crowds denouncing the election results to go back home. The party’s representatives now claim that their primary aim is to get ready for the 2019 elections so they can take Erdoğan down and replace him with another president who—like Erdoğan under the new presidential system—would have the power to override parliament and issue decrees.
In a country where prisons are filled with dissenting voices (including MPs and elected mayors), where emergency decrees have increasingly deprived hundreds of thousands of people of their jobs, and 83 elected mayors have been replaced with government-appointed trustees, it would be naïve to think that CHP representatives really believe that the 2019 elections will be free of fraud and that Erdoğan would accept a defeat. Why, then, did the so-called opposition party, which launched a “no” campaign against Erdoğan, object so meekly to the controversial election results and call its supporters off the streets?

Today, as the authoritarian tendencies and aims of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) have started to target larger swathes of the population, including that segment which enjoys the privilege of being Turkish in a nationalist and profoundly anti-Kurdish and anti-Armenian society, the AKP’s policies have garnered broader international attention. Noting the policies enacted under the current state of emergency and the enormous powers that will be given to the president after the 2019 elections, commentators have claimed that Turkey is undergoing a historical transformation. While it is true that Turkey is going through a historical process of change, this shift has not come about just as the result of state-of-emergency policies, which for decades have targeted Kurds and working-class Aleviis living in the urban margins. For the first time in its history, in the elections of June 2015 Turkey witnessed the electoral success of a political party (the People’s Democracy Party, the HDP) that emerged from the long criminalized Kurdish liberation movement that includes the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), a Fanonian party [1] which adopts an anti-colonial resistance strategy against the Turkish State.

As a result of the election campaign carried out by HDP co-chairs Figên Yüksekdağ, the former chair of the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP), and Selahattin Demirtaş, a Kurdish politician and human rights activist, the HDP passed the 10 percent threshold in Parliament by receiving 13.12 percent of votes (six million in total). The party was successful in bringing together anti-AKP Kurds, socialists, feminists, LGBT activists, and critical Muslims from Turkey’s Kurdistan and other parts of Turkey, thereby creating a peace and democracy bloc that has intervened effectively in politics. Given the fact that Turkish ruling elites have been waging a systematic war
against Kurdish civil politics for decades, a situation which Derya Bayır (2014) refers to as “politi
cide,”[2] borrowing a term from Baruch Kimmerling (2003).[3] the HDP’s electoral success was
tremendously significant in ways that basic statistics cannot measure.

This success not only proved the Kurdish liberation move-
ment’s adamant insistence on
civil politics in spite of the de

decades long lawfare and warfare
against Kurdish activists: it also
demonstrated the possibility of
the de-criminalization of the
stigmatized Kurdish political
voices in the eyes of the Turkish
public. Indeed, aware of the
challenges posed by the HDP’s
peace and democracy bloc and
seeing the party as a threat, the
AKP administration did not
hesitate to re-initiate the war
in Turkey’s Kurdistan. Shortly
after the elections in 2015,

Turkish military forces occupied Kurdish towns, declared curfews, took lives and left hundreds of thousands of Kurds homeless and dispossessed. Through this process, Parliament granted immu
nity to military personnel who were “serving” in Kurdistan, while members of Parliament
were stripped of their immunity with the goal of putting HDP parliamentarians behind bars—a
move backed by MPs from the AKP, CHP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). As of today,

thirteen HDP parliamentarians, including its co-chairs, have been imprisoned on the grounds of
encouraging or supporting terrorism, and others expect to be arrested as well.

Turkey’s long-suppressed Kurdish political struggle found an opening during the brief “peace
process” carried out between 2013 and 2015, managing to become the second biggest opposition
party in the country. It not only gained the support of Kurds but also of Turks who for a long
time had turned a blind eye to the various forms of violence inflicted on Kurds. At the same time,

the PKK and its affiliate, the People’s Defense Units (YPG), took major steps toward building
multi-ethnic and multi-religious autonomous areas of governance in Syria, thereby becoming key
actors in those regions. At this point it should be noted that the Turkish national(ist) ideology has
crafted a narrative in which the Kurds, like other colonized peoples, are “uncivilized” and “igno-
rant,” and therefore incapable of ruling themselves. This ideology, of course, is not independent of
Turkish ruling elites’ treatment of Kurdistan and former Armenian lands in Turkey’s South East as
The political success of the Kurds, hence the colonized, has intimidated not just the authoritarian AKP and ultranationalist MHP but also the nationalist, secularist, so-called social democratic CHP. When the AKP appointed trustees to 83 Kurdish provinces and jailed elected Kurdish mayors and MPs, the CHP drew upon such a colonial mindset in its refusal to see those moves as a breach of democracy. The CHP gave its tacit consent to the large-scale violence in Turkey’s Kurdistan by not objecting, adopting a stance of inaction, and choosing to be partners (in crime) with the AKP in silencing Kurdish political voices and putting the elected representatives of Kurds behind the bars. It was through just such a colonial mindset—so entrenched in the Turkish political imaginary—that a CHP deputy had the audacity to say, in an interview with a Kurdish journalist after the referendum, that “Kurds’ biggest expectation [in solving the so-called Kurdish issue] is from the CHP” — presenting CHP as the future benevolent savior of the Kurds. [5]

The AKP and the so-called opposition in parliament are united in their enmity towards Kurdish political voices and practices that have taken action so effectively in Turkey’s political scene. The political success of the Kurdish liberation movement both within and outside Turkey has prompted those parties to feel a sense of colonial envy, which not only drives them to “devalue” (cf. Memni 2013) [6] the colonized but also try to erase her from the scene. In spite of its supporters’ fear of a non-secular and religious society, the secularist CHP’s alignment with an Islamist party proves that the enmity against and fear of the Kurds, who do not need benevolence and have a say in the Turkish politics, is one of the key components of the Turkish politics and/or political imaginary.

Deniz Yonucu received her PhD degree in Social Anthropology from Cornell University in 2014 and is currently an Alexander von Humboldt post-doctoral fellow at Leibniz-ZMO and Forum Transregionale Studien and a visiting lecturer at Freie University’s Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. She is currently completing a manuscript that builds on her dissertation project funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Middle East Research Competition of the Ford Foundation. The manuscript, entitled War Against Politics: Law, Sovereignty and Terror at the Margins of Turkey, focuses on marginalized Alevi populated working class neighborhoods in Istanbul and analyses the complex relationship between law, state violence, counter violence and sovereignty in Turkey.

E-mail: deniz.yonucu@gmail.com
NOTES


“Our people made a choice and approved the constitutional changes. The debate is over. So are days of post-election uncertainty. It is time to move on,” argued the Turkish President Erdoğan in his post-Referendum address in the Turkish capital.

But is the debate, really, over?

Hours into the referendum, the Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey (YSK) allowed the inclusion of voting slips and envelopes without official stamps to the vote count, which was a violation of Article 98 of the Electoral Law. In its commentary published a week later, the YSK stood behind its decision, arguing that “the conditions for an absolute illegality were not met” and that a constituent’s vote could not be annulled simply because of a mistake committed by the ballot box supervisors. What they meant by the term, “absolute illegality” [tam kanunsuzluk] remains a mystery. Were conditions for a partial illegality met, for example?
According to the opposition, the conditions were met indeed. The YSK’s decision helped whitewash a systematic electoral fraud that helped the Justice and Development Party (AKP) secure a victory, which, the opposition argued, would otherwise not be attainable. Accordingly, of the approximately 50 million votes casted in the Referendum, at least 2.5 million were claimed to be fraudulent. Images from Turkey’s conflict-torn South East surfaced with “No” votes lying around in the basement of an abandoned building. In some districts, block voting claims surged as the “Yes” votes appeared mysteriously high despite the usual political constituencies of these districts. Elsewhere, videos circulated on social media in the hours and days following the referendum, showing ballot box supervisors meddling with the results.

We believe that despite attempts to close this case, the debate is far from over. And so is our hope, which, we argue, persists in subtle ways.

When the polls closed on April 16, a sound wave of clanking casseroles filled the streets of many Turkish cities. People walked out of their homes and occupied the streets despite State of Emergency rules outlawing public assembly. The protestors mobilized under the hashtag #HayirBiz-Kazandik/#NoWeWon, and the protests continued on for several days. The manner in which the protests were initiated was a shout out to the Gezi Park Protests of 2013, where the opponents of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) took over the urban land-and-soundscape of Turkey. The protests over the referendum result were perhaps too subtle for the international media to pick up, but they were still there to remind us that this was not a lost battle. The margin was tight; 51 percent “Yes” v. 49 percent “No” votes, and the potentially fraudulent 2.5 million votes could alter the cursor’s direction. Hence there was ample reason to make some noise.

The state’s response was swift. Quickly came a new law that invented a new crime for engaging in “propaganda about the illegitimacy of the ‘Yes’ result”, followed by a string of detentions. Erdoğan tolerated little time to discuss, let alone, digest the sweeping changes that were hastily enforced. The debate was not over, but the polity wanted to ensure that it was.
This is why our reflections on Turkey these days are shaped by a lingering sense of helplessness and hopelessness. As Hannah Arendt writes in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the “true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion, but organization of the polity… What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part.” The consistency of debates being declared “over” without any time or need for explanation and/or clarification, as well as the sidelining and suppression of all voices of dissent and criticism bring forth a sense of detachment and hopelessness. Why care, when all hope is lost for our belief in change? A large part of our pessimism has to do with how little space we have to think and act outside of President Erdoğan’s and his AKP’s gaze. It also has to do with how little opportunity we create for ourselves to think beyond the discursive boundaries manifested by those in power. Columns in scholarly blogs, such as this one, offer spaces for critical discourse, but we know that they might come at a hefty price to its authors. And even then, it often remains limited in its reach.

In a rather gloomy column on the Turkish referendum, Ayşe Parla asked whether the “No”-sayers had themselves become hostages through their belief in a false hope. Why be complicit in hope? Why remain hopeful, especially when the final arbiter, the President, had long spoken his concluding words? For those of us who have nothing else but hope to ponder on, a critique of hope comes as a sinister blow to our very life-line. The belief in hope, as Parla argues, keeps other alternatives out of sight. And she is right. We should have, by now, learned our lesson not to be hopeful for structural changes after having been let down so many times in the preceding years and by the consistency of how fast important debates were closed or got lost in the immediacy of other issues in Turkey’s political agenda.

A critique of hope is a productive intellectual exercise. And Parla’s scholarly intervention is an excellent illustration of it.
But so is reflexively engaging with our hopelessness. Losing hope in hope itself risks leaving us to wallow in apathy. While we are not here to offer an appraisal of hope, or celebrate a false hope, we would like to be mindful of the possibilities for alternative kinds of protest, which continue to take place in Turkey (such as a ongoing boycott against a dairy giant, whose CEO had a verbal confrontation with the No-sayers), albeit in small scale and disconnected forms. Raising our voices internationally is but one thing we can do.

The post-referendum Turkey bears stark differences to the Turkey of Gezi Park protests, which found significantly more coverage in international media and academic scholarship, and had a more hopeful tone to them than what we see today. But giving up hope in and on Turkey does not help. In the words of Arendt again, for “nothing perhaps illustrates the general disintegration of political life better than this vague, perhaps hatred of everybody and everything without a focus for its passionate attention, with nobody to make responsible for the state of affairs (...). It consequently turned in all directions, haphazardly and unpredictably, incapable of assuming an air of healthy indifference towards anything under the sun.”

For some, not giving up hope might at best be wishful thinking, especially under the draconian measures of the State of Emergency rule perpetually being extended and where ruling by decree has become the norm rather than the exception. Yet, it should not mean becoming indifferent, but instead, all the more a reason for devising new platforms for “making some noise.” As Jennifer Curtis aptly notes, a democratic system requires more than vigilance (or hope, for that matter). It requires participation. This is because action and participation are animating features of democracy. Even when the very underpinnings of democracy are distorted and its institutional and legal protection is undermined—as we witness today in Turkey—it is still taking action and participating in action that can help preserve, defend and re-assert democracy. No matter how small, subtle and dispersed resistances we might see, we hold them crucially important not for just being courageous enough for raising our voice, but for their practicing of hope for democracy.
Oguz Alyanak is a PhD candidate in sociocultural anthropology and a McDonnell scholar at Washington University in St. Louis. His fieldwork in Strasbourg, funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, was on moral anxieties pertaining to Muslim Turkish men’s going out habits. He writes a column on Turkey for Anthropology News.

Funda Usteck-Spilda is a Postdoctoral Researcher on the ARITHMUS research project “Peopling Europe: How data make a people” at Goldsmiths, University of London. She obtained her doctorate in Sociology from the University of Oxford & St. Cross College. She writes on missing people in official statistics, particularly with respect to labor, migration and gender.