



NATIONALISM BY CHOICE:  
HOW THE PRESIDENTS OF TURKEY AND  
RUSSIA TAKE ADVANTAGE OF  
NATIONAL FEELINGS TO STAY IN POWER

by Michael Thumann



**About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative**

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

## Introduction

Nationalism, a concept of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is offered on the global marketplace of ideas as a solution for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nationalist movements and xenophobic sentiments are on the rise in many countries in Europe and around the world. Simultaneously, a growing number of politicians all over the world have responded to these trends. They call themselves nationalists, they pursue nationalist policies, and they employ nationalist rhetoric.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced essential features of a nationalist agenda. Across Europe and the world, borders have been closed, the movements of refugees and migrants have been interrupted, and international trade has been severely damaged. Globalization is coming to a halt, and the historic opening of the world after the end of the Cold War in 1990 is hanging in the balance. Nationalists have taken advantage of these developments to promote their agendas; some have disabled parliaments and rule now by decree with unlimited powers.

This article will focus primarily on the leaders who offer nationalist solutions to current problems and less on the populist mood and related grassroots organizations. Top-down nationalism is no less of a concern for Europe, Turkey, and the wider neighborhood than nationalist movements from below. In the past years, we have seen that political leaders were able to bring underlying nationalist currents to the surface and to dominate the public space.

Nationalistic right-wing and conservative populist leaders had already been in power in Russia, Poland, Turkey, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania before a self-declared nationalist<sup>1</sup> was elected president of the United States in November 2016. These leaders all share similar messages of the uniqueness and preeminence of their respective countries. They use and abuse nationalist sentiment to rally people around the flag and mobilize public sentiment against the “corrupt old elites.” Most of them promote isolationism and spread messages about the curse of globalization. Many condemn international organizations and prefer bilateral agreements called “deals.” Most messages are classical nationalist demands recalling the past.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of European countries were ruled by nationalist leaders

who had started their political careers as nativists or nationalists, racists or militant chauvinists. Benito Mussolini in Italy was the first to lead a fascist movement to power in Europe. He was also a textbook nationalist who had, at an early stage, promised discipline and Roman-style dictatorship and delivered it in horrifying ways. Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* when he was imprisoned in Landsberg, Germany, in 1924. His pamphlet was not taken seriously at the time of publication but proved to be an almost accurate projection of the crimes and the genocide he would commit many years later. A more recent example of a genuine nationalist is the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, a psychiatrist and poet who joined the political class when Yugoslavia fell apart in 1990. Karadžić was a Serbian nationalist at an early age, as his poetry shows. His work is a pompous reading of self-pity and resentment, inspired by nationalist thinking. An important mentor of Karadžić was the Serbian nationalist writer and later president of Yugoslavia, Dobrica Ćosić.

Today, we witness a very different pattern of nationalism that I call *nationalism by choice*. My argument is that a number of today’s leaders who pursue nationalist policies did not start out as nationalists. They were neither nationalists when they came to power nor had they any distinct nationalist credentials when they started their careers. To the contrary, some even opposed nationalists and denounced nationalism. However, at a certain point in their career they reconsidered their stance and adopted nationalism as a means to rule or to come to power. For them, nationalism is a function more than an ideology. Nationalism by choice has two criteria. First, the political leader makes a choice to become a nationalist. Second, he chooses from among different patterns of nationalism what suits his tactics best.

The two leaders who best illustrate this postmodern form of nationalism are President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. They ventured into nationalism in three stages, which I will analyze in this policy brief. First, I will trace their careers as critics of nationalism. Second, I will explain how both leaders experienced a number of crises that prompted their political turnaround. Third, I will look at the means and methods to implement their newly learned nationalism. Finally, I will ask how sustainable this policy is, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

## Critics of Nationalism

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, he was not the Putin we know today. Similarly, Erdoğan came into office in 2003 with a rhetoric and program contrary to his current policies. In the beginning of their terms in office, both leaders focused on the integration of their countries into Western structures—or at least on closer cooperation. Vladimir Putin visited Germany in 2001 and spoke to the Bundestag in German celebrating Russian-German friendship. When al-Qaida terrorists attacked New York and Washington in September 2001, Putin was among the first leaders to call U.S. President George W. Bush. Shortly after this, he visited him on his ranch. Putin uttered very cautious criticism when NATO was enlarged in 1999 and 2004; in 2004, he even expressed hope that NATO's enlargement would lead to “the strengthening of trust in Europe and the entire world.”<sup>3</sup> Putin had no qualms with the EU's enlargement process in the 2000s, unlike in 2013 when he tried to prevent an EU-Ukraine customs union.

In his early days in office, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a comprehensive effort to begin membership negotiations with the European Union. He implemented EU-inspired reforms and was rewarded with the start of accession negotiations in 2005. In the early stages of their careers, Putin and Erdoğan tried to become friends, not foes, of the West.

At the time both leaders enjoyed the privilege of presiding over a sustained economic boom. Russia profited from quickly rising prices of oil and gas after OPEC had agreed on a minimum price corridor per barrel and had cut production quotas in 1999 and 2000. Erdoğan continued the financial reforms of his predecessors and followed the script of the IMF. In both countries, a new middle class emerged, larger segments of society moved into new housing and flooded shiny new shopping malls. Putin and Erdoğan based part of their popularity on the promise of prosperity. They spread the narrative of upward social mobility and claimed the praise for it. Subsequently, both got reelected after their first term.

Putin and Erdoğan also engaged in comprehensive integration processes in their countries and neigh-

borhood. Erdoğan declared in 2005 that the Kurdish problem was his own to solve; he denounced nationalism on numerous occasions and led two comprehensive negotiation processes to find a solution to the Kurdish problem. Erdoğan promised to “trample on nationalism”<sup>4</sup> and accused nationalists of “forc[ing] an identity on people”<sup>5</sup> while he pushed for the Kurdish opening. Putin, meanwhile, was looking for integration within his own neighborhood when he founded the Eurasian Economic Union. He hoped for as many post-Soviet states as possible to join the Union, yet the most important country for him was Ukraine.

What prompted the leaders to go down the path of nationalism by choice? In Turkey and in Russia, Western countries cannot deny their role in creating an increasingly frosty relationship. As for Russia, George W. Bush's unilateralism in the Middle East and the invasion of Iraq contributed to Russia's decision to try its own brand of unilateralism. In Turkey, Erdoğan's pro-European policies were frustrated by France and the Republic of Cyprus's block of crucial chapters of Turkey's membership negotiations with the EU, while Germany under Chancellor Merkel looked on indifferently and called for a “privileged partnership.”

## Choosing Nationalism

The main reasons for the turnaround were of purely domestic origin. After the global financial crisis in 2008, the economic situation in Russia deteriorated. Putin's narrative of upward social mobility seemed not to work anymore. His popularity suffered terribly when he sought a return to the president's office in 2012. Middle-class citizens and Russian liberals revolted against this political advance in late 2011 and 2012 during the Bolotnaia protests. At that time only 42 percent of Russians wanted to elect him president again.<sup>6</sup> Putin's spin doctors brushed up his image for election day, but after this his popularity nose-dived, again. Putin was in a desperate search for a new narrative, and he tested it when he wrote an article on nationalism in *Nezavissimaya Gazeta*<sup>7</sup> in January 2012. In this article, he called Russia a “civilization with the Russian people and the Russian culture at its core.” This was surprising to hear from Putin, who had

previously preferred to speak of *rossiiskii narod*, the people of the multiethnic Russian federation, instead of *rusiskii narod*, meaning the Russian people in the distinct ethnic sense of the term. Later in the year he claimed to be the biggest nationalist in his country. He could live up to this title in late 2013 when his regional integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union, was threatened in the Maidan uprising in Kyiv. This uprising started as a conflict about Ukraine's deep and comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union, which precluded Ukraine's full membership in Putin's newly designed Eurasian Union. However, compromises were not found. As the Ukrainian president faced a revolt over his pro-Russian policies, Putin chose aggressive nationalism as a program and occupied Crimea. This move ensured his popularity for years to come.

In Turkey, Erdoğan's slide toward nationalism by choice was prompted by three shocks. The first was the Gezi park event, when young urban, middle-class and civil society actors turned against him. The second factor was the collapse of Turkey's economic boom<sup>8</sup> and the end of the narrative that his rule would bring indefinite prosperity to the Turkish people. The third shock was the eventual breakdown of the solution process with Kurdish leaders, which upset Erdoğan's hopes that the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) would help him become president of Turkey.

In the crisis year of 2015, Erdoğan ended the rapprochement with the Kurds and started to fight both the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the HDP. He had won earlier elections with the promise of prosperity, yet in the November 2015 polls he prevailed with extremist slogans of a struggle for national survival. This was a dramatic shift compared to the times when he denounced nationalists and considered the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) a political foe. After the election, Erdoğan pursued his project to change the constitution and create a presidential system. For this venture, he was offered help by the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Erdoğan quickly joined hands with his former foe. Like Putin two years before him, he became a nationalist by choice.

"Nationalism by choice" has a double meaning. Rulers choose nationalism and nationalist rhetoric as a means of clinging to power, but it also implies that the ruler chooses from the large menu of nationalisms as he sees fit. Russian and Turkish nationalisms share a wide range of variations as they refer to both the imperial past and the present nation-state. In Russia, ethnic nationalists would claim Russia only for Russians, for example, whereas Slavophiles would imagine a union of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Eurasianists propose a new empire of the people in the Eurasian space with Russians as the leading nation and Russian as the lingua franca. The Russian Orthodox Church idealizes the Tsarist empire, and so do Slavophiles, while Communist Orthodox nationalists merge Stalin's Soviet totalitarianism and Christian Orthodox beliefs in a toxic mix of ideology.

In Turkey, Kemalists uphold Atatürk's republican nationalism of 1923; left-wing, neo-nationalists (*ulusalci*) would do the same but with a strong anti-Western and anti-NATO bias. Eurasianists are equally anti-Western and suggest Turkey join forces with Eastern powers such as Russia, Iran, Syria, and possibly China. Neo-Ottomanists would praise the victories and virtues of the Ottoman Empire; nationalist Islamists do the same but emphasize the religious aspect of the empire. Right-wing nationalists (*ülküçü*) are ethnic nationalists who despise the West, while some of them support the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, an ideological blend championed by the generals of the September 12, 1980 coup.

Which patterns of Russian nationalism has Vladimir Putin chosen, and which are the preferred nationalist models of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan?

Putin does not go for one a particular category of nationalism: he plays with more than one. He encouraged ethnic nationalists in Crimea in 2014 but then curbed their enthusiasm in Eastern Ukraine later in the year. He fiddled with Eurasianist ideas for a while only to have the leading Eurasianist ideologue, Alexander Dugin, fired from his post as a professor in 2014. He nurtures positive perceptions of both Joseph Stalin and Alexander III, the Soviet dictator and the autocratic nationalist tsar. Putin applies nationalism as a method to consolidate the nation under his leadership in a way that

ethnic Russians, Chechens, imperialists, and religious people all think they have their own place in a nominally federal Russia. Here is where Putin differs strongly from the Turkish case.

Erdoğan's way of ruling is through polarization. He repeatedly lashed out at nationalists when he supported the resolution process with the Kurds. Likewise, he created further polarization in Turkey when he chose to fight the PKK, again, and at a later stage forged the MHP-AKP alliance. In his early years Erdoğan consumed various theories of religiously inspired nationalism, but he never steadfastly followed one of them. Erdoğan is not an intellectual ideologue. He has developed a rather instinct-driven and resentment-based nationalism by choice with some religious embellishments. He prefers to laud the victories of the Ottomans and Selcuks rather than the achievements of the Turkish Republic. He likes to question the Treaty of Lausanne. He disturbs ethnic nationalists by identifying Turks and Arabs as part of the same nation of Muslims. But, as an example, with his son Bilal, he championed a Turkic ethno-sport event in Kyrgyzstan.

Both leaders employ a colorful mix of nationalist features that consist of five main ingredients: an anti-Western attitude, a narrative of victimhood, the glorification of the imperial past, a nationalist narrative aiming at creating zones of interest beyond the state borders, and finally, a distinct contempt of borders and a confirmation of the right to intervene.

## **Anti-Western Attitudes**

Anti-Western references can be found in the speeches of both leaders. Erdoğan likes to refer to the West as “they,” like in this speech: “They wanted to make this nation forget its history, they wanted to destroy our values, they never allowed us to produce anything, they just wanted us to be consuming, to be their market.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Putin blamed the United States in his pivotal state of the nation speech in March 2018: “Efforts to contain Russia have failed. We warned, and nobody listened to us. Listen to us now!”<sup>10</sup> He then outlined his plans for hypersonic nuclear weapons targeting the United

States in the future and enjoyed the applause and standing ovations of the selected audience in the Kremlin. The rhetoric of Putin and Erdoğan is quite similar in this respect, referring to the crimes and misdemeanors of the West. They reflect a sense of being offended and mistreated.

Adam B. Lerner has written about the uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics.<sup>11</sup> He shows how the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion created nationalist victimhood narratives. His approach is likewise useful to analyze the implementation of such narratives in Turkey and Russia. Putin likes to stress how the United States disregarded him over the years; he spreads the inaccurate story that the United States promised Mikhail Gorbachev that it would not expand the NATO alliance in exchange for German unification. He condemns NATO expansion today but did not speak up against it when he was in power between 1999 and 2004, when NATO's largest expansion actually happened. Invented wounds of the past, imagined injury—this is what victimhood in nationalism by choice is about. Erdoğan's speeches are rich in depicting himself, his party, and his country as a victim of numerous adversaries. He has used this language from the beginning of his career, but the coup attempt of July 15, 2016 triggered the current official victimhood narrative about foreign and domestic forces that try to bring down Erdoğan and destroy all of Turkey on behalf of evil powers abroad.

## **Glorification of the Past**

Both Erdoğan and Putin glorify the imperial past of their countries. The Russian president compared his rule to important tsars such as Peter I and Alexander III; he referred to the “magnificent victories” of Russia and the Soviet Union when he explained why it was important to annex Crimea. Erdoğan's archetypical battles of national pride are those of Manzikert, as recent as 1071, and Çanakkale in 1915, which he refers to when Turks successfully crushed Western forces in the past. Time and again, Putin and Erdoğan redraw historical events according to their current requirements. For example, the Russian president defended the pact between Hitler

and Stalin as a means to defend the Soviet Union from Western aggression. The governments of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, which were attacked and conquered by the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1940 as a result of this pact, revolted against this distorted depiction of history. Erdoğan entertained squabbles with Iraq about territories that, according to the Turkish president, were unlawfully detached from Turkey a century ago.

## Creating Zones of Interest

References to the imperial past are complemented with ambiguous statements about “the nation,” which seems to be much larger than the national state. Putin has time and again spoken about *russkii mir*, the Russian World, an ethno-nationalist concept addressing all Russians, including those in neighboring countries. Erdoğan often talks about Turks and Arabs belonging to the same Muslim civilization; on other occasions he proudly refers to people of Turkish origin living in Europe or Central Asia. All these concepts point to an enlargement of nationhood beyond the state borders. In fact, both leaders seem to have a problem with the borders their state inherited in 1923/39 and 1991. In 2016, Erdoğan distinguished between physical borders that have been drawn by foreign forces with a ruler and the boundaries of our heart. He has called the Treaty of Lausanne unfair and the “minimum of what we could accept.” When Putin explained the annexation of Crimea, he explained why “in people’s hearts and minds” it was “always an inseparable part of Russia”—which is, given the mere 173 years of Crimea’s attachment to Russia, a blatant fabrication. The writer and ideologue Alexander Prokhanov, whom Putin cordially congratulated on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, added to this with his theory of “breathing borders,” describing Russia’s ever-changing outlines on the map.

## Contempt of State Borders

These statements have served as a rhetorical framework for military operations in neighboring countries and, in the case of Russia, the annexation of Crimea. However, the main target of nationalism has always been the domestic theater. Putin

and Erdoğan were able to garner strong support for their policies for a couple of years as nationalist policies buttressed the authoritarian tendencies of their regimes. While opponents were silenced, Putin’s popularity skyrocketed.<sup>12</sup> The same was true in Turkey. After the coup attempt in 2016, hundreds of thousands of Turks were laid off from work or jailed. Meanwhile, Erdoğan won two general elections and a referendum on the presidential system. It is accurate to conclude that nationalism by choice has worked for the leaders. But only for some time.

## An Expiry Date for Nationalism?

The use of nationalism as a political tool seems to have an expiry date. This date is nearing its end when economics, health issues, and questions of governance get more attention than national pride and foreign policy victories. In Russia, the expiry date surfaced in early 2019, when Putin’s ratings went down dramatically. Russians found him less appealing, and a large part of the population had become indifferent toward him.<sup>13</sup> They were less interested in Russia’s foreign wars than in domestic prices for food and living. The municipal elections in September 2019 in Russia were more a judgment of Putin’s party, Edinaia Rossiia, than of the president. But, the large protests in Russia’s big cities throughout the summer indicated a growing discomfort with Putin’s rule altogether. Similarly, in Turkey, the unease of the population with the president can be heard in the street, even much more often than in Russia. The municipal elections in Turkey in 2019 were an overwhelming warning sign for Erdoğan. Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 stimulated nationalist sentiment and improved the rating of the government—but again, only for a short period of time as economic issues were back on top of the agenda in late 2019. The expiry date of nationalism by choice is clearly visible here, and both Putin and Erdoğan are under strong pressure to come up with new narratives to justify their endless rule.

In early 2020, both leaders indicated their awareness of these problems. In his state of the nation address in January, Putin suggested the draft of a new constitution. He managed to capture public

attention with an in-depth discussion about a new law that would eventually extend his unchallenged position in the Russian political system. Meanwhile, Putin and the state-controlled media made huge efforts to describe the Russian president as a peacemaker and indispensable arbiter in the crisis zones of the Middle East. These successful foreign policy stories and constitutional changes are designed to reinforce Putin's presidency.

Erdoğan used the opportunity of the civil war in Libya to strengthen his image of an important international actor and stir up national emotions. An agreement with the leader of Libya's presidential council, Fayeze as-Sarraj, confirmed Turkey's view toward how the territorial waters and natural resources of the Eastern Mediterranean should be carved up. By sending military advisors and Syrian militants to Libya, Erdoğan emphasized his role in international affairs and as an indispensable interlocutor. Turkey's ambitious policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was widely saluted in the Turkish state media so as to offer other news than rising prices and higher unemployment.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges to the presidents of Turkey and Russia. Putin has seen his popularity decrease because of economic woes, a falling oil price, and his timid and ambiguous way of handling the coronavirus crisis. By deferring the responsibility of protecting the population to governors, he has damaged his aura of strong leadership. Erdoğan tried to shed responsibility in other ways. With a virus as a national threat, it has become more difficult for him to refocus the population on foreign and internal enemies. Erdoğan's popularity can drop further in the economic crisis following the corona-related lockdown.

### **Three Take-Aways for Europe**

For European observers there are three lessons to be drawn from the phenomenon of nationalism by choice.

First, beware of any cooperation or coalition with nationalists and study their programs carefully. As a general rule, alliances with nationalists do not lead to the moderation of the nationalists but to a radicalization of their moderate allies. National-

ists are not inclined to make compromises. There are currently several examples of nationalism by choice in America and Europe, provided by U.S. President Donald Trump, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary. All of them profoundly changed their parties, some departed from international organizations, disrupted trade and political relations, and revolutionized their countries.

Second, think twice before entering into open conflict with these leaders. Nationalists by choice welcome confrontation, threats, and particularly, lectures from the position of moral high ground, because it allows them to claim double standards and enter a show fight for their home audience. Thus, it is imperative not to interfere openly in the domestic playing field as nationalism thrives on identifying enemies. Sanctions are only useful when they have tangible repercussions on the behavior of such leaders. In the case of Russia, Western sanctions against the annexation of Crimea have successfully prevented the international recognition of Russia's expansion. Additional economic and financial sanctions as a response to Russia's disguised invasion of the Ukrainian Donbas prevented the Russian government from destabilizing more regions of Ukraine. However, in the case of Turkey's operations in Northern Syria, sanctions against Ankara in all likelihood would not produce the same positive results. They would only bolster the domestic standing of the president.

Third, have strategic patience. Nationalism by choice can be a very successful tactic for a certain period of time, but as we have seen in the case of Turkey and Russia, it has an expiry date. Strategic patience remains highly important for protecting multinational alliances and organizations such as the European Union or the United Nations against attacks from nationalists by choice. Instead of looking at nationalists by choice, look out for allies who share the view that the challenges of the world cannot be solved through unilateralism. While preserving multilateralist structures as much as possible, wait for the demise of the nationalist fallacy. Economic crises, bad governance, and monumental corruption are accompanying nationalist rule, also in the age of COVID-19. Without external incentives and domestic excuses, nationalism by choice will reach its expiry date by itself.

## Endnotes

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