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“Strong, but Anxious State”: The Fantasmatic Narratives on Ontological Insecurity and Anxiety in Turkey*

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ABSTRACT

The political discourse on the problem of state survival in Turkey is hegemonic. What is central to this discourse is Sévresphobia: the idea that Turkey is surrounded by internal and external enemies who are ready to destroy it. This article aims to explain why the political discourse on the problem of state survival in Turkey sustains itself over time and how it captures the collective mode of being. The article argues that fantasmatic narratives play an important role in maintaining the hegemonic discourse and governing collective anxiety. First, fantasmatic narratives simplify the socio-political space by offering a comforting explanation for the ongoing insecurities and making anxiety tolerable. Second, they act as an ideological force by keeping the political dimension of the discourse on ontological security at bay. Drawing on the Post-foundational Theory of Discourse (PTD) and Ontological Security Theory (OST), the article problematizes and analyzes the political discourse on the problem of state survival in Turkey.

Keywords: Ontological Security, Discourse, Sévresphobia, Hegemony, The Problem of State Survival

“Güçlü ama Kaygılı Devlet”: Türkiye’de Ontolojik Güvensizlik ve Kaygı Üzerine Fantasmal Anlatılar

ÖZET

Türkiye’de devletin beka sorununa ilişkin siyasi söylem hegemonik bir söylemdir. Bu söylemin merkezinde Sévr Fobisi yani Türkiye’nin onu yok etmeye hazır iç ve dış düşmanlarla çevrili olduğu fikri yatmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye’de devletin beka sorununa ilişkin siyasi söyleminin zaman içerisinde kendini nasıl devam ettirdiğini ve bu söylemin kolektif varoluş biçimini nasıl etkilediğini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda makale, fantasmal anlatıların hegemonik söylemin sürdürülmesinde ve kolektif kaygının yönetilmesinde önemli bir rol oynadığını savunuyor. Birincisi, fantasmatic anlatılar süregiden güvensizlikler için iç rahatlatıcı bir açıklama sunarak ve kaygıyı katlanılabilir bir hale getirerek sosyo-politik alanın okunmasını kolaylaştırır. İkincisi, fantasmal anlatılar ontolojik güvenlik söyleminin siyasi boyutunu tartışmalardan uzak tutarak ideolojik bir güç görevi görürler. Post-yapısalcı Söylem Teorisi’nden (PST) ve Ontolojik Güvenlik Teorisi’nden (OGT) yararlanan bu makale, Türkiye’de devletin beka sorununa ilişkin siyasi söylemi sorunsallaştırıyor ve analiz ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ontolojik Güvenlik, Söylem, Sévr Fobisi, Hegemoni, Devletin Bekası Meselesi.

* Both authors contributed equally to the article and their names are in alphabetical order. We are grateful to the editors of the journal and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and detailed comments.

Introduction

The hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival in Turkey has been unfolding over a long period. Since the foundation of the country, the hegemonic discourse has shown both continuity and an ongoing process of change. However, what has become more prominent in the discourse is the idea that Turkey is surrounded by internal and external enemies who are ready to destroy it. This idea is known as Sévresphobia. Although the Treaty of Sèvres, stipulating a territorial division of Turkey in the aftermath of the First World War, never materialized, Sévresphobia, the fear of the ever-present possibility of a Sevres-like partition of the country by great powers, still informs the socio-political space in Turkey. For example, 78 percent of those polled in a recent survey¹ agreed with the following statement: “just like they did in the past to the Ottoman Empire, the European countries want to dissolve and disintegrate Turkey now.” This result indicates that the hegemonic discourse has become the surface of inscription from which a vast majority of Turkish subjects make sense of the ontological security of the state and society.

The hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival is a key element of politics in Turkey. It has been successful in two ways. Firstly, it determines the present ways of understanding, defining and articulating the ontological security of the state. By doing so, it makes alternative articulations on ontological security unthinkable. Secondly, it exercises a grip on subjects by channeling their sense of ontological security. In this way, it serves as an organizing principle for socio-political relations and provides identification opportunities through which subjects make sense of themselves and the world around them. Recently, Turkish society has experienced unprecedented political instability caused by a series of political events, the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 being the most destructive. In their attempt to govern the coup and the ensuing crisis, the political elites foregrounded the hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival. In this context, the discourse on ontological insecurity and anxiety become prominent again. Against this background, the central focus of this article is to reflect upon and problematize the hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival.

We begin with the problematization by highlighting the seemingly paradoxical nature of the contemporary political discourse on the problem of state survival. The ways in which this paradox emerges is closely linked to a combination of two ideas: the New and Old Turkey. In this newly emerging political discourse, the New Turkey is presented as a strong and powerful state determining its own destiny while the Old Turkey is portrayed as a politically and economically unstable and insecure state. However, while the political elites employ a discourse that signifies New Turkey as a strong/powerful state, they also foreground society-wide anxieties – e.g., Sévresphobia. This is the point where the paradox of the hegemonic discourse reveals itself. While the discourse on a strong/powerful state signifies a state of ontological security, the discourse on Sévresphobia underlines an ongoing state of ontological insecurity. In this sense, the political elites foreground the very forms of insecurities and anxieties which, normally, a strong state would not experience. Hence, the political discourse includes seemingly contradictory narratives, coexisting in paradoxical tension. This raises the following questions. Why do political elites articulate the New Turkey as an increasingly powerful state, but at the same time foreground ontological insecurities of the state in their political discourse? Why would a state with the second-largest army in North Atlantic Treaty

1 TurkuazLab, “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey 2020”, <https://www.turkuazlab.org/en/dimensions-of-polarization-in-turkey-2020> (Accessed: 12 November 2021).

Organization (NATO) after the United States (US) be constantly preoccupied with the problem of state survival?

We argue that understanding the paradoxical character of this hegemonic discourse requires an engagement with fantasmatic narratives. Fantasmatic narratives² are typically structured around ideals (e.g., being a powerful state) and obstacles (e.g., Sévresphobia). The realization of the ideals is often made conditional on the circumvention of an implied obstacle (or obstacles). Structured in this way, fantasmatic narratives play vital roles in maintaining hegemonic discourse and governing collective anxiety.

Firstly, fantasmatic narratives provide anxious subjects with clear-cut and comforting answers to their ontological insecurities. In this way, they simplify the socio-political space and make anxiety tolerable. Secondly, fantasmatic narratives are the affective force behind hegemonic discourses. The capacity of a hegemonic discourse to stand as an object of identification largely depends on its fantasmatic narratives and the subject's affective investment in this narrative. Fantasmatic narratives mobilize a subject's identification and create the political subject. Finally, political elites often mobilize fantasmatic narratives to govern the traumatic events and ensuing crisis before they can become the sources of a political struggle. When put into practice, fantasmatic narratives leave little space for alternative articulations. This keeps the political dimension of the security policies at bay, limits political contestation, and establishes a legitimate background for the politics of emergency/exception and fear.

The article is structured as follows. First, it lays out the main elements/arguments of the Ontological Security Theory and Post-foundational Theory of Discourse and articulates an analytical framework for the analysis of political discourse on ontological security. This section underlines the affective/political character of discourse on the problem of state survival and discusses the role of fantasmatic narratives and different forms of agencies in the constitution and re-constitution of the ontological security regimes. The second section contextualizes the political discourse on the problem of state survival by broadly laying out the main characteristics of this discourse in early and contemporary Turkey. Expanding on these sections, the following sections analyze the contemporary political discourse on ontological security and fantasmatic narratives on the problem of state survival in Turkey. This section focuses on the formation of the ontological security discourse by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) and empirically focuses on the political discourse of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – the leader of JDP and Turkey's current president.

Anxiety, Radical Contingency and Fantasmatic Narratives

OST evolves around two concepts: ontological security and existential anxiety. While ontological security is the need of the subject to exist in a stable way and feel oneself as whole³, ontological insecurity is the condition under which the subject feels a “deep, incapacitating state of not knowing how to get by in the world.”⁴ For Mitzen, subjects satisfy their need to feel ontologically secure by articu-

2 Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 147.

3 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991; Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1979.

4 Jennifer Mitzen and Randall L. Schweller, “Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Mislplaced Certainty and the Onset of War”, *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No 1, 2011, p. 29

lating unique and consistent autobiographical narratives⁵ and self-identities.⁶ In this way, they aim to govern their ontological insecurity and existential anxiety. For Giddens, articulating a self-identity and formulating a set of behavioral routines⁷ is an attempt to alleviate the driving impact of existential questions.⁸ Herein, the keyword is “attempt”. This is because, as Mitzen argues, “the need to experience oneself as a whole person in time can never be fully satisfied”.⁹ This quest always remains a failed attempt, and thereby a source of anxiety.

Recently, the OST scholarship has further built upon the distinction between fear and anxiety as a governing practice of security.¹⁰ This literature argues that “anxiety –as a sensation, an emotion, and a thought– prevails through all stages of being and must therefore be central for any political analysis”.¹¹ While fear is about visible and known threat/risk, in times of anxiety, the object of threat/risk is not visible, known, or identifiable.¹² Anxiety additionally differs from fear in terms of its orientation in time and space. While anxiety is a future-oriented and long-acting response to an unknown threat, fear is a present-oriented and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and tangible threat.¹³

The concept of anxiety is vital to account for ontological security as an ongoing process. For Giddens, behind the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday practices and discourse, there is a hidden chaos that has the potential to destroy the sense of the very reality of things.¹⁴ In other words, anxiety lies underneath our everyday life and cannot be eliminated. It makes it difficult to maintain a stable way of being, thus triggering ontological insecurity. As Browning argues, anxiety “stalks us constantly, threatening to overpower us and leave us floundering in despair and helplessness if we fail to keep it at bay.”¹⁵ Considering this, Kinnvall suggests a movement from ontological security as security of being (a possession) towards a conception of ontological security as a constant security-seeking process.¹⁶ This suggestion represents a shift of focus from “being ontologically secure” to “become ontologi-

5 Brent J. Steele, “Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No 3, 2005, p. 519-540; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, London, Routledge, 2008.

6 Jennifer Mitzen, “Anchoring Europe’s Civilizing Identity: Habits, Capabilities and Ontological Security”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No 2, 2006, p. 270–285.

7 In Giddens’ *Central Problems in Social Theory*, it is also argued that routine action “is an action that is strongly saturated by taken for granted” (p. 218).

8 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

9 Mitzen, “Anchoring Europe’s Civilizing Identity”, p. 342.

10 For example, see Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen (2020). “Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens”, *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, p. 240-256. Bahar Rumelili, “Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security”, *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020 p. 257-272; Karl Gustafsson and Nina Krickel-Choi, “Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No 3, 2020 p. 875-895.

11 Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, *Politics of Anxiety*, London, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017, p. 3.

12 Ibid, p. 5.

13 Gary VandenBos, *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, Washington DC, American Psychological Association, 2007, <https://dictionary.apa.org/anxiety> (Accessed 14 April 2021).

14 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 31.

15 Christopher Browning “‘Je suis en Terrasse’: Political Violence, Civilizational Politics, and the Everyday Courage to Be”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 39, No 2, 2018, p. 246.

16 Catarina Kinnvall, “Ontological Insecurities and Postcolonial Imaginaries: The Emotional Appeal of Populism”, *Humanity & Society*, Vol. 42, No 4, 2018, p. 523–543.

cally secure.”¹⁷ While “having ontological security is a precondition for action”, “seeking ontological security is driving choices and behavior”.¹⁸

In Post-foundational Discourse Theory, the search for an ontological ground and meaningful existence can only be done in and through discourse.¹⁹ Discourse is the only possible origin of meaningful understanding of the self and the world. In this conception, objects’ social meaningfulness (signified) can only originate from their articulation in a discourse – a particular arrangement of meaning conveying entities (signifiers).²⁰ For PTD, creating meaning is a social/political process where there is a constant struggle between the potential and the actualized meanings.²¹ This struggle is only possible due to radical contingency - the impossibility of fixing social meaning and identity in any context.²² Any socially meaningful entity (e.g., social practices/routines, autobiographical narratives, identities) is therefore ultimately contingent – possible but not necessary. While the outcome of this search is always “contingent foundations”²³, the radical contingency of these foundations can be backgrounded when a particular discourse is sedimented/institutionalized over time and constitutes social objectivity.²⁴

For PDT, subjects experience anxiety when they encounter dislocatory moments during which the radical contingency of social objectivity, meaning, and existence are made visible. Giddens conceptualizes these moments as critical situations: a set of conditions that radically disrupts everyday routines.²⁵ Dislocatory events disrupt subjects’ sense of order, continuity, and self by revealing the absence of an ultimate ground for meaning. Experienced as a sudden awareness of radical contingency of existence and meaning, these events cause anxiety and trigger the feeling that life is ultimately meaningless.²⁶ Heidegger argues when the subject experiences anxiety, it encounters the horror of nothing – the fact that there is no secure foundation for its being or any other beings in the world, that it remains “held out into the nothing.”²⁷

Dislocations are challenging moments when subjects do not know how to “go on”, and they are called upon to confront the radical contingency of social relations more directly than at other times.²⁸ Subjects can respond to these moments in different ways. They can be reluctant, not capable, or not have the courage to encounter emerging radical contingency and uncertainty. Instead, they reproduce existing routines and identities to restore coherence, consistency, and continuity.²⁹ The “muted agents” can reproduce an existing regime of practices and collectively search for “control

17 Felix Berenskötter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency”, *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, p. 273-290.

18 *Ibid*, p.274

19 Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 16.

20 Thomas Marttila, *Post-foundational Discourse Analysis: From Political Difference to Empirical Research*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2016.

21 *Ibid*, p. 43.

22 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p. 217.

23 *Ibid*. p.7

24 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, New York, Verso p. 68.

25 Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 124.

26 Kinnvall and Mitzen, “Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics”, p. 245.

27 Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don’t Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis*, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2013, p. 112

28 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p. 210.

29 Berenskötter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency”.

mechanisms” to make their anxiety tolerable and “make the present readable”.³⁰ Alternatively, the “creative-constitutive agents” can foreground the radical contingency of social practices and create conditions for political practices which may reshape ontological security regimes and anxiety control mechanisms.

According to Berenskötter, during dislocatory moments, subjects experience an “anxiety paradox”, “the tendency of reflexive humans facing the freedom of being in time to attach themselves to constructs that provide a sense of temporal continuity/certainty.”³¹ Here, the question is: Why do reflexive humans opt for continuity, rather than confronting radical contingency? Building upon this paradox, we argue that fantasmatic narratives play vital roles in the critical explanation of the constitution and re-constitution of ontological security regimes.

While the content of fantasmatic narratives would change from one context to another, they are typically structured around two scenarios: beatific and horrific. On the one hand, fantasmatic narratives promise an imaginary fullness-to-come³² once a named or implied obstacle is tackled (the beatific side of fantasy). On the other hand, they foretell a disaster scenario if the obstacle cannot be eliminated (the horrific side of fantasy).³³ The function of these narratives is therefore two-fold: 1) they provide accounts on why subjects experience anxiety by naming an obstacle/threat, and 2) mitigate the forceful anxiety by providing anxious subjects with a narrative that they can identify with.

Structured in this way, fantasmatic narratives have critical/analytical value in maintaining ontological security regimes. Firstly, during the moments of dislocation, fantasmatic narratives protect subjects from the anxiety stemming from a confrontation with the radical contingency.³⁴ In this way, they complement autobiographical narratives; reinforce the self-identities of the subjects by providing identification opportunities; inform their social practices, and thereby sustain a stable way of being and sense of self. Fantasmatic narratives account for how subjects misrecognize their real conditions of existence and act as a muted agency. Secondly, fantasmatic narratives complement political discourses by acting as anxiety-control mechanisms. They respond to subjects’ ‘desire for knowledge’³⁵; shelter them from anxiety; and feed their ‘hunger for certainty’ by showing them their place in the world.³⁶ By doing so, fantasmatic narratives contribute to subjects’ practical consciousness and make anxiety tolerable. This is because articulated in an excessively simple and clear-cut fashion, fantasmatic narratives leave no room for ambiguity and uncertainty³⁷ and create what Berenskötter terms

30 Slavoj Žižek, “The Structure of Domination Today: A Lacanian View”, *Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 56, No 4, 2004, p. 393.

31 Berenskötter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency”, p. 274.

32 See Moran Mandelbaum, “Making Our Country Great Again’: The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism”, *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, Vol. 33, 2020, p. 451–476; Linus Hagström, “Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021, p. 331–342.

33 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p. 147.

34 Jason Glynos, “Ideological Fantasy at Work”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 13, No 3, 2008, p. 275-296.

35 Berenskötter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency”, p. 279

36 Jakub Eberle, “Narrative, Desire, Ontological Security, Transgression: Fantasy as a Factor in International Politics”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2019, p. 243–268. Also see Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel, “‘Putin, You Suck’: Affective Sticking Points in the Czech Narrative on ‘Russian Hybrid Warfare’”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 40, No 6, 2019, p. 1267-1281.

37 Ibid.

“a sense of epistemological peace”.³⁸ Overall, fantasmatic narratives can function as an effective “coping mechanism” when successfully mobilized and play a vital role in maintaining ontological security regimes. In what follows, we analyze the ontological security regime in Turkey based on the analytical framework presented above.

The Problem of State Survival and Fantasmatic Narratives in Turkey

The hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival in Turkey is deeply embedded in a historical context. The chain of dislocatory events experienced during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire created the conditions of possibility for the present ways of understanding, defining, and articulating ontological security in Turkey. The foundations of the newly established republic had to rise over an abyss left from the Ottoman Empire. At the end of First World War, the Allied Powers prepared the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and sought to annex the remaining territories of the Empire among themselves. Following the War of Independence (1919-1923), the Treaty of Sèvres was replaced with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) through which the Republic of Turkey was founded. Although the Treaty of Sèvres, stipulating a territorial division of Turkey, was never carried out, it has become one of the main elements of the hegemonic discourse on the problem of state survival. Articulated as a horrific fantasmatic narrative, Sévresphobia creates conditions of possibility for the contemporary political discourse on ontological security.³⁹ The political elites employ this narrative to constitute and re-constitute the ontological security regime. As an ever-resonating anxiety (horrific scenario), Sévresphobia keeps Turkish society alarmed about the imagined condition of being surrounded by internal/external enemies who are ready to destroy the Turkish state.

In this sense, Sévresphobia has been an ongoing traumatic experience and a persisting condition. This horrific fantasmatic narrative has left significant marks on the everyday routines and practices of subjects in Turkey. A good illustration of Sévresphobia is the survey on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy. According to the respondents, only three countries have been categorized as the friend of Turkey: Azerbaijan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Georgia. On the contrary, the long list of countries that are seen as a threat to Turkey includes the USA (the biggest threat), Israel, Russia, Syria, China, Iran, Greece, Armenia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and so on.⁴⁰ Overall, although the Treaty of Sèvres was never carried out and the tangible security threats associated with the treaty (being attacked by the Allied powers or the West) remain as a distant memory and insignificant, the fantasmatic narratives on Sèvres still inform the political discourse on the problem of state survival.

Against this anxious background and the horrific scenario of Sévresphobia, the JDP elites disseminated the fantasmatic narrative on New Turkey. Articulated as a beatific scenario, this narrative has been deployed to mobilize the society towards a new future direction while channeling its desire to be ontologically secure. The narrative on New Turkey has been successful in two ways. Firstly, the

38 Berenskötter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency”, p. 280.

39 Umut Can Adisonmez, “When Conflict Traumas Fragment: Investigating the Sociopsychological Roots of Turkey’s Intractable Conflict”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 40, No 6, 2019, p. 1382.

40 Mustafa Aydın et. al, “Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perception Survey 2021”, <https://www.khas.edu.tr/en/arastirma/khasta-arastirma/khas-arastirmalari/turk-dis-politikasi-kamuoyu-algilari-arastirmasi-2021> (Accessed: 12 December 2021).

narrative has gradually laid the foundation for the articulation of a unitary and homogenous collective identity structured around four signifiers: one nation, one state, one motherland, and one flag. Secondly, this collective identity is articulated side by side with an autobiographical narrative upon which subjects can maintain a new sense of self and re-read their past, present, and future. The aim here is to articulate a linear ontological security discourse, but at the same time demarcate a clear political frontier between Old and New Turkey. Accordingly, the subjects are called upon to distance themselves from their immediate past, namely ‘Old Turkey’ and are invited to embrace the glorious times and memories of the Ottoman Empire. Included in this narrative is the idea of Old Turkey as an object of anxiety and an obstacle towards establishing ‘New Turkey’. This fantasmatic narrative is further developed by gradually making the very idea of ‘Old Turkey’ congruent with the well-known ‘Sick Man of Europe’ narrative. Erdogan emphasizes this dimension in his following speech in 2005:

“They want Turkey to remain as ‘the Sick Man of Europe’ as much as it is possible... However, everyone should know this for sure, that ‘Sick Man’ has recovered, regained his full health, stood up and now started to move forward to achieve its own goals.”⁴¹

Since then, Erdogan has repeatedly articulated a sharp antagonism between the ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Turkey, while simultaneously locating the former as an object of anxiety. This narrative renders the values, practices, and mindset of the ‘Old Turkey’ as a source of anxiety and threat to the collective security of ‘the people’. For this narrative, the ‘Old Turkey’ was governed by elites and a bureaucratic oligarchy who formed a tutelage system that led to a vicious cycle of social, economic, and political problems. The ‘New Turkey’, on the contrary, is articulated as a forward-looking, strong, visionary state that is governed by and for ‘the people’. In this populist articulation, the ‘Old Turkey’ has been signified entirely as a negative reference point and as an obstacle (horrific scenario) to build a strong and stable state: the ‘New Turkey’ (beatific scenario). The following quote by Erdogan draws clear links between the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Turkey by referring to the sources of anxiety:

“None of the events that transpired recently are a coincidence. None of the crises that we experienced lately are events that were driven by Turkey’s internal dynamics. Separatist terrorism, the Gezi events, the coup attempts of December 17-25 and other attempts were planned to determine Turkey’s future course. They are events that were put into play by pawns here as well as by foreign actors. The sole objective of these incidents has been to bring back the old, dependent and meek Turkey that lacks self-confidence and can be controlled and directed. All of these intrigues have been planned and staged to resurrect the old Turkey that would be bogged down in a vicious cycle of economic downturns, democratic deficit and many problems that cannot be solved.”⁴²

This narrative clearly articulates the horrific scenario as the resurrection of the ‘Old’ Turkey and designates ‘foreign forces’ and their pawns as the enemies. One of the main motivations of these enemies is to disrupt and destroy ‘New’ Turkey and bring back the ‘Old’ Turkey. As it will be discussed in the following sections, the political discourse on anxiety experienced some vital shifts with the introduction of a series of new enemies, including the mastermind.

41 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “AK Parti’nin 4. Kuruluş Yıldönümü İstanbul Kutlama Töreni”, 10 September 2005, p. 295, <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 18 April 2021).

42 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “Seventh Conference of Ambassadors in the Vision of New Turkey”, Presidential Publications, 6 Jan 2015, p. 107, <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 23 April 2021).

The antagonism between the 'Old' and 'New' Turkey became more visible as Turkish society witnessed a series of political events in the past decade. These include events such as the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park Protest in 2013, the June 2015 national elections. In July 2015, following the collapse of the peace process between the Turkish state and the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the political conflict entered into one of the deadliest periods since the 1980s. Between 2014-2017 there were several terror attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In July 2016, Turkish citizens experienced a violent military coup attempt which at that time was considered to be a thing of the past.⁴³ Starting from August 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted several large-scale military operations in Syria. Finally, against this social and political turmoil, Turkey's long-standing parliamentary system was transformed into a presidential system where the power concentrated in the hands of one person: Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In this new system, a few people have major control over political decision-making.

These dislocatory events have left crucial marks on socio-political space in Turkey. They not only dislocated the hegemonic position of the Turkish state into question by damaging its biographical continuity and sense of identity but also triggered society-wide anxiety. Turkish society has found itself in an increasingly insecure, uncertain and anxious state of being. Against this anxious background, the political discourse on ontological security and anxiety started to gradually dominate social and political space in Turkey. In fact, in this context, the meaning of ontological security has been extended to the point where almost every social or political problem can be articulated as a function of the struggle for the survival of the state. These trends created conditions for the articulation of a network of social and political practices and fantasmatic narratives.

At first glance, it seems that the contemporary political discourse on New Turkey is inherently paradoxical. The discourse simultaneously articulates Turkey as a strong, powerful state, as well as an anxious and vulnerable one. The narrative foregrounds the very forms of insecurities and anxieties which a strong state would not experience. However, as it has become clear from the above discussion, the simultaneous emphasis on ontological security (beatific scenario) and insecurity (horrific scenario) is an integral part of fantasmatic narratives. This is because for PTD, social reality is often fantasmatically structured around incompatible positions.⁴⁴ The capacity of a hegemonic discourse to stand as an object of identification largely depends on its capacity to conceal this incompatibility by articulating a beatific scenario, while at the same time articulating threats and obstacles to the realization of this scenario. Articulated around the co-existence of the beatific and horrific scenarios, fantasmatic narratives continuously defer any solution to the insecurities or anxieties as well as pinning responsibility for these insecurities on threatening others.

The JDP elites mobilized fantasmatic narratives to act as anxiety-control mechanisms, simplify the political discourse, and keep the political dimensions of their security policies at bay, thereby maintaining the ontological security regime. We begin the discussion by introducing the following set of arguments that have been frequently disseminated by Erdogan:

43 Umut Can Adisonmez and Recep Onursal, "Governing Anxiety, Trauma and Crisis: The Political Discourse on Ontological (In)Security after the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 29, No 3, 2020, p. 291-306.

44 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p. 148.

“As you know, above all, we will be ‘one.’ We will be great, alive and brothers. It is all together that we will be Turkey, and do not forget this: One nation, one flag, one homeland and state. They will not be able to divide us, break us up, and if we are ‘one,’ great and alive, with the help of God, we will walk toward [the goals of] 2023, 2053 and 2071 in very different ways.”⁴⁵

In many ways, these arguments represent beatific and horrific dimensions of a fantasmatic narrative. While, the beatific scenario promises an anxiety-free future, a great state, and a peaceful society, this imaginary fullness-to-come (being ‘one’) is also complemented by a horrific scenario. The horrific narrative foregrounds a disaster to come (a divided country) if implied or named obstacles (internal/external enemies) cannot be overcome. Articulated in this way, the fantasmatic narrative on ‘New’ Turkey is mobilized as an effective anxiety-control mechanism.

This narrative follows a double strategy. Firstly, the beatific scenario sustains a stable way of being and a sense of self, thereby making anxiety tolerable. It does so by providing subjects with a relatively stable, whole, and complete identity by also promising a harmonious society without anxiety. Accordingly, it calls subjects to affectively invest in one nation (a singular body), one flag (a single symbol), one homeland (a single space), and one state (under a single authority) as a collective identity⁴⁶. In this way, the narrative completes autobiographical narratives, reinforces self-identities and is mobilized as an effective anxiety-control mechanism at the collective level. Secondly, by foretelling a disaster scenario, the horrific dimension narrative captures the collective anxiety of the subjects. When combined, beatific and horrific scenarios channel anxious subjects’ desire for continuity and create “a sense of epistemological peace”. The further implications of the fantasmatic narrative and its dimensions are clearly illustrated in this quote by Erdogan:

“...we will stay true to ourselves. We will embrace and pass down our history, culture and values both as a country and as individuals. If we do not do so, ‘we will disappear like so many societies and civilizations in the past’ [*horrific dimension*]. I always say that Anatolia is the cradle of civilizations and peoples. But at the same time, ‘Anatolia is a graveyard of civilizations and peoples’ [*horrific dimension*]. The region we call home is truly beautiful, alluring, fertile and very valuable. But these same characteristics also ‘make it vulnerable to threats, dangers and attacks’ [*horrific dimension*]. In order to live in this beautiful but challenging region and ‘make progress towards our goals [*beatific dimension*], we must keep our national unity and solidarity strong” (emphasis added).⁴⁷

Here, Erdogan draws strong links between horrific and beatific scenarios. While the beatific scenario has a stabilizing dimension (‘keep our national unity and solidarity strong’) which highlights the state of ontological security (a dream state without disturbance), the horrific scenario has a destabilizing dimension (‘we will disappear like so many societies and civilizations in the past’) in which the state of ontological insecurity is articulated foregrounding a threatening ‘other’.⁴⁸ After foregrounding horrific dimensions and foretelling a series of disasters to come Erdogan finishes his argument

45 Hurriyet, “The Issue is about Turkey, not Me”, 26 August 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-the-issue-is-about-turkey-not-me-13615> (Accessed: 18 June 2021).

46 Adisonmez and Onursal, “Governing Anxiety, Trauma and Crisis”.

47 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “World Turkish Entrepreneurs Assembly Speech”, 26 March 2016, p.367 <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 18 May 2021).

48 Slavoj Zizek, “The Seven Veils of Fantasy”, Dany Nobus (ed.), *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, New York, Other Press, 1998, p. 1

as follows: “That is why I always say, ‘One nation, one flag, one homeland and one state’. This is not a slogan; these are the four cornerstones of our existence.”⁴⁹ By doing so, he assigns an ontological meaning to this collective identity, and implies that Turkey’s ontological security can only be sustained under these cornerstones. In his following articulation, these cornerstones are made congruent with the struggle for ontological security:

“Where we will end up is the conditions of the Sèvres treaty if we happen to stop during this critical period when the world is being tried to be reshaped. However, we are a nation that still feels the sorrow of our losses at Lausanne. Let me be clear, Turkey is putting up its biggest struggle since the War of Independence. This is a struggle for one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state.”⁵⁰

The integral part of the fantasmatic narrative is to articulate enemies within and without. Closely linked to the horrific scenario, the threatening ‘others’ are the actors who are responsible for preventing the realization of the beatific scenario and therefore blocking the ontological security at the collective level. Erdogan articulates the link between threatening others, the beatific and horrific scenarios as follows:

“If we show even the slightest negligence in this fight of ours, they will confront us with impositions that are much worse than the Sevres. It is due to our strength in every area, from politics to economy and from infrastructure to the defence industry, that they dare not actually mess with us.”⁵¹

What is also included in the horrific narrative is the articulation of an invisible enemy – the mastermind. During the moments of an increasing sense of uncertainty/instability, the mastermind is articulated as the main enemy whose sole motivation is to put the horrific scenario into practice. For this narrative, the ‘other’ enemies are named as either extensions or pawns of the mastermind. This narrative has some important implications.

First, in this narrative, the meaning of dislocatory and political events has been gradually reduced to the point where they can only be explained as the acts of the mastermind. Articulated in this way, this fantasmatic narrative simplifies the socio-political discursive space and provides simple answers that “make the present readable” as Zizek calls it.⁵² In this way, it provides clear-cut answers to the sources of anxiety, shelter subject from collective anxieties and constitutes a practical consciousness. While the mastermind narrative was used by Erdogan on a limited number of occasions, it was widely disseminated by pro-government media outlets⁵³ and public figures.⁵⁴ It is also possible to

49 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “World Turkish Entrepreneurs Assembly Speech”, 26 March 2016, p.368 <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 24 May 2021).

50 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “the Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs Speech”, 22 December 2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/68472/turkey-is-putting-up-its-biggest-struggle-since-the-war-of-independence> (Accessed: 12 Feb 2022).

51 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “the State Commendation Medal Conferment Ceremony”, 18 March 2021, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/125298/president-erdogan-attends-state-commendation-medal-conferment-ceremony> (Accessed: 19 Feb 2022).

52 Zizek, “The Structure of Domination Today”, p. 393.

53 A detailed documentary on mastermind: A Haber, “Üst Akıl Belgeseli”, 23 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PD1Z9PBoO8I> (Accessed: 28 April 2021).

54 Kerem Karaosmanoğlu, “The Discourse of *Üst Akıl*: A Search for Hegemony in the Turkish Media”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2021, p. 77-99.

observe many subjects who identified with this fantasmatic narrative and reproduce it in the context of their everyday routines/practices. What is at stake here is not an act of ignorance, but instead a deliberate choice not to know. By opting for a muted agency, subjects misrecognize their real conditions of existence by concealing the contingent nature of the socio-political order. This sustains existing anxiety control mechanisms and reproduces the ontological security regime.

Secondly, this fantasmatic narrative makes it possible to provide similar answers and assign similar meanings to different political/dislocatory events that de-stabilize the collective mode of being. As the idea of “mastermind” has been gradually made congruent with the idea of ontological insecurity and assigned as the main source of anxiety, there has also been a convergence between the meaning of different political events. As the below quote by Erdogan indicates, the horrific scenario implies that these events may look isolated or have a dynamic of their own, but they are all orchestrated by one actor: the mastermind. Articulated in this way, the narrative not only provides clear-cut answers to collective anxieties but also projects the remaining uncertainties onto the mastermind and its extensions. The logic behind the horrific narrative is overtly illustrated by Erdogan as follows:

“‘If one scenario fails, they come up with another one’ because that is what they have been doing for 12 years. Their color, appearance, mask, disguise may change, but the game does not. ‘It is the same scenario’. People who used to be hostile to each other and said all sorts of bad things about each other embrace one another today. Why? ‘Because that is what the mastermind commands. That is what the mastermind wants.’ People who used to be enemies are now working together. Why? Because that is what the boss wants. They cannot oppose or disobey the boss or the mastermind because they have to pay their dues in return for the promises they have obtained.”⁵⁵

Here, the horrific narrative draws equivalences between different events and actors. For example, following the July 15 coup attempt, despite the significant ideological/political differences and historical points of origin, the Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization (FETO), the PKK and ISIS were all articulated as the extension of a mastermind⁵⁶ and located against the “New Turkey” as a collective identity. Overall, the mastermind has been considered as the main source of anxiety and utilized as a political scapegoat when things go wrong. The final implication of the horrific narrative is therefore political. On multiple occasions, Erdogan has argued that the survival of the state is above and beyond everyday politics. For example, when referring to large-scale military operations in Syria, he argues “we have never turned this issue, which is a matter of the survival of our nation and state, into a part of daily politics.”⁵⁷ Similarly, the July 15 coup attempt was articulated as “something way beyond politics, this is either our freedom or death.”⁵⁸ What this political discourse aims to achieve is to depoliticize the ontological security regime although the regime and its content are ultimately articulated by political practices.

55 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “General Assembly of the Foreign Economic Relations Board in the Vision of New Turkey”, Presidential Publications, 20 December 2014, p.107, <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 15 May 2021)

56 Adisonmez and Onursal, “Governing Anxiety, Trauma and Crisis”.

57 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “Justice and Development Party Parliamentary Group Meeting Speech”, 20 March 2018, <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/92030/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma> (Accessed 18 May 2021).

58 Hurriyet, “Millions Stand for Democracy in Turkey”, 5 August 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/millions-stand-for-democracy-in-turkey-102510> (Accessed 8 May 2021).

Articulating the mastermind as an invisible, vague, and dark agent as an obstacle, governing elites have been able to govern dislocatory events and prevent crises before they become a source of political struggle. In this way, they have not only kept the political dimension of the regime at bay, but also dominate the political space. Here, fantasmatic narratives again play a vital role. They not only simplify the socio-political space but also dictates the terms of political discussions and the range of possible solutions to ongoing security problems.⁵⁹ When integrated into the political discourses on anxiety, fantasmatic narratives background the political dimensions of the governing practices by providing an easy-to-read explanation for collective anxieties. In this way, they conceal the political moment in which decisions could have been different. For example, on multiple occasions Erdogan has presented ‘the presidential system’ as the only possible political solution to the problem of the survival of the state in Turkey and linked this with beatific scenarios:

“...This is why a new constitution and the presidential system are essential for building the New Turkey. Otherwise, we will not only fail to achieve the 2023 goals, but also miss out on our vision for 2053 and 2071...”⁶⁰

Finally, maintaining the ontological security regime and political discourse on the problem of state survival have been possible as a result of constant surveillance of social and political life. The integral part of the ontological security regime in Turkey is to carefully control political practices and what is sayable and what is not about the regime. The regime reinforces ‘muted agency’ while limiting the space for ‘creative-constitutive agency’. On the one hand, the beatific dimension of the fantasmatic narrative (one nation, one homeland, one state and one flag) promotes homogeneity as security. Included in this articulation is the idea of a society in which there is no political difference, therefore no ontological insecurity. On the other hand, political practices and creative-constitutive agency are inextricably linked with ontological insecurity. Following this logic, any public contestation of the ontological security regime has been gradually reduced to the point where they only can be signified as a threat to the survival of the state.

Conclusion

This article shows how fantasmatic narratives can be mobilized as anxiety-control mechanisms by informing political discourse on ontological security. Overall, the article argues that when successfully mobilized, fantasmatic narratives simplify the socio-political space; make anxiety tolerable; project the uncertainties and ambiguities onto internal/external enemies; and thereby foreground ‘muted agency’.

Based on this perspective, the article provides a critical analysis of fantasmatic narratives on the problem of state survival in Turkey. On the one hand, the beatific narrative on one nation, one homeland, one state and one flag provides subjects with a unitary collective identity, a stable way of being and a sense of self. On the other hand, the horrific dimension of the fantasmatic narrative captures the collective anxiety by mobilizing a series of threatening ‘others’ who are deemed responsible for blocking the collective identity by preventing the realization of beatific scenario. During the moments of an

⁵⁹ Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p. 174.

⁶⁰ Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2015), “Germany ‘Karlsruhe Meeting’ in the Vision of New Turkey”, Presidential publications, 10 May 2015, p.203, <https://mk.gov.tr/koleksiyonlar/CBYayinlar/liste> (Accessed: 15 May 2021)

increasing sense of uncertainty and instability, these fantasmatic narratives provide Turkish subjects with clear-cut answers for the sources of their anxieties and project the remaining uncertainties onto others such as the ‘mastermind’. Overall political elites mobilize fantasmatic narratives to background the political dimension of the ontological security regime in Turkey; set the terms of political discussions on security policies; exercise a grip on ontologically insecure subjects and thereby constitute and re-constitute the ontological security regime.

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