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When Populism, Gender and Discourses of Activism Meet in Conspiracy: The Bitter Story of the Istanbul Convention

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Raising our voices...

Mobilizing against...

Collaborating for...

Protecting rights of...

The above phrases are integral to the everyday practices and study of social movements and activism. Drawing on and departing from the hopeful and often assumed connotations of these phrases — specifically in the history of feminist and LGBTI+ movements — in different contexts, this piece looks at what happens when discourses of feminist and LGBTI+ activism are used by state and pro-state media to create or strengthen conspiratorial knowledge making practices. How do we trace the links between shifting connotations of political discourses, populism, and paranoid invitations to criminalize bodies, desires and thoughts that do not fit to the fixed definitions of the acceptable to serve populist agendas? Inspired by scholars such as Elif Babül (2020), Başak Çalı (2015, 2021) and Jessica Greenberg (2020) who work on discursive shifts on politics of rights, this essay looks at the story of Istanbul Convention (*İstanbul Sözleşmesi*) in Turkey to study complex links between populism and gender through competing and often contradicting discursive journeys of specific ethical and political concepts. While doing that, this essay aims to refrain from the perspectives that position the discussions on gender equality in Turkey as a device to measure Turkey’s alleged proximity to “European norms and values.”

This piece explores new ways of engaging with everyday politics of populism and gender through the debates surrounding the Istanbul Convention in Turkey. It asks: What do we do when discourses of solidarity and struggle become a key narrative to form conspiracies as part of state sponsored populist approaches? Treating this question as a speculative invitation, I suggest to refrain from the assumption that Turkey’s noncompliance with transnational standards — in this case, gender equality and gender/sexual orientation-based violence — are due to the state’s inability to “reach” European political capacity (Babül 2020). This assumption often leads to arguments such as “Turkey is moving away from Europe and getting closer to the Middle East” or positions certain processes such as Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a

symptom of Turkey's "de-Europeanization" (Ün, Arıkan 2021). Instead of looking for solid answers through symptomatic analysis, my aim is to open spaces to think about the complex relationship between human rights discourse and paranoid governmentality. I invite us to think about why and how an international agreement named after the most important city in Turkey, the first country to ratify it, could become a threat to its nation after a decade of signing it. And how do we make sense of populist politics of a state that uses gender as a symptom of secretive global politics?

To explore these questions, first I start with a full quote of Article 4, the fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination clause of the Istanbul Convention, which was systemically circulated in pro-state news outlets and social media channels as evidence to show the "secret agenda of the Western powers to spread LGBTI+ identities and destroy the Turkish family values." Then, I will focus on historical and contextual necessities regarding the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention. Then I provide a quick chronology of specific events that took place between 2011 and 2021, before moving on in the third section to discuss how a state's lack of commitment to a specific issue can be represented by conspiratorial knowledge making practices.

Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Article 4 – Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination

1. Parties shall take the necessary legislative and other measures to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence in both the public and the private sphere.
2. Parties condemn all forms of discrimination against women and take, without delay, the necessary legislative and other measures to prevent it, in particular by:
 - Embodying in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation the principle of equality between women and men and ensuring the practical realization of this principle,
 - Prohibiting discrimination against women, including through the use of sanctions, where appropriate,
 - Abolishing law and practices which discriminates against women.
3. The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national

minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.

4. Special measures that are necessary to prevent and protect women from gender-based violence shall not be considered discrimination under the terms of this Convention (2012, 8-9).

Turkey brought its legal framework on gender equality to bear on many international conventions. In 1986, Turkey signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In addition, Turkey has been part of the European Convention on Human Rights and ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2012. The women's movement in Turkey and collaboration between feminists and LGBTI+ activists played an important role in the preparation and signing processes of the Convention and its legal impact on the Turkish constitution (i.e. In 2012, Turkey adopted "Law No.6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women" and the Justice and Development Party [AKP] launched a national action plan for gender equality).

2011 – The Istanbul Convention was opened for signature in Istanbul, Turkey.

2012 – Turkey became the first country to ratify the convention; by 2021, 34 countries had followed suit.

2014 – The Istanbul Convention was entered into force.

2014 – While accusing feminists of "rejecting motherhood," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: "Women and men could not be treated equally. It is against nature."

2016 - A bill was proposed that would have deferred punishment for the sexual assault of minors. Supporters of the bill, which women's rights advocacy groups referred to as "the marry your rapist bill" or "the statutory rape bill," claimed to be protecting families where men, punished for sexual assaults on minors, had married their victims with the consent of both parties. After massive protests and criticism from civil society, including representatives of conservative women's groups, the government withdrew the bill.

2016 - These moves coincided with growing attacks from the Right on the ‘dangers’ of the Istanbul Convention. In response, We Will Stop Femicides Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu) organized a social media campaign in 2019 called “The Istanbul Convention Keeps us Alive.” This campaign was picked up by feminists, LGBTI+ rights activists, political parties, and local authorities.

2016 – President Erdogan increased the volume of this anti-feminist, family-oriented rhetoric. During his party’s women’s branch annual gathering he argued that women who are not mothers are “incomplete.” During the same event, he urged women not to use birth control and to have at least three children to ensure the growth of the country.

2018 - 2019 - Turkey’s conservative and Islamist circles started to make public statements and events to criticize and target the Istanbul Convention to ‘raise their voices’ against an international agenda that aims to damage Turkish family values and change conservative understanding of gender identities. As İlayda Eskitaşçıoğlu states “throughout their intense lobbying efforts, these groups have accused the Convention of corrupting the traditional family structure and advocating for LGBT[I+] rights” (2021).



Figure 1. ILKHA Online Newspaper, November 9, 2019 <https://ilkha.com/analiz/aileleri-yikan-istanbul-sozlesmesi-tbmmde-26-dakikada-kanunlastirilmis-108513>



Figure 2. ‘, Sabah Daily, May 16, 2019. The headline reads: *Individuals and Institutions are under pressure: The aim is to destroy family*’



Figure 3. Takvim Online Newspaper, May 16, 2020 The headline reads: *This is how they place dynamite at the foundation of the family*'. The under title reads: *'From now on we don't only have feminist-gay/lesbian movement but also an enormous effort for normalization guided by CHP (the main opposition party in the Turkish parliament),*

July 2020 – AKP (Justice and Development Party) Vice Chair Numan Kurtulmuş put forth the possibility of withdrawing from the Convention by saying "Just as [*İstanbul Convention*] was duly signed, one can duly withdraw from the convention."

August 2020 - Turkish feminist organizations came together to establish a platform called Women's Platform for Equality (Eşitlik için Kadın Platformu) to fight collectively against far-Right demands to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention.

August 2020 - The Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS) Women's and LGBTI+ Commission stressed the importance of the *İstanbul Convention*, asking the government, "Why do you demonize the *İstanbul Convention*, which you signed yourself, with certain campaigns of perception?"

August 2020 - President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke at the ceremony held for the 19th Foundation Year of the AKP. Targeting the Istanbul Convention without naming it as such, Erdoğan said, "No legislation, no understanding or no ideology putting dynamite at the root of the family is humane or legitimate."

Debates around the Istanbul Convention during the summer of 2020 followed a similar vein where anti-conventionists were specifically focusing on Article 4 while presenting it as yet another evidence for "Western sources" trying to damage and give harm to Turkish values and nation. Many AKP members (who are mostly men), cleared their positions by saying that the main point behind their reactions towards the Istanbul Convention was not about their attitude towards the femicides. Most of them recognized the issue of violence against women and the importance of reacting now. However, they also argued that what needs to be done is to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and create a legislation to "protect our women" and "protect the Turkish family values."

Following these arguments, pro-government politicians, activists and media platforms used Article 4 as evidence of "another attack from the West" while calling the government for a legislation that would fit to our values and tradition. The Istanbul Convention prohibits discrimination on many grounds, including gender identity and sexual orientation (Article 4, paragraph 3). This is to ensure protection and support for all victims of violence, irrespective of any characteristics they might have.

The convention speaks about the "gendered" nature of violence against women or of "gender-based violence." Therefore, it is important to emphasize the fact that violence against women and domestic violence cannot be addressed without looking at gender equality issues in general. Even though its aim is to address violence against women and domestic violence wherever it occurs, the convention does not limit its application to legally married partners but extends it to all partners, married or not, whether these are of the same or different sex. It is stated that no groups should be excluded from protection based on their marital status or any of the other grounds of discrimination covered by the convention.

November 2020 - Erdogan openly expressed the government's intention to withdraw from the Convention saying that Turkey needs to draft such treaties on its own, rather than using “translated texts.”

December 2020 - On December 23, a group that supports the withdrawal from the Convention distributed pamphlets in the parliament of Turkey. Pamphlets distributed in parliament by a group called Union of Family Associations called for not only a withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, but also for the cancellation of Turkish bill 6284 that protects women against violence. "The Istanbul Convention is an assassination weapon directed at the Turkish nation," the pamphlet said.

20 March 2021 – Turkey announced an official withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. While public and political discussions and debates regarding the Istanbul Convention were ongoing, the presidential decision published on a Friday midnight was unexpected and drew a reaction in and outside of Turkey.

Presidential Decision No. 3718 reads as following:

“It is decided that the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence which was signed by Turkey on 11/5/2011 and approved by the Cabinet Decree No. 2012/2816 on 10/2/2012 shall be terminated on behalf of Turkey according to Article 3 of the Presidential Decree No. 9.”

Post-March 2021- The Presidential Decision prompted a strong public reaction and widespread criticism. Lawyers, human rights advocates, activists, and politicians found the decision problematic from a legal perspective as well, as it was issued without Parliamentary consent, which raised claims that it was against the Turkish Constitution. Additionally, the decision received many reactions from the international point of view as well. From United Nations, the Council of Europe, to European Parliament and countries such as the United States, many NGOs, international councils and activists “raised their voices” against the presidential decision of Turkey.

Additionally, myriad organizations hosted international events on online platforms to explore international strategies against governments like Turkey (and countries specifically Poland and Hungary) who are considering withdrawing from the convention.

Following these reactions, Turkey's Directorate of Communications announced a statement which I quote at length below:

On 20 March 2021, Türkiye has unilaterally withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention. Article 80 of the Istanbul Convention permits any party to denounce it by notifying the Council of Europe.

As known, Türkiye was the first signatory to the Istanbul Convention by demonstrating a strong commitment to protect women's status in society and fight any violence against women. The Istanbul Convention, originally intended to promote women's rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality – which is incompatible with Türkiye's social and family values. Hence the decision to withdraw.

Türkiye is not the only country who has serious concerns about the Istanbul Convention. Six members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia) did not ratify the Istanbul Convention. Poland has taken steps to withdraw from the Convention, citing an attempt by the LGBT community to impose their ideas about gender on the entire society.

The decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention by no means denotes that the State of the Republic of Türkiye "compromises the protection of women." Türkiye will not give up on its fight against domestic violence by quitting the Convention.

In relation to the issue, President Erdoğan strongly emphasizes that Türkiye will continue protecting the safety and the rights of all women and underlines that fighting domestic violence with the principle of zero tolerance will remain on top of the government's agenda.

Türkiye has taken concrete steps to uphold and promote women's rights and those mechanisms are still in place. Türkiye will also implement new reforms to fight violence against women. Following the withdrawal from the Convention, Türkiye will focus on measures that will address the specific needs of the society and strengthen ongoing efforts to that end. Those legal mechanisms include the Turkish Constitution as well as our nation's civil law, penal code and the Law no. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and the Prevention of Violence Against Women. Türkiye is also party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

It must be noted that Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has zero impact on the implementation of strict, effective, and real-world measures, including a landmark legislation that President Erdoğan's government drafted, sponsored and passed. Türkiye will take additional steps to improve the effectiveness of existing precautions against domestic violence and violence against women as part of the Human Rights Action Plan that was unveiled in early March.

Encounters of Discursive Tactics

The preparation, application, and cancellation of the Istanbul Convention in Turkey was complex and nuanced and deserves attention. Apart from the centrality of conspiratorial knowledge making processes in government's public justification and pro-government group's statements, it is also crucial to think about the similarities between groups that occupy oppositionary sides regarding the Convention.

One of the details that catches the eye is about the urgency of the call. While feminist and LGBTI+ movements were calling on the state to apply the Convention and the Law No. 6284 immediately, anti-conventionists were using a similar tense and aspect strategy to call an urgent action to withdraw from the convention. In one instance we see the main motto of the protestors 'İstanbul Sözleşmesi Yaşatır' (Istanbul Convention saves lives) turning into 'İstanbul Sözleşmesi Öldürür' (Istanbul Convention ends lives).



Figure 4: An image from a protest against the Convention organized by Turkey's Family Unit Association on May 18, 2020. [Turkey's Family Unit: The Istanbul Convention need to be cancelled immediately.](#)



Figure 5. #IstanbulConventionSavesLives

In addition, using imagery as a tactic to mobilize digital and offline spaces of activism has been an important strategy for feminist and LGBTI+ movements in Turkey. In a context where not only the state-sponsored/pro-government media outlets but also the state itself were actively involved in a campaign-like politics against the Istanbul Convention, mobilizing impacts of imagery and slogans became very important. As debates became heated and only way of being involved in discussions related to the Convention was limited to being ‘for’ or ‘against’ it, tactics of using and circulating visuals became significant. While feminist and LGBTI+ activists were using images and especially cartoon graphics and animated designs to spread their messages on social media, Twitter in particular, similar imageries started to appear within anti-Istanbul Convention outlets through their circulation in social and mass media.



Figure 6. A cartoon graphic designed by Mikail Çiftçi against the Istanbul Convention.

In this manner, feminist and queer reflections on the state sponsored conspiratorial forms of knowledge making (i.e. ‘Istanbul Convention aims to destroy families and the nation.’), through some of the paradoxes that follow the collaborative struggle within the human rights activism in Turkey, reveal the complexity of engaging with state sponsored traumatic histories of the past and conspiracy narratives of the present. When getting confused about who is raising whose voices against whom and how, we realize that languages of solidarity and collaboration are mobile. Looking at glimpses of tension within spaces of collective struggle for the Istanbul Convention may help us understand how discourses of solidarity and collaboration can be reproduced as part of populist politics of conspiracy and paranoia.

In Turkey’s case, the state’s discourse of foreignness seems to be one of the main reasons why the convention was seen as a threat to the nation and family values. But why wait for a decade? Were there any newly discovered clauses in the convention after it was opened for signatory? Did a secret organization secretly added clauses to the convention to promote any identity or a particular type of family? Did the convention change its definition of gender, sexuality, or family

after 2012? And finally, do we know other examples of internationally recognized agreements that can be *hijacked* by social movements?

While having no doubt on our potential to add more to the list of cynical but necessary questions, I would like to discuss the ways in which the shifts in governmental discourses regarding the Convention and the discourses around ‘deep concerns’. Feeling confused between deep concerns of mine, my friends, and millions in Turkey on one side, and international parties such as the European Convention and United Nations (and many more) and national institutions and organizations on the other, I would like to end by going back to the beginning of this essay and think about complexity of discourses when state sponsored conspiratorial knowledge making becomes a central routine of populism. Maybe it’s time to zoom in on the dynamics that turned politics of gender and sexuality into a national threat. Maybe instead of reading populism between two sides of ‘pro’ or ‘anti’, it is time to think about discourses of conspiratorial politics that promise to ‘show the big picture’ while unapologetically borrowing the discourses of activists and rights advocates who struggle at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

As Sara Ahmed (2012) suggests understanding how ‘what happens’ happens, we need to narrow the frame and ‘think about words, texts, objects, and bodies to follow them around, to explore what they do and do not do when they are put into action.’ (50) It is important to explore how spaces of activism come to have certain habits, rhythms, and orientations travel and circulate within state’s discourse to be used against activists as a part of conspiracy making projects. As conspiratorial knowledge making practices equalize people who struggle for the Istanbul Convention as ‘national threats’ or ‘puppets of the West’, state discourse borrows their narrative tactics to target them by creating suspicion. Understanding the fine nuances of struggles, terms of transformations, and contradictions demand methods that immerse us in the worlds of discursive tactics and strategies.

As Jenny L. Davis (2014) articulates, study of languages, discourses and practices of knowledge making reveal how certain power dynamics that are embedded between gendered binaries such as modern/traditional and majority/minority play certain roles in the marginalization of certain peoples. In this case, language cannot be detached from the historical discourse associated with certain regions and people that form social contexts that create margins for certain individuals and groups. Inspired by them and surprising forms of exchange among groups who

have contradictory positions on Turkey's Istanbul Convention decision, we see activist discourses and narratives on rights require precise approaches and perspectives.

In this case, it is important to not categorize the intersections of conspiracy, populism and politics on gender and sexuality as illogical arrangement of scenarios. Politics of conspiratorial knowledge making (which surprisingly echoes discursive tactics that are used against them) to target the Istanbul Convention in Turkey, and elsewhere, encourage us to go from fixed and specific sites of political struggle to more creative understandings of inequalities and uncertainties with regards to the linguistic maneuvers of knowledge production.

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