

**TURKEY AND THE
POST-PANDEMIC WORLD**

WHAT KIND OF REVISIONISM?

Toni Alaranta

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This study analyzes Turkish foreign policy narratives generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and their intellectual and political context provided by Western debates. The approach is based on the assumption that the narratives about the pandemic provide an interesting window through which to observe the long-term fears and hopes concerning international politics in Turkey. The study utilizes Steven Ward's conceptualization of distributive and normative revisionism as a theoretical framework for analyzing Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy. It also discusses the analytical limits of this concept by introducing the idea of revisionism as a familiar narrative trope in Western International Relations scholarship. The study demonstrates that while Turkey remains loosely attached to its traditional commitment to defend the existing order, it increasingly expresses its dissatisfaction within that order, sometimes pushing it to the limits, and taking action that could even be defined as normative, or radical, revisionism.



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INTRODUCTION

Turkey has fought the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020. By July, the country was seen as a relative success story in terms of being able to control the situation, but recently there has been a new peak in cases. Similar to the situation in many other states, the pandemic quickly generated not only massive nationwide counter-measures but also a heated debate regarding its possible effects on international politics. The present Working Paper focuses on detecting and analyzing these narratives and placing them in the wider context of the ongoing debate on the alleged weakening of the so-called Liberal International Order (LIO) and its future prospects in the post-pandemic world. The paper utilizes Steven Ward's conceptualization of revisionism as a theoretical framework for Turkey's current foreign policy in general and the post-pandemic views in particular. It also briefly discusses the extent to which revisionism is an established narrative trope in IR literature.

The study is based on the assumption that the narratives about the pandemic provide an interesting window through which to observe the long-term fears and hopes concerning international politics in Turkey. Further, they provide a prism through which we can evaluate the internal contradictions and meaning of order narratives, Turkey-West relations, and their mutual interrelationship. The paper focuses on the narratives reproducing the agenda of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). In addition to President Erdoğan, his top advisers and leading ministers, the official government policy is not only reflected, but also often formulated, by a number of writers contributing on a daily basis to the pro-government newspapers and think tanks.

REVISIONISM: DISTRIBUTIVE, NORMATIVE AND NARRATED

During the post-Cold War era, and particularly since 2002 when the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power, Turkey has been increasingly defined by analysts

and commentators as a 'rising power', 'middle power', or an 'emerging power'.¹ None of these concepts is easily defined, but they do reflect the obvious fact that Turkey's economic, military, and political weight has increased and the country has become a more independent player in world politics. During the last five years in particular, it has also become necessary to ask whether Turkey can now be considered a *revisionist power*. The obvious starting point for this debate is President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repeated critique of the current international order and his insistence on Turkey's major role in structuring a new order, a trait that has only intensified in recent months defined by the global pandemic.

The concepts of revisionism and order are of course strongly linked. Revisionism is at the same time a widely used yet rather vague concept. In essence, it refers to an attitude of dissatisfaction and the desire to change the status quo in international politics. In previous studies, a rough distinction has been made between revisionism regarding the distribution of resources (influence, wealth, markets, ideology, and power) and that regarding the norms and rules that help to constitute the status quo in the international order. This implies an unhelpful choosing between these two meanings. According to Steven Ward, this can be alleviated by conceptualizing the status quo, at any particular time and place, consisting of both a distribution of resources and a set of norms, rules, and institutions that produce order by constituting actors with different statuses and bundles of rights, providing bases for legitimate action in international politics.²

Nevertheless, Ward underscores that distributive and normative dissatisfaction are analytically distinct, and result in different behaviour by the revisionist state. For instance, ambitions for an enhanced status might lead to demands for the reform of international institutions to accommodate claims for a more powerful voice for the state in global governance. According

1 Soner Çağptay, 'Defining Turkish Power: Turkey as a Rising Power Embedded in the Western International System', *Turkish Studies* 14 (4) 2013, 797–811; Svante Cornell, Gerald Knaus and Manfred Scheich, 'Dealing With a Rising Power: Turkey's Transformation and its Implications for the EU', Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2012); Buğra Süsler, 'Turkey: An Emerging Middle Power in a Changing World?', LSE ideas June 11, 2019, <https://medium.com/@lseideas/turkey-an-emerging-middle-power-in-a-changing-world-df4124a1a71f>.

2 Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 12.

to Ward, this should not be confused with evidence of a fundamental opposition to the norms, rules, and institutions that produce the existing order itself. The first option (distributive dissatisfaction) might in fact signal the acceptance and even confirmation of existing norms and values. On the other hand, normative dissatisfaction runs deeper and pushes not for marginal reforms under the existing institutions, but rather for policies that deny, challenge the legitimacy of, or aim at overthrowing the norms, rules and institutions that constitute the status quo. In this kind of radical normative revisionism, states may, for example, try to destroy the existing order altogether or withdraw from or refuse to participate in status quo institutions.³

On the other hand, in addition to understanding revisionism as a useful analytical tool, one should also consider to what extent it is a familiar narrative trope in the IR literature. According to Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm, revisionism and the status quo function as narrative-ordering principles in scholarly analyses, so that revisionism is typically conceived as disruption from the non-West amidst a fundamentally moral Western order that represents civilizational progress. In this view, narratives of international revisionism and the status quo have long worked to construct and legitimize understandings of a principally Western-led global status quo and the universal advances it brings.⁴ Turkey is a telling example in this context. According to Ayşe Zarakol, together with Russia and Japan, Turkey has been characterized by an enduring debate whereby it is not accepted as being as good as the West in the eyes of the latter.⁵ This suggests that the polemic regarding Turkey's place in an international system dominated by the West is an ongoing one, and that today's debates on revisionism and order should be understood within this broad historical perspective. This study utilizes the concept of revisionism in order to analyze the often highly critical remarks about the current international order inherent in Turkish foreign policy narratives, while acknowledging that the concept is not completely objective but also part of a certain influential narrative within the Western IR discipline that tends to apply this term to non-Western actors in particular.

THE WESTERN DEBATE ON ORDER

The Western debate about the current international system is characterized by a deep anxiety over the fate of the so-called liberal international order (LIO). According to the mainstream (liberal) view, this order was established after World War II, was upheld and developed by the Western block of states during the Cold War under American patronage, and was then successfully globalized after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bankruptcy of international communism.⁶

The ongoing power shift is real and its main cause is the economic growth of China. Further, following this economic growth, we are increasingly witnessing a more assertive Chinese foreign policy all around the world. At the same time, Russia, by using both force and diplomacy, has re-emerged as a powerful global actor, although its economy is relatively weak compared to that of China, the EU and the US. However, the nature of the power shift is far from self-evident. It is also obvious that the narrative coherence one could perhaps find by taking an initial cursory look at the academic literature and policy papers is, in fact, contested within the discipline of International Relations. In other words, different approaches within IR have a very different understanding even about the very starting conditions of the current 'West in crisis' narrative. Thus, the alleged existence of a coherent liberal international order vigorously upheld by leading Western states is thoroughly questioned in some IR approaches. For the sake of simplicity, this controversy about 'what was there before' can be exemplified by citing two prominent IR scholars, namely John G. Ikenberry and Patrick Porter. It indeed turns out that these two scholars – a liberal internationalist and a realist – have a very different understanding of the liberal international order.

In Ikenberry's view, since the 1940s the US had acted as a largely benevolent hegemon. Under its restrained power projection, during the 1990s a major part of the world was drawn into a liberal world order characterized by institutions and practices that decreased states' tendency to violence. This was accompanied by an order where liberal market economies became increasingly dependent on each other in a mutually beneficial way, and where adherence to human rights, democracy, and civil liberties became

3 Ibid, 16–17.

4 Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm, 'Morality and progress: IR narratives on international revisionism and the status quo', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32 (4) 2019, 409.

5 Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6 G. John Ikenberry, 'The End of Liberal International Order?', *Foreign Affairs* 94 (1) 2018, 7–23; Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, 'After Liberal World Order', *International Affairs* 94 (1) 2018, 25–42.

the normative expectation, even when not always implemented in practice. This was seen as the most recent phase of liberal ascendancy that had started in the nineteenth century under the British Empire. This was subsequently halted during the inter-war period, but after the end of the Second World War, the beacon of liberalism switched from Britain to America, which started to build institutions and alliances restricting its own power so that the states within the Western bloc voluntarily accepted US leadership, as it also served their own interests. In this account, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Eastern bloc built on international communism – which since the 1970s had lost the race for modernization and progress to the capitalist Western camp – allowed an ever larger part of the world to be included in the liberal order, so that it now became truly global.⁷

In contrast to this account of a coherent liberal order ultimately bringing progress, better living conditions, and greater liberties to all nations, Patrick Porter paints a much gloomier picture of international relations since the 1940s. The first critique concerns the ahistorical character of Ikenberry's liberal account. To begin with, Porter points out that if a liberal international order worthy of its name in terms of free markets really did exist, then it lasted only a very short period from the 1990s onwards. It was only at this stage that states beyond Euro-Atlantic countries, Japan and Australia were drawn – with the implementation of neo-liberal policies – into the liberal economic order. On the other hand, the US itself never stopped protecting its own key industrial production with various restrictions and limitations, and saw to it that all trade agreements benefited it either directly or at least created relationships and dependencies it could later make use of. Even more importantly, the American hegemon never shied away from using coercion against those who did not bow to its arrangements, and nor did the liberal edifice obstruct the US from supporting all kinds of undemocratic, anti-liberal regimes and leaders if their domestic success was seen as vital for the overall American national strategy.⁸ One could argue that the case of Turkey supports this view. In 1980, Turkey witnessed a military intervention that established a draconian rule that crushed the domestic left while implementing free-market policies. The military

rule was in practice backed by the US, which thus chose to ignore the vast human rights violations taking place in Turkey at the time. Taken together, according to Patrick Porter, the kind of coherent liberal international order, constantly promoting liberal values under a benevolent US hegemon that had learned to restrain its own power through institutions and alliances, has never existed, at least not in the (strongly idealized) form claimed by Ikenberry and other liberal internationalists.

However, useful attempts at a conceptual clarification have already been made that can help us compose a workable synthesis of various interpretations. According to Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann, there is reason to argue that the global power shift has not resulted, thus far at least, in the break-up of the current order, but rather in significant challenges within that order. This interpretation builds on a 'minimalist' description of the post-war global order based on its fundamental substantive and procedural ordering principles: sovereign inter-state relations and a relatively open global economy, characterized by practices of inclusive, rule-bound multilateralism. Here, (Westphalian) state sovereignty and a relatively open global economy form the substantive core of the post-1945 international order, whereas multilateralism – a set of widely agreed-upon rules and principles, enshrined in and premised on general respect for international law – is the conglomeration of procedures used by state actors in order to uphold the substantive principles of state sovereignty and economic openness. This is a 'minimalist' account in the sense that it takes economic liberalism as a central tenet of liberal international order, whereas political liberalism and democracy are considered an aspiration rather than the essential element of the existing order.⁹

The merit of this minimalist account is that it allows us to speak about a liberal international order without claiming that this order has consistently attempted – not to say succeeded – to uphold democracy and political liberalism. Accordingly, we should learn to conceptualize international order as a dynamic construct, parts of which have been continuously challenged and renegotiated. From this perspective, what we are currently witnessing is not so much a definitive crisis of the existing order, but rather its ongoing and problematic transformation into a broader, more inclusive system of global governance, reflecting the need to accommodate new actors and problems.

7 G. John Ikenberry, 'The End of Liberal International Order?', *Foreign Affairs* 94 (1) 2018, 7–23.

8 Patrick Porter, 'A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order'. Cato Institute: Policy Analysis 843, 2018.

9 Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Stephanie C. Hofmann, 'Of the contemporary global order, crisis, and change', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13501763.2019.1678665?needAccess=true>.

TURKISH NARRATIVES OF THE POST-PANDEMIC ORDER

Covid-19 came late to Turkey, on March 11, 2020. First, there was some empty boasting about Turkey managing to avoid the whole thing, with TV shows discussing whether a special ‘Turkish gene’ made Turks immune to the virus. After some hesitation, government officials started to take the right action and say the right things to the public, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, reminding citizens that now was not the time for traditional social contact, such as kissing and hugging. At the time of writing this paper, the official death toll in Turkey was just over 7,000, in a country of 82 million. The tracking and testing started in Turkey on day one on March 11, and there were strict restrictions on daily life – no trips to the coffee shop, no shopping in crowded markets, no communal prayers at the mosque. Istanbul, the epicentre, was in complete lockdown for several weeks.¹⁰ The pandemic has caused a major economic downturn in Turkey, with the tourism industry being hit particularly hard. On the other hand, the AKP government has used the emergency to increase its pressure against political opponents, targeting the pro-Kurdish HDP in particular.

The aim here is to analyze the way in which Turkish pro-government foreign policy narratives have framed the pandemic, how it has been used to give meaning to international politics and Turkey’s place in the world, and what kind of evaluations these stories provide regarding the future of international affairs. These observations are then evaluated in terms of whether the narratives express normative or distributive revisionism. By early March 2020, the Turkish media were already steeped in narratives about Covid-19 and its consequences. The pandemic required huge restrictions, lockdowns, and a re-organization of daily life, the labour force and modes of production and services. It was obvious that these measures would generate an endless array of speculations, forecasts, and interpretations. Ultimately, these can be understood as manifestations of various fears and hopes and fears about the expected ‘new world order’ to be created after the crisis. The nature of these hopes and fears reveals a great deal about different Turkish foreign policy narratives and the ideological frameworks on which they are built. Further, they will go some way towards addressing the question of the kind of revisionism that

now characterizes Turkey as a state actor.

Turkey confronted the pandemic in an era when there was significant social polarization, based on the highly polarizing policies implemented under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkey thus presented an interesting case regarding the comparison between democratic and authoritarian states’ ability to tackle the crisis caused by the virus.¹¹ Turkey also engaged in significant ‘virus diplomacy’, sending medical aid and personal protective equipment to over 80 countries, including its Western NATO partners the UK, Italy and Spain. It did this at a time when the virus was quickly spreading throughout Turkey, and while the country’s medical authorities were warning that there was also a domestic shortage of critical medical equipment. As argued by Yaprak Gürsoy, it is clear that the Erdoğan government wanted to advance Turkey’s international image through virus diplomacy and acts of international compassion. The country’s foreign policy and relations with Western countries in particular had been deteriorating for a long time, and the virus diplomacy was part of a positive image campaign. In addition, the Islamic-conservative Turkish foreign policy is particularly keen to underscore the (Turkey-centred) Muslim international actorness, where the opportunity to demonstrate how the dominant Western countries need Turkey is repeatedly emphasized. Dispatching medical supplies to powerful Western countries in times of crisis thus provided the AKP regime with a way to highlight how the power balance between the West and the Islamic world was changing, and how Turkey as the leading Islamic power was becoming increasingly relevant in global politics. During the previous ten years, Turkey had been actively promoting its ‘soft power’ through aid and development assistance in other Muslim-majority societies, and now this method was being applied in terms of NATO allies.¹²

According to Kerem Alkin, writing for the pro-AKP *Sabah* newspaper, the Covid-19 pandemic was the biggest human crisis since the Second World War, and the global system was now forced to change. The pandemic meant a profound learning process, encompassing our individual lives, companies, states and even the international system and all of its institutions, calling

10 Orla Guerin, ‘Coronavirus: How Turkey took control of Covid-19 emergency’, *BBC News*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52831017>.

11 Emre Erdoğan, ‘The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Polarization in Turkey’, *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, April 2, 2020, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/impact-coronavirus-pandemic-polarization-turkey#utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Social.

12 Yaprak Gürsoy, ‘Turkey is facing its own coronavirus crisis – so why is it sending medical supplies to the UK?’ *The Conversation*, April 22, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/turkey-is-facing-its-own-coronavirus-crisis-so-why-is-it-sending-medical-supplies-to-the-uk-136784>.

their operations into question. Above all, it posed a profound test for the capitalist economy operating through neoliberal logic. The pandemic was particularly challenging for the leaders of 'wild capitalism', namely the US but also the UK, of which Alkin argued rather unjustifiably that its public healthcare system was unable to provide care for the majority of citizens. On the other hand, China's authoritarian state capitalist model could not be praised either, but was instead accused of the damage that had been inflicted.¹³

Okan Müderrisoğlu, also contributing to *Sabah*, expressed the same kind of argumentation. The era when states perceived every issue in terms of the markets was gone. However, the pandemic also demonstrated that during times of crisis, the idea of international solidarity was just a dream. The value of 'local and national production' became evident, and the importance of national unity was no longer a slogan but a reality. The pandemic was a global crisis that was tackled by Turkey through national strength. The crisis showed the crucial importance of family values as the core of Turkey's existence. It also demonstrated how important it was to acquire a healthy parent-child relationship, as well as the public's endorsement of good connections to neighbours and relatives.¹⁴

The interpretation according to which the pandemic calls into question the very fundamentals of a capitalist society is also present in Hasan Öztürk's column, published in the fiercely pro-Erdoğan *Yeni Şafak* newspaper. According to Öztürk, the virus challenged forms of production and consumption, and even the nature of ownership. Accordingly, it called into question the globalization process and showed that the fight against the virus was the domain of nation-states. In this view, the outcome of the pandemic that ravaged the globe was going to be a brand new, hopefully more humane world.¹⁵ Taken together, these narratives by Alkin, Müderrisoğlu and Öztürk represent normative revisionism in the sense that they not only question the ability of the LIO to generate cooperation in times of immediate crisis, but also challenge some of its operational logics, such as free markets and individualism.

Burhanettin Duran, writing for the *Sabah* newspaper and the SETA think tank, underscored the

pandemic from the viewpoint of international relations, and particularly in terms of great-power competition and major actors' propaganda efforts. First, the pandemic produced an array of narratives about the kind of regimes that were best prepared to tackle the virus, and whose internal organizational procedures and healthcare systems were the most effective in handling the crisis. In international media narratives, China was firstly accused of spreading the virus and covering up vital data, seen as a natural consequence of its authoritarian and non-transparent governance. However, later on, as the virus spread all over the world and several European countries faced serious problems in tackling the epidemic, China also managed to portray itself as a compassionate and responsible global actor by sending medical supplies and doctors to help other countries in trouble. Accordingly, the pandemic duly became another expression of the power struggle and race for global leadership between the US and China. The pandemic seemed to strengthen the mechanism, initially triggered by the 2008 financial crisis, where the US was markedly losing its position as the leader of the world.¹⁶

In terms of the long-term economic and political consequences of the pandemic, analysts in the SETA think tank expected significant changes. The pandemic created acute shortages in many fields of production, and it was thus likely that international firms would re-evaluate their investment and production strategies. This could mean that factories established in China and other parts of Southeast Asia would be transferred to other regions of the globe. In addition, there was also the possibility that Western companies would now be more willing to bring their manufacturing processes back to their home countries, which, in their attempt to keep production costs and salaries as low as possible, could spark a much more determined effort to utilize robotics in the production process.¹⁷

In addition, the pandemic was likely to have significant effects on the existing international system. According to SETA analysts, the international system could be conceptualized as consisting of three main dynamics: actors (states), international institutions, and international regimes. In the positive scenario, the pandemic was brought under control by the end

13 Kerem Alkin, 'Korona: Kapitalizmin "en ağır" sınavı', *Sabah*, 23.3.2020, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/kerem-alkin/2020/03/23/baslarken-turkiye-icin-sorumluluklarimiz>.

14 Okan Müderrisoğlu, 'Küresel salgın: Türkiye'nin farkı ve ailenin değeri', *Sabah*, 24.3.2020, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/muderrisoglu/2020/03/24/kuresel-salgin-turkiyenin-farki-ve-ailenin-degeri>.

15 Hasan Öztürk, 'Koronavirus üzerinden yeni bir dünya kurulacaksa', *Yeni Şafak*, 17.3.2020, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hasanozturk/koronavirus-uzerinden-yeni-bir-dunya-kurulacaksa-2054575>.

16 Burhanettin Duran, 'Koronavirüs ve ideolojik kapışma', *Sabah*, 20.3.2020, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/duran/2020/03/20/koronavirus-ve-ideolojik-kapisma>.

17 Murat Yeşiltaş, Nurullah Gür and Can Acun, '5 Soru: Koronavirüs Salgını Küresel Sistemi Nasıl Etkileyecek?' Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmalar Vakfı (SETA), Ankara, March 2020, <https://www.setav.org/5-soru-koronavirus-salgini-kuresel-sistemi-nasil-etkileyecek>.

of 2020. In this case, it was expected that the existing mechanism between actors, institutions and regimes would continue more or less in the same way as before. However, in the case of the pandemic continuing to spread among populations for a longer time, this would seriously call into question the current international order and challenge the already weakened American global leadership even further. In that scenario, China and other emerging powers would probably aim to remake the global system in an even more determined way. All this would then considerably change the existing manifestations of globalization, and supply chains in particular. In terms of the possible immediate consequences in the Middle East, SETA analysts list the strained state finances due to diving oil prices observed during the pandemic, as well as the overall economic and political challenges caused by the pandemic in a context where many of the region's states were already on the verge of becoming 'failed states'.¹⁸ One could thus conclude that the narrative provided by SETA analysts expresses distributive revisionism, namely, it speculates about a new division of labour and a reformulated distribution of power, instead of vocally questioning the normative basis of the order.

According to Bülent Erandaç, an analyst in the pro-government Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü (EDS) think tank, the Covid-19 pandemic was the most serious threat the world had faced since the Second World War. Everyone understood the world would never be the same again after the crisis, and that the international system with its existing structure, balance of power and its economic and political dimensions had been transformed. Most importantly, the existing world order had been characterized by a structure where one side lived a life of luxury and wealth while the rest lived in poverty, need and ignorance. Such a world could not prevail. The last two centuries had been dominated by the Western nations, which had occupied other countries, endlessly chasing profits, implementing massacres, and engaging in self-deception with narratives of democracy. These were, ultimately, the acts of Western civilization, now crushed because of the virus. Western countries would obviously try to rebuild their hegemony after the pandemic. This, Erandaç underscored, must be stopped and the new world order must be founded on more humane and fair principles. He quoted President Erdoğan's famous slogan 'the world is bigger than five' – a critique

of the permanent members of the UN Security Council – and stressed how Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership was emerging from the crisis as the dominant power of Islamic civilization, now poised to put an end to the highly unequal and oppressive order of Western civilization.¹⁹

Turkey was also one of the actors strongly emphasizing the country's own capabilities to deal with the pandemic on its own terms. President Erdoğan crystallized this self-assured position by introducing the slogan *Biz bize yeteriz*, which roughly translates as 'we're enough for ourselves'. In reference to this, Bülent Erandaç emphasized that this slogan had a highly meaningful history. Accordingly, it reminded the Turks of their successful defence struggle, in the First World War to begin with and then in the subsequent War of Independence (1919–1922), when they abandoned a foreign mandate and trusted solely in their own capabilities. This same spirit was now needed to fight the virus. By making the historical reference to the years of the War of Independence, during which the Western powers tried to partition Ottoman Anatolia and divide its territories, Erandaç managed to turn his article about Covid-19 into one bashing Western civilization. Accordingly, the pandemic was interpreted by Erandaç as a starting point for a post-Western world order. That order had been characterized by the US's illegal occupation of other countries, and its attempt to violently change regimes wherever it wanted. However, Covid-19 had now made the US and Europe a 'naked king'. For instance, France, which had once established its violent repressive rule over Africa, was now doomed. Italy, a key member of the European Union, was given urgent help not by other European countries but by Russia and China instead, while Bulgarians bemoaned that they had only received help from Turkey and China. According to Bülent Erandaç, all this once again validated President Erdoğan's motto 'the world is bigger than five', and thus demonstrated the immediate requirement to rebuild the existing power structures in the international system. Regarding Turkey's own position, Erandaç underscored its willingness to help others, praising President Erdoğan's long-term strategy to encourage Turkey's increased 'domestic and national' production volumes. Now, Erandaç concluded, this strategy would prove vital for Turkey's success.²⁰

18 Ibid.

19 Bülent Erandaç, 'Quo Vadis Dünya', Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, 30.3.2020, <https://www.sde.org.tr/bulent-erandac/genel/quo-vadis-dunya-kose-yazi-si-16530>.

20 Bülent Erandaç, 'Biz bize yeteriz', *A Haber*, 1.4.2020, <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/yazarlar/bulent-erandac/2020/04/01/biz-bize-yeteriz>.

The idea of the pandemic as a kind of historical purgatory, after which a new world order would emerge, partly elaborated by Erandaç, is explicit in Yusuf Kaplan's writings. Kaplan, writing for the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper, argues that out of all humans, Muslims were best equipped to endure all sorts of crises because they were used to living by constantly balancing between good and bad. Muslims, Kaplan opined, knew that there was always something good in every bad situation, and vice versa. The pandemic had resulted in a global lockdown, and the landscape was dystopian. However, Kaplan underscored that the world had already been hell before the virus, and that it had been turned into a living hell by the global capitalist system dominated by the West.²¹

Kaplan's views are often extreme, and his narration is notorious for spreading conspiracy theories and hatred. Nevertheless, this extremism and even unbelievable claims should not prevent one from seeing how some of the essential threats, hopes, and expectations inherent in Kaplan's writing are in fact shared by a large segment of the ruling Islamic-conservative block. One such theme is the profound conviction that the current world order is deeply illegitimate, and that Islamic civilization is both suppressed and in a state of humiliation, and, further, that it needs to find unity, ideological resurrection and subsequently – in one form or another – become a leading civilizational force in the world, or at least in terms of all Muslim-majority societies. At first sight, such an evaluation seems astonishing as it would appear to align Turkish AKP constituencies' attitudes very closely with the views espoused by hardcore Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda. That kind of interpretation, on the other hand, would be rather radical in itself, as there is a widely held conception of the AKP representing a very moderate and pragmatic re-invention of a form of religious-oriented politics that was, even in the original version, a very moderate political Islam of the *Milli Görüş* movement.

However, the terms 'radical' and 'moderate', or any talk aiming to put specific thoughts or actions into a hierarchy regarding their intensity, violence, or any such characterization is perhaps not the most useful approach here. The important point is to recognize the deeply ingrained tradition of thinking of the world in terms of religious-centred civilizations, of utilizing such a conviction in political action and as a reservoir

or building blocks for utopian discourse. The idea of a better world – one that in some essential way differs from the existing one – is best understood as a permanent human condition. Within the AKP, the overall Islamic-conservative ideology provides its supporters and leadership alike with concepts and interpretations whereby the crisis produced by the pandemic is conceived of as an opportunity to implement key hopes, which in this case are closely attached to the idea of Islamic civilization. Thus, although radical and often unbelievable, Yusuf Kaplan's interpretation of the pandemic as a kind of purgatory cleansing the world of the sickness caused by Western dominance stems from this widely shared common Islamist repertoire for articulating social fears and hopes.

It is in line with these premises, forming the ideological background to President Erdoğan's 'New Turkey', that İbrahim Karagül, editor-in-chief of *Yeni Şafak*, also interpreted the pandemic as a universal confirmation of New Turkey's wise strategy emphasizing 'national and local' solutions. It also explains the almost celebratory tone of Karagül's account of the 'shattering image' of the US and the European Union. Thus, Karagül explains in triumphant rhetoric that 'the Western or Atlantic world order exists no more'. A new world was being erected, one where states prefer national production and, in particular, see to it that all strategic items and goods are produced domestically. In addition to the increasing demand for economic autarky, the new world now emerging is characterized by increasing questioning of the 'Western way of life'. In Karagül's narrative, it was now futile to ask whether the world was about to change as 'it has already changed'.²²

However, when the pro-government publications address Western audiences through their English editions, the message seems quite different. Tarık Oğuzlu in the *Daily Sabah* recently provided a typical example. According to him, the Western powers should understand that notwithstanding Turkey's emergence as a powerful regional actor keen to revise the distribution of capabilities and see its values and interests better secured in global politics, Turkey's alleged challenge to the current international order should be seen as a challenge from within the Western block. As he put it, 'Similar to many traditional middle powers, Turkey does not challenge the fundamental norms and values of the current international

21 Yusuf Kaplan, 'Yeni bir dünya kurulacak, burada İslâm kilit rol oynayacak', *Yeni Şafak*, 5.4.2020, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/yusufkaplan/yeni-bir-dunya-kurulacak-burada-islam-kilit-rol-oyunayacak-2054750>.

22 İbrahim Karagül, 'Türkiye'nin hazırlık yaptığı her şey dünya gerçeği oldu', *Yeni Şafak*, 7.4.2020.

order built by Western powers in the immediate aftermath of World War II'.²³

All of these themes can also be found in President Erdoğan's own speeches since the outbreak of the pandemic. The global crisis is seen to emphasize even further Turkey's ability and willingness to take a much more active role in global politics. This new activism is strongly related to Turkey's role as a successor state of the Ottoman Empire. A typical example is the statement Erdoğan made after the cabinet session on July 14, 2020. According to Erdoğan:

*From every platform, we will continue to repeat our outcry that 'the world is bigger than five' and in dire need of a more just order. We strongly believe this trait characterizing Turkey is a responsibility bestowed upon our nation by history. Our ancestors fulfilled their duty during the past centuries, and we will continue to do so until our last breath.*²⁴

This statement reveals Erdoğan's deeply felt conviction that, under his presidency, Turkey is destined to become a global power that will help establish, as he defines it, a more just world order. It is crucial to understand that controversial policies – from the occupation of northern Syria and increasing intervention into Iraqi territories, the intervention in Libya, playing the 'spoiler' in the East Mediterranean multinational gas exploration, the current endless quarrel with Western NATO allies and the EU, to the difficult conflict and cooperation relationship with states like Russia and China – are all explained in this framework of 'global actorness'. If there is one underlying theme in these narratives, it is the conviction that the existing (liberal international) order was dysfunctional and unjust before the pandemic, and has become increasingly so after it. Further, some recent initiatives such as turning the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque and threats of withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on combating domestic violence can be at least partially interpreted as moves to challenge or deny the legitimacy of the current international order.

CONCLUSIONS

The material analyzed in the present study points to three major conclusions. First, the Turkish narratives about the international order in the post-pandemic world repeatedly underscore the profoundly problematic nature of the so-called liberal international order. It is constantly accused of oppressing non-Western countries, while the Covid-19 pandemic has proved that it is highly problematic even for the populations of the leading Western states. Second, the remedy is said to be found in opening some of the key institutional arrangements of power distribution, such as the UN Security Council, and in bringing in the values and norms represented by Turkey as the allegedly leading country of Islamic civilization. Third, the almost celebratory tone depicting the crushing of the Western world and its accompanying order is significantly softened by diplomatic gestures, an emphasis on Turkey's firm commitment to NATO and the EU, and by emphasizing Turkey's rise within, rather than against, the Western world.

Regarding the theoretical framework of the study, what can be said about Turkey's revisionism? There are obviously elements of deep, normative dissatisfaction in the foreign policy narratives analyzed. At the same time, there are constant claims – as well as institutional attachments – signalling that Turkey represents distributive revisionism, willing above all to re-negotiate the distribution of wealth and status within the existing order. This dual signalling can be interpreted within two mechanisms for the most part. First, accusations of Western brutality help to recast Turkey's role within the existing order by underscoring its acute need to better accommodate non-Western actors participating in upholding the existing order. Second, it reflects the internal contradictions of Turkey's strategic culture within which the West is a security provider yet, at the same time, a cultural-civilizational challenge, if not an outright threat. Finally, this latter aspect relates directly to the somewhat problematic tendency in Western IR scholarship to conceptualize assertive non-Western actors as revisionist within a narrative that typically associates order and the status quo with the leading Western states. It is safe to say that while Turkey remains loosely attached to its commitment to defend the existing order, it increasingly expresses its dissatisfaction within that order, sometimes pushing it to the limits, taking action that could even be defined as normative, or radical, revisionism. /

23 Tarik Oğuzlu, 'The West should understand that Turkey is different from other rising powers', *Daily Sabah*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/the-west-should-understand-that-turkey-is-different-from-other-rising-powers>.

24 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Kabine Toplantısının Ardından Yaptıkları Konuşma', 14.7.2020, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/120644/kabine-toplantisinin-ardindan-yaptiklari-konusma>.

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