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und Außenpolitik

Zeynep Cagman

**Democratic Backsliding in the Turkish
Presidential System:
The Withdrawal from the Istanbul
Convention as a Case of Stealth
Authoritarianism**



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Abstract

This research examines Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 as an example of democratic backsliding and the consolidation of stealth authoritarianism following the transition to a presidential system in 2018. Drawing on Ozan Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism and theories of democratic backsliding, the study investigates how gender-related policy decisions can function as key indicators of authoritarian transformation within hybrid regimes. Methodologically, the thesis employs a process-tracing design to analyze the legal, institutional, and discursive mechanisms through which the withdrawal was prepared, enacted, and justified. The findings reveal that the decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention was not an isolated policy shift, but rather the result of a coordinated set of mechanisms that expanded executive power while maintaining the appearance of formal legality. Legal reinterpretation, institutional bypassing, and moralized public discourse jointly enabled the erosion of democratic accountability without overt regime rupture. Overall, the case study demonstrates that gender politics constitutes a core arena in which democratic accountability is gradually weakened under stealth authoritarian rule.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, Turkey, Stealth Authoritarianism, Gender Politics, Istanbul Convention

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List of Abbreviations

AKP	The Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi)
EU	European Union
HSK	Council of judges and prosecutors (Turkish: Hakimler ve Savcilar Kurulu)
KADEM	Kadin ve Demokrasi Dernegi
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
WROs	Women's rights organizations

Democratic Backsliding in the Turkish Presidential System:

The Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a Case of Stealth Authoritarianism

1 Introduction

More than 1.4 million women in Turkey reported being subject to domestic violence, between January 2013 and July 2024 (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2024). UN Women estimates that roughly four in ten Turkish Women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (UN Women, 2023). These dynamics are embedded in a broader global pattern: according to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in three women worldwide has been subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner (WHO, 2021).

At the same time, Turkey ranked lowest in Western Europe in the Democracy Index 2024 (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2025). Democratic backsliding, increasingly visible across the globe, often heightens the vulnerability of marginalized groups – something that the Turkish case illustrates with clarity. After more than two decades of rule by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the early promise of democratization associated with EU accessions has gradually given way to an increasingly authoritarian political environment (Kirişçi & Sloat, 2019). In this context, the risk faced by women and LGBTQIA+ groups have intensified as institutional protections continue to erode.

The transition from a long-standing parliamentary system to a presidential system in 2018 marked a decisive step in this democratic decline. The constitutional reforms not only abolished the office of the prime minister but also granted President Erdogan the authority to issue decrees, propose the national budget, appoint cabinet ministers without parliamentary approval, and select members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (Kirişçi & Toygür, 2019). These reforms fundamentally restructured the balance of power, weakening horizontal accountability and enabling an unprecedented concentration of executive authority.

In March 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a presidential decree withdrawing Turkey from the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (Aksoy, 2021). The treaty, opened for signature in Istanbul, represents a landmark legal instrument for addressing violence against women and domestic violence. It obliges signatory states to take concrete measures to prevent such violence, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators (Council of Europe, 2021). The withdrawal can thus be understood not merely as a policy decision on gender issues, but as part of a broader pattern of stealth authoritarianism in Turkey — where legal and institutional tools are used to pursue anti-democratic outcomes under the appearance of formal legality, national sovereignty and traditional values. Stealth Authoritarianism, coined by Ozan Varol, describes authoritarian practices through legal mechanisms with democratic credentials for anti-democratic ends (Varol, 2015).

While extensive literature exists on Turkey's democratic backsliding, limited attention has been given to how stealth authoritarianism operates as a method within this process and to what extent gender policies are strategically employed to consolidate executive dominance. Existing research has often focused on the role of Islamization (Gümüşçü, 2024) or the instrumentalization of women's rights, yet the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has rarely been studied as a concrete case through which stealth authoritarian mechanisms can be empirically traced. This

thesis contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding in Turkey's presidential system by examining how constitutional, institutional and discursive mechanisms jointly enable the consolidation of executive power. It explores how the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention reflects the strategic use of legal and policy instruments characteristic of stealth authoritarianism.

To achieve this goal, it addresses the following research question:

Through which legal, institutional, and discursive mechanisms did Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention contribute to the consolidation of stealth authoritarianism under the presidential system?

This thesis aims to shed light on how gender-related policy decisions can serve as indicators of stealth authoritarianism in hybrid regimes. By examining Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how democratic erosion manifests through legal and institutional pathways rather than overt repression. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative process-tracing approach, combining document analysis and secondary data to identify causal mechanisms underlying the withdrawal and to situate it within Turkey's broader trajectory of democratic backsliding.

The thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 provides the state of the art by reviewing the existing literature on gender politics under the AKP, gender-based violence and feminist mobilization, the political debate surrounding the Istanbul Convention and the institutional changes under the presidential system, concluding with a clearly defined research gap. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework, discussing democratic backsliding, stealth authoritarianism and their relevance for understanding Turkey's political transformation and the Istanbul Convention withdrawal. Chapter 4 outlines the research design and methodology, explaining the logic of process tracing, the case selection, data sources and the operationalization of key concepts. Chapter 5 presents the empirical process-tracing

analysis across the legal, institutional and discursive mechanisms that shaped the withdrawal process. Finally, Chapter 6 evaluates the findings through hypothesis testing, mechanism assessment and a discussion of the study's limitations, followed by the conclusion and outlook in Chapter 7.

Through this structure, the thesis seeks to demonstrate that Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is not an isolated political event but a revealing moment in Turkey's ongoing transformation, where executive power is consolidated through mechanisms that appear legal, procedural and even protective, while quietly eroding the democratic foundations they claim to uphold.

2 State of the Art

This chapter examines how academic scholarship has approached the topic of gender politics and growing authoritarianism in Turkey. First, it traces back the leaning towards authoritarianism under the Justice and Development Party (AKP)¹ and the gender politics of the Turkish regime. Later, it will do a close look on feminism and the Istanbul Convention in the Turkish political debate. Although the literature provides compelling insights into gender politics, democratic backsliding and institutional transformation, the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention remains insufficiently analyzed as a mechanism of authoritarian consolidation. This section aims to review the existing, relevant literature and identifies the conceptual and empirical gap this thesis addresses.

¹ Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi), abbreviated as AKP is a self- describing conservative-democratic party, founded in 2001 by Recep Tayyip Erdogan among others and has been the ruling party of Turkey since 2002.

2.1 Gender Politics under the AKP

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that the AKP has reshaped the discourse on gender policy through a conservative and family-centered framework. Cindoglu and Unal argue, that the current anti-feminist political moment in Turkey operates through the interweaving of pro-Islamism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism and conservatism, which together reinforce a patriarchal order (Cindoglu & Unal, 2016, p. 40). In this context, womanhood is defined through traditional gender codes, positioning the heterosexual, child-bearing wife as the ideal representation of femininity (Cindoglu & Unal, p. 42).

Yarar supports this argumentation by showing how the global economic crisis in 2007–2008 shaped the AKP’s subsequent authoritarian turn, particularly after the general election in 2011 (Yarar, 2020, p. 127). She contends that this shift was fundamentally gendered and that the party cultivated what she terms a “neoconservative feminist position” (Yarar, 2020, p. 128). During this period, the AKP began appealing to the resentments of the radical right and strengthened its own conservative women’s politics, while simultaneously criminalizing feminist and queer discourses. Drawing on Acar and Altunok (2012), Yarar (2020) illustrates how this neo-conservative disciplinary project materializes in the regulation of women’s bodies: the government equates womanhood almost exclusively with motherhood and sidelines broader gender-equality concerns. This ideological shift is further reflected in the replacement of sexual-health terminology with “reproductive health”, and in the erasure of issues such as safe sex or LGBTQIA+² rights from policy debates (Acar & Altunok, 2012, p. 17).

Yarar also points to concrete legislative and rhetorical developments enacted by Erdogan and the AKP between 2008 and 2014. Erdogan’s statement, that women

² Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more

must bear at least three children for the sake of the nation, as well as his 2012 comparison of abortion to the Uludere Massacre, framing it as an “insidious plan” to eliminate the Turkish nation, illustrate how gender politics became central to the AKP’s moral and demographic agenda (Yarar, 2020, p. 130). Taken together, these developments demonstrate that gender has become a strategic terrain through which the AKP is advancing its broader authoritarian project.

2.2 Gender-Based Violence and Feminist Mobilization

During its first term from 2002–2007, the AKP adopted a series of liberal reforms on women’s rights that were welcomed by the women’s movements. In 2004 the government amended the Penal Code, the new code defining crimes related to sexual violence as “crimes against individuals” whereas the old code categorized them as “crimes against public morality” (Arat, 2022, p. 920). Punishments for sexual crimes and domestic violence increased and marital rape and harassment in the workplace were both recognized as crimes punishable by law. Later, the government initiated the amendment of the Law on Municipalities, making it mandatory for municipalities with more than 50.000 inhabitants to establish women’s shelters against domestic violence. In 2006 the Prime Ministry even collaborated with feminist groups, issuing a road map to prevent gender-based violence. The prime minister of that time, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, sent the message that he was concerned with gender-based violence, that primarily secular feminists advocated at the time. Arat argues that these reforms were politically strategic rather than transformative. They helped promote the popularity, legitimacy and credibility of the Islamically rooted government. There were also advantages on the international level, suggesting that this religiously rooted party was progressive on human rights (Arat, 2022, p. 920) In her article, Arat explores how the AKP came to power in a constitutionally secular state, promising to strengthen the secular

democracy but instead emerged as a political regime with authoritarian features and a conservative gender framework. Extending women's rights was purely instrumental from the AKP (Arat, 2022, p. 935).

Research on state–civil society relations show that after 2011, the AKP's gender politics underwent a pronounced authoritarian shift, diminishing the autonomy and influence of women's rights organizations (WROs). Koyuncu and Özman demonstrate that the government advanced a conservative gender regime centered on “conservative familialism,” positioning women primarily in domestic roles (Koyuncu & Özman, 2019, p. 729). This shift was accompanied by institutional restructuring and the emergence of pro-government WROs such as *Kadin ve Demokrasi Dernegi* (abbreviation: KADEM), which received direct political support from Erdogan. The authors show that the AKP systematically marginalized critical feminist organizations, promoted ideological disengagement, and reframed the policy debate from “gender equality” to “gender justice”, an islamically grounded counter-concept used to legitimize conservative gender norms (Koyuncu & Özman, 2019, pp. 729–734). Together, these developments illustrate how gender governance became a strategic arena for consolidating authoritarian practices in the post-2011 period.

At the same time, research on women's activism highlights the resilience—but also the limitations—of feminist mobilization under democratic erosion. Zihnioglu shows that the Turkish women's rights movement is not homogenous, as it encompasses secular, Islamic and Kurdish feminists. The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, triggered widespread protests in more than fifty cities, signaling strong grassroots mobilization (Zihnioglu, 2024, p. 4). Yet despite high societal engagement, the overall impact of women's mobilization remained constrained by the increasingly repressive political environment (Zihnioglu, 2024, p. 7).

2.3 The Istanbul Convention in Turkish Political Debate

The Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding convention aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It is based on the understanding, that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence (Council of Europe Portal, n.d.). On this ground, the Council decided that it was necessary to set a comprehensive standard to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. Adopted in 2011 and entering into force in 2014, it is structured around prevention, protection, prosecution and integrated policies. Turkey signed the Convention in 2011 and became the first country to ratify it in 2012. As a binding international treaty ratified by parliamentary law, the Convention carried constitutional significance within Turkish legal order. The Convention was opened for signature in May 2011, in Istanbul, therefore the name (Council of Europe Portal, n.d.).

Scholarly work demonstrates that the Istanbul Convention became one of the most contested political issues in Turkey's trajectory of democratic backsliding, reflecting deeper ideological and institutional transformations. Zeynep Direk emphasizes that Turkey initially played a central role in drafting the Istanbul Convention, driven by the lawsuit in 2002 by Nahide Opuz, who applied to the European Court of Human Rights to file a lawsuit against Turkey, for not protecting her against her husband, who threatened and physically abused her, despite her making 36 official complaints against him (Direk, 2023, p. 415). The verdict penalized Turkey for not being able to protect its citizens, making it the first country in history that was penalized for failing to protect its citizens. Afterwards, the European Council arranged a meeting in Istanbul on how domestic violence and violence against women should be dealt with. The convention was opened for signing on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul, after which it was given the name Istanbul Convention (Direk, 2023, p. 416).

Turkey's early commitment to the Convention reflected a moment in which the government sought to present itself as responsive to international human-rights obligations and as taking concrete steps to address gender-based violence. Yet, as Direk shows, the same government later reframed the Convention as a threat to "Muslim cultural identity" (Direk, 2023, p. 423).

The literature highlights a critical shift in political discourse that began in the mid-2010s. Zeynep Direk documents, that from 2015 onward, the Turkish state increasingly criminalized and restricted feminist NGOs and other related entities. This escalation occurred at the same time as the AKP's broader ideological move towards a family-centered gender politics. According to Direk, the AKP's definition of family, is that of a Muslim patriarchal family, in which the man is the head of the household, and the woman is supposed to solve all problems by making diplomatic concessions (Direk, 2023, p. 426).

Carola Cerami's analysis further situates the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention within Turkey's authoritarian turn. She argues that the decision must be understood in connection with the AKPs consolidation of executive power and Turkey's path to increasing authoritarianism. Cerami mentions that after the signing of the Istanbul Convention some important events took place, such as the Gezi-Protests in 2013, the 2016 coup-attempt and finally the constitutional referendum in 2017, followed by the presidential elections in 2018, which produced a highly centralized presidential system, with Erdogan, as the Head of State, acquiring almost unlimited powers (Cerami, 2021, p. 191–192). The official motivation for the withdrawal, offered by the Turkish Government, opened a field of controversy, attracting protests of women and women's movement and of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Turkey and around the world (Cerami, 2021, p. 192). Zihinoglu also describes the societal mobilization that took place after the withdrawal (Zihinoglu, 2024, p. 4). Her research highlights that feminist movements viewed the decision as

part of a broader pattern of democratic erosion and state repression (Zihinoglu, 2024, p. 2–5).

The literature shows that the Istanbul Convention evolved from a symbol of Turkey's early 2000s democratic ambitions into a focal point of its contemporary authoritarian transformation. The debate surrounding the Convention and especially the withdrawal became a proxy for broader struggles over gender norms, national identity and executive dominance, revealing how gender politics function as a strategic terrain in Turkey's ongoing democratic backsliding.

2.4 Institutional Change under the Presidential System

The transition from Turkey's parliamentary system to an executive presidential model represents one of the most consequential institutional transformations in the country's political history. The existing literature on the institutional change focuses on the dismantling of institutional checks and balances prior to and culminating in the 2017 constitutional referendum. Esen and Gümüşcü argue, that starting in 2011 the AKP gradually eroded institutional checks and undermined political rights and civil liberties (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2020, p. 1). According to the authors, the AKP's democratic backsliding is rooted in capital accumulation and resource allocation for a cross-class coalition made by the rising economic elite (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2020, p. 6). The urban poor provide the party with electoral support and democratic legitimacy and in return receive selectively distributed social assistance, jobs and charitable goods from the government (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2020, p. 6). They refer to Baykan, who states that the AKP's massive membership organization, coordinated through the AKP's large and active party organization, is very active and has access to even the remotest corners of the country. The party members evoked the fear of redistribution and retribution among government's clients in case of a government turnover. Hence, the clientelist relations with their constituencies is quite unique,

since many parties in power tried to build clientelist relations, yet the AKP's network proved to be qualitatively and quantitatively superior to previous center-right governments (Esen & Gümuşcu, 2020, p. 7).

Yilmaz and Turner are rather focused on the coup-attempt in 2016. The extended state of emergency, which opened the way for a referendum and finally a regime change, provided more authority and power to Erdogan, by also purging thousands of state employees and violently repressing political opposition (Yilmaz & Turner, 2019, p. 695). These developments significantly altered the balance of power, limiting the judiciary's ability to constrain presidential authority.

The 2017 constitutional amendment marked the formal institutionalization of these shifts. Adar and Seufert emphasize that the amendment was introduced amid conditions of repression, intimidation and severe media imbalance during referendum campaign (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 7). They note that the reform abolished the office of the prime minister, fused executive authority with the presidency and gave the president powers to appoint high-level bureaucrats, issue decrees with the force of law and exert direct influence over the judiciary. The authors analyze how the shift towards the presidential system weakened the parliament, undermined local government and increased the dysfunctionality of the judiciary by dominating the High Council of Judges and thereby determining the ideological orientation of the judiciary (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 13–15).

A second central theme concerns the politicization and weakening of state institutions under the presidential system. Presidentialism did not lead to strengthened state capacity but instead became personalized and dependent on the president. Rather than improving efficiency, Adar and Seufert call it a "largely paralyzed bureaucracy" (2021, p. 17). While the AKP used to complain about the ineffective bureaucracy, a highly centralized bureaucracy has grown under the AKP government, making it unable to act independently (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 17). Further, the deteriorating quality of institutions, in terms of lacking objectivity and

political neutrality, extended in various administrations (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 18). New legislation, such as the multiple bar system further enabled the government to weaken autonomous legal institutions (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 16). These developments point to a broader institutional logic in which professional autonomy, bureaucratic expertise and rule-based governance were subordinate to executive discretion.

A third important dimension highlighted in the literature is the transformation of the political competition. The presidential system introduced a new electoral logic based on alliances, fundamentally altering the dynamics of party competition. Adar and Seufert explain, that while the alliance system was initially intended to strengthen the AKP-MHP³ bloc, it also created a new opening for the opposition (Adar & Seufer, 2021, p. 31).

Nevertheless, Esen and Gümuşcu argue that even though 2019 local elections, where the AKP lost several municipalities, marks the democratic system of Turkey, the reality was that on the election night, the party refused to accept the defeat and pressured a rerun on flimsy legal ground – all signs of a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen & Gümuşcu, 2020, p. 3). Finally, scholars emphasize the reconfiguration of state-citizen relations under the presidential system. Yilmaz and Turner argue that the authoritarian shift is not solely institutional but also societal: to intimidate and suppress civil society organizations the state's security and surveillance capacity were strengthened, portraying dissidents as a threat to national survival (Yilmaz & Turner, 2019, p. 694).

In sum, the literature shows that the Turkish presidential system represents the culmination of a broader authoritarian transformation rather than an isolated institutional change. The system centralizes power in the executive, erodes judicial and bureaucratic autonomy, restructures electoral competition and reshapes state-

³ MHP stands for ‚Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi‘ and is the Nationalist Movement Party of Turkey.

citizen relations in ways that systematically weaken democratic accountability. This institutional context directly shapes how legal procedures can be used strategically by the executive, making it essential for analyzing the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a mechanism of stealth authoritarianism.

2.5 Research Gap

While existing literature provides detailed analysis of gender politics, democratic backsliding and institutional transformation, it does not yet explain how the legal and procedural aspects of the Istanbul Convention withdrawal function as instruments of authoritarian consolidation. Ozan Varol's theory of stealth authoritarianism (2015) – the strategic use of law and legal institutions to entrench executive power while maintaining democratic facades – offers a critical analysis lens. Varol identifies different mechanisms through which modern autocrats expand authority.

However, no existing study systematically applies this framework to Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. The gap lies in analysis how the withdrawal process itself – its legal justification, institutional handling and political framing – reflects the broader authoritarian logic underpinning Turkey's presidential system. This thesis addresses that gap by linking the withdrawal to mechanisms of stealth authoritarianism under the post-2017 governance model.

3 Theoretical Framework

This thesis combines Nancy Bermeo's concept of democratic backsliding, together with the framework of Ozan Varol's stealth authoritarianism. Hereby, Bermeo offers the structural and institutional perspective, while Varol complements this by focusing on the mechanisms showing how incumbents exploit legal frameworks to

disadvantage opponents and avoid overt repression. Together, these two frameworks allow the analysis to move beyond formal constitutional changes and examine how the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention functions as a concrete mechanism of power consolidation under Turkey's presidential system and how it paved the way for a continuing democratic backsliding.

3.1 Democratic Backsliding

Understanding the process of democratic backsliding is essential for analyzing contemporary challenges in Turkey, where formal democratic procedures coexist with incremental concentration of power in the executive. At its very core, democratic backsliding refers to the process of state-led dismantling of political institutions that sustain democracy (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). Nancy Bermeo conceptualizes democratic backsliding by identifying six major varieties (2016, pp. 6–14). Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of backsliding has evolved, according to Bermeo: traditional forms such as coups d'état, executive coups, and election-day vote fraud have declined in frequency. Coups d'états are defined as illegal attempts, usually by the military, to overthrow an existing executive (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6). Bermeo's research shows that the number of such coups has decreased since the Cold War, during which they had often resulted in long-lasting dictatorships. Similarly, executive coups — where elected leaders suspend democratic institutions — have also become less common. Lastly, Bermeo notes a decline in blatant election-day vote fraud. However, this does not imply that electoral malpractice has disappeared; rather, cheating has become more subtle and institutionally embedded (Bermeo, 2016, p. 7)

Bermeo identifies three emerging and underexplored varieties of backsliding. The first involves so-called promissory coups, a trend that has risen

since the Cold War. In these cases, coup-makers justify their actions as temporary interventions aimed at restoring democracy (Bermeo, 2016, p. 8).

A more prevalent form of democratic backsliding is executive aggrandizement. This occurs when elected executives gradually weaken institutional checks on executive power, undertaking different institutional changes. These changes are typically framed as democratic—often put to a public vote through referenda.

In her seminal paper, Bermeo (2016, p. 11) uses Turkey as a key example of executive aggrandizement. She highlights the career of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party, the AKP. During Erdogan's first two years in office, the government passed a record number of new laws. The AKP's growing parliamentary dominance enabled what Bermeo calls a "quiet revolution" (2016, p. 11) in which legal and institutional changes gradually eroded democratic constraints while maintaining a façade of popular support. Turkey has been an example for executive aggrandizement in many aspects. Starting with limiting media freedom through revising the penal code to allow criminal prosecution of journalists in 2004, paving the way to silencing everyone, who criticized the state or the politics of Erdogan.

Manipulating elections strategically is a third form of the three emerging varieties of democratic backsliding. The difference to blatant election-day vote fraud is, that typically happens long before polling day and usually does not violate the law in an obvious way, so that observers are less likely to criticize it. Bermeo lists the actions that count as strategic manipulation, including:

"[h]ampering media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commissions, changing electoral rules to favor incumbents, and harassing opponents" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 13).

Instead of collapsing through sudden coups or revolutions, modern democracies tend to erode gradually and legally, through a sequence of small but significant institutional changes. This incremental form of backsliding is less violent than the abrupt breakdowns of the past, yet it poses challenges. Bermeo highlights that political science has long concentrated on clear regime transitions while neglecting the gray zones of hybridization (Bermeo, 2016, p. 14).

Gradual shifts toward authoritarianism often occur in contexts where opposition forces are already weakened by internal divisions and declining credibility. Because incumbents typically enjoy broad popular support and face no unified counterforce, mass mobilization against such incremental backsliding is rare and often relies heavily on external allies (Bermeo, 2016, p. 14).

She interprets these developments not as random failures but as rational responses to domestic instability and international incentives. Leaders often consolidate power defensively, reacting to past experiences of political volatility, elite opposition, or civil unrest. She also points out that international democracy promotion has unintentionally encouraged subtler forms of backsliding: as coups became more heavily sanctioned, leaders learned to undermine democracy through formal, legal mechanisms that maintain a democratic façade. Hence, contemporary autocrats justify their actions through institutions such as elections, legislative majorities, or judicial rulings, producing what Bermeo calls a “vexing ambiguity” — a condition in which authoritarian practices are legitimized by democratic procedures themselves (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15). This ambiguity complicates international and domestic responses, as foreign interventions can be framed as attacks on sovereignty, while defending flawed democratic institutions may damage credibility. Bermeo (2016, p. 16) notes that even “promissory coups,” which claim to restore democracy, exploit this tension by invoking democratic rhetoric. Furthermore, some instances of institutional rollback emerge from marginalized

groups seeking greater representation, illustrating that backsliding can sometimes be driven by competing visions of democracy rather than outright rejection of it.

Despite these complexities, Bermeo offers a cautiously optimistic conclusion. Incremental and ambiguous erosion, she argues, still allows for correction and recovery because not all democratic institutions are dismantled at once. As long as some space for electoral competition and civic mobilization remains, the possibility of democratic renewal endures. She observes that the authoritarian regimes emerging from contemporary breakdowns are generally less repressive and shorter-lived than those of previous decades, suggesting that while democratic backsliding persists, its consequences are less catastrophic than in the past (Bermeo, 2016, p. 17).

Bermeo's framework provides a crucial foundation for understanding the gradual and institutionally embedded nature of democratic decline. Her concept of executive aggrandizement is particularly relevant for analyzing Turkey's post-2017 presidential system, where legal reforms and policy decisions have progressively concentrated power in the executive while maintaining formal democratic procedures. While Bermeo's framework explains what institutional changes constitute democratic backsliding, Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism sheds light on how incumbents use the law, rather than overt coercion, to enable power and undermine democratic opposition — a dynamic clearly reflected in Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

3.2 Stealth Authoritarianism

Stealth authoritarianism refers to the use of legal and formally democratic mechanisms for anti-democratic purposes (Varol, 2015, p. 1684). It enables incumbents to entrench their power by exploiting legal frameworks in ways that systematically disadvantage opponents, making political turnover increasingly

difficult. Anti-democratic practices are thus concealed behind the façade of legality, rendering the underlying authoritarian mechanisms less visible than in openly repressive regimes. Key mechanisms include judicial review, libel lawsuits, electoral law reforms, the deployment of non-political criminal charges, and internationally backed surveillance laws. In the case of Turkey, these mechanisms help explain how seemingly legal actions, such as certain policy and institutional changes, contribute to the broader process of democratic erosion under the presidential system.

In the next chapter we will take a closer look at the different stealth authoritarian mechanisms, emphasizing especially those that are going to be relevant for our analysis later.

First and foremost, Varol mentions Judicial Review, which will also be of importance later in the analysis of Turkey's democratic backsliding. Judicial Review is a central mechanism of checks and balances in a functioning democracy. However, there are three ways in which judicial review may function as a tool of stealth authoritarianism. Varol argues that the judiciary does not operate in a vacuum but is influenced by the political environment it operates in. Therefore, it is unlikely that judges will participate in a resistance against powerful political incumbents (Varol, 2015, p. 1689). The judiciary can serve as a reliable partner on protecting the political status quo. As an example, Varol mentions the creation of the Turkish Constitutional Court, which was created following a military coup in 1960 (Varol, 2015, p. 1688). The military leaders structured the appointment of justices favorable for their own interests. Another way of judicial review to function as a mechanism of stealth authoritarianism is by bolstering democratic credentials. In the outer appearance, judicial review portrays the constitutional framework of a state being imbued with checks and balances. That serves to promote the regime's image before global audience and to rebut criticism regarding anti-democratic practices (Varol, 2015, p. 1691). For the judiciary to serve in a legitimizing function, it first must derive autonomy from the political incumbents. Thirdly, judicial review

can be established to avoid accountability and therefore function as a tool of stealth authoritarianism. The regime embeds its preferred policies within a judiciary that operates with some independence, enabling judges to deliver rulings that serve the leadership's goals — even when politicians cannot openly support them — and shielding those in power from direct political accountability (Varol, 2015, p. 1692).

The second mechanism Ozan Varol focuses on is the strategic use of libel laws. Libel can also be described as a defaming statement, targeting to injure the reputation of the other person. Libel laws are a simple mechanism to raise the cost of criticism by the threat of a libel lawsuit, leading to less free speech and therefore a form of self-censorship, when it comes to critical commentaries of political incumbents (Varol, 2015, p. 1693). The culture of self-censorships poses a threat to democracy, by limiting the public's ability to observe and criticize the incumbent politician's behavior. Varol emphasizes the importance of political debate for a democratic society. However, for political debate to take place it is important that political speeches are not influenced by the fear of libel lawsuits, since that will lead to the electoral field being tilted in favor of the incumbents (Varol, 2015, p. 1694). Varol further points out, that the overt oppression of opponents or dissidents through non-legal means can damage the credibility of the government in the national as well as international view. It might even lead to mobilizing activists to stand up against the government, while the use of libel laws to silence dissents is less costly (Varol, 2015, p. 1695). In general, libel lawsuits caused a wide self-censorship, undermining the democratic value of freedom of speech through undermining the public's ability to sanction their leaders (Varol, 2015, p. 1699).

Varol describes electoral laws as a "fertile ground for stealth authoritarianism" (2015, p. 1700). Electoral fraud provides pavement for the entrenchment of power, and the following political instability can create power vacuums. Instead of focusing on methods such as gerrymandering, Varol discusses less transparent sets of electoral laws that are prone to abuse, such as voter

registration laws, electoral barriers to entry and campaign finance laws. Laws that regulate the voter registration exist in all democratic nations, to ensure electoral fairness. However, it can also place an obstacle for those, for example, living in a rural area, who live far away from election sites (Varol, 2015, p. 1701). Voter registration laws, originally placed to combat voter fraud, can also be used by regimes manipulate votes. Registration laws can be deployed to discourage or to promote voting by the diaspora, for example. In democratic nations as Germany and Canada, voters must identify themselves to prevent electoral fraud. Yet, in many African nations, voter identification laws are being used to exclude ethnic minorities, who are frequently denied formal identification (Varol, 2015, p. 1702). Electoral entry barriers are often endorsed to prevent voter confusion and protect the political stability of a country. However, it can also be used as a stealth authoritarian practice, since they also exclude up-and-coming political parties (Varol, 2015, p. 1702). Electoral thresholds exist in many democratic nations, promoted with the promise of ensuring stability in a fractious political landscape, the idea being that too many small political parties can lead to a formation of a weak government. However, what might seem like a reasonable democratic method, can pose a challenge on democratic structures since the thresholds can also limit political competition and lean the playing field of elections towards the incumbents. While electoral thresholds might seem like a progressive democratic method, it slants parliamentary representation since the number of seats awarded to the parties that passed the threshold is disproportionate to the number of votes they receive (Varol, 2015, p. 1703). High entry barriers for small parties can discourage voters to vote for smaller parties, with the concern that their vote will not count, if the party does not pass the threshold. Consequently, this can award systemic advantages to the incumbents and exclude opposition parties from the political marketplace (Varol, 2015, p. 1703). Turkey has a special position here, as it has the highest threshold in the world with 10 % (Varol, 2015, p. 1704). Campaign finance laws influence the political process. They curb foreign influence on domestic political process, but they

have also been used as a tool of stealth authoritarianism, for example, as they also have been used to sanction or evict foreign NGOs that support the civil society or the opposition of the country, as they did for example in Russia (Varol, 2015, p. 1707).

The use of non-political crimes to prosecute political dissidents is another strategy of stealth authoritarianism, according to Ozan Varol (2015, p. 1707). The prosecutions often do not concern over political opposition, such as tax evasion or fraud, and it is often more difficult to detect whether the motive for the prosecution is political. For the domestic and global audience, it is portrayed as the application of the rule of law. Surveillance laws became more legitimized again after the attacks of 11 September 2001, for domestic protection counter terrorism. However, surveillance laws and institutions can also be employed for anti-democratic purposes. First, under pervasive surveillance individual humans might lean towards decisions that conform mainstream expectations and lead to self-censorship. Second, governments can use surveillance mechanisms for blackmailing dissidents, for example by revealing sensitive information. Further, financial surveillance laws have also been a tool of stealth authoritarianism.

Additionally, Varol discusses two mechanisms that incumbent officeholders use to boost their legitimacy: providing a space for discontent against the incumbent government and the implementation of democratic reforms. This allows incumbents to rebut criticism of anti-democratic behavior. Providing a space for discontent is usually limited under authoritarians or would-be authoritarians, but it exists to create an illusion of a pluralistic society (Varol, 2015, p. 1713). The method of implementing democratic reforms and using democratic rhetoric may invoke the rule of law, democracy and constitutionalism (Varol, 2015, p. 1715). It serves to distract from people detecting the anti-democratic measures.

Varol situates stealth authoritarianism within a strategic-choice theory, which falls into the broader rubric of a rational-choice framework, arguing that incumbents make calculated decisions to entrench power while minimizing costs and risks. Leaders tend to exploit legal and institutional mechanisms strategically, with a focus on domestic and international reactions. An essential component for the model of strategic choice is discretion (Varol, 2015, p. 1719). In criminal cases, for example, prosecutors often have the discretion of bringing charges, which enables selective enforcement.

In sum, Varol's framework highlights that contemporary autocrats do not primarily rely on overt repression but instead weaponize legal and institutional tools to entrench power while maintaining a democratic façade. For this thesis, only a subset of these mechanisms is analytically relevant. Specifically judicial review and electoral law are central for understanding how the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention became embedded in a broader architecture of stealth authoritarianism under Turkey's presidential system. These mechanisms provide the anchors for the analysis, guiding the process tracing how legality is strategically employed to undermine accountability, weaken opposition capacity and power democratic erosion.

3.3 Relevance for Turkey and the Istanbul Convention

In sum, combining Bermeo's framework of democratic backsliding with Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism provides a comprehensive lens to understand both the structural as well as the strategic dimension of Turkey's democratic erosion. While Bermeo highlights the institutional shifts that weaken democracies, Varol explains which mechanisms are used to entrench executive power under the guise of legality. Building on this theoretical foundation, the following analysis focuses on mechanisms relevant to Turkey's case, such as judicial review and

electoral law changes, but also with a look on libel laws – to systematically trace how stealth authoritarianism operates in practice, as exemplified by the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

Although this thesis is grounded in theories of democratic backsliding and stealth authoritarianism, its relevance extends directly into the field of International Relations. Authoritarian information control and institutional manipulation do not operate solely within domestic boundaries; they shape foreign policy behavior, strategic communication, and a state's interaction with international partners. Erdogan's regime therefore influences how Turkey projects power, negotiates with allies, and positions itself within global information and security environments. This connection situates the study firmly within IR, while allowing the analysis to focus on domestic mechanisms as the drivers of externally visible state behavior.

4 Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework guiding the analysis of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a case of stealth authoritarianism. It introduces qualitative, within-case approach and explains why process tracing is employed to analyze Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. The chapter also clarifies the deductive logic of the study, presents the derived hypotheses, describes the data sources and the operationalization of key concepts and concludes with a discussion of methodological limitations

4.1 Research Logic, Process Tracing and Hypotheses

This study employs a single-case, theory guided process tracing design, aimed at uncovering the causal mechanism behind Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul

Convention. The selection of a single case reflects the study's analytical orientation: the objective is not to explain variance across countries but to trace the within-case processes that link a specific presidential decision to broader patterns of democratic backsliding. As Blatter and Haverland emphasize, causal-process tracing is particularly appropriate when researchers seek to analyze the temporal unfolding of causality within a single empirical setting and account for the interplay of causal conditions that produce a given outcome (Blatter & Haverland, 2014, pp. 2–3). This logic aligns with the theoretical claim surrounding stealth authoritarianism, which conceives democratic decline not as an event but as an incremental sequence of legally grounded, institutionally embedded actions.

To make the application of process tracing more transparent, this study adopts a mechanism-focused and theory-guided approach to reconstructing the causal chain leading to Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. For each mechanism derived from the theoretical framework of this study, as in legal manipulation, institutional control and discursive legitimation, the analysis traces an empirically observable chronological sequence that links antecedent conditions, triggering events and the observable outcomes.

The selections of these particular mechanisms are grounded in Varol's conceptualization of stealth authoritarianism that relies on manipulation of legal procedures, the neutralization of oversight institutions and the strategic deployment of legitimizing narratives to mask authoritarian intent (Varol, 2015). Among the wider range of mechanisms identified in the literature these three are the ones that constitute the proximate and casually relevant pathways through which the withdrawal was enacted and subsequently stabilized. The legal mechanism captures the formal process that enabled the executive to withdraw through a presidential decree, the institutional mechanism traces how parliamentary and judicial non-intervention facilitated the consolidation of the decision, and the discursive mechanism analyzes how official narratives framed and

justified the withdrawal to domestic audiences. Together, these mechanisms offer a coherent and case-appropriate operationalization of the broader theoretical framework.

The withdrawal of Turkey from the Istanbul Convention is an analytically valuable case for different reasons. First, it marks one of the most consequential executive interventions in Turkey's gender policy domain in the political environment after Turkey's shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Institutionally, the use of an overnight presidential decree exemplifies the concentration of executive authority enabled by the presidential system and the subsequent erosion of legislative and judicial oversight-phenomena central to both the democratic backsliding literature (Bermeo, 2016) and on stealth authoritarianism (Varol, 2015). The case is thus not selected for its representativeness but for its theoretical leverage. It allows the study to examine whether mechanisms of legal manipulation, institutional control and discursive legitimation, which are central elements of stealth authoritarianism, can be empirically detected in the chain of events surrounding the withdrawal. The goal here is to trace the configuration of causal conditions, rather than isolating the effect of a single variable.

Given the theoretical orientation, the study adopts a deductive research scheme. Core expectations are derived from the existing theories of Bermeo and Varol and the empirical analysis investigates whether the observable implications predicted by those theories appear in the case record. Following Collier's emphasis on hypothesis-guided process tracing (2011, pp. 824–825), the formulation of hypotheses is designed not to test broad general laws but to identify whether specific mechanisms can be empirically verified. To guide this study, the following three hypotheses are formulated:

H1: The withdrawal was enabled through the strategic use of presidential decree, allowing the executive to bypass parliamentary involvement in the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention.

H2: Judicial and legislative institutions were unable or unwilling to constrain the executive decision, reflecting weakened checks and balances under the presidential system.

H3: The withdrawal was justified in the aftermath of the decision through political narratives appealing to national sovereignty, conservative morality and family values, thereby legitimizing a non-deliberative decision through rhetorical rather than democratic means.

Before turning to the case justification, it is necessary to clarify how the variables and the causal process of this study are conceptualized within the process-tracing framework. The dependent variable (DV) is the deepening of democratic backsliding under the presidential system, which is visible through the erosion of institutional checks and balances, the consolidation of executive authority and the increasing reliance on legally sanctioned mechanism of authoritarian governance. The independent variable (IV) is the 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, regarded as not an isolated event but as a policy decision embedded in legal, institutional and discursive actions. This decision is analytically divided into three mechanisms that will be examined in this study: a legal mechanism enabling unilateral executive action through decree powers, an institutional mechanism capturing the absence or weakness of parliamentary and judicial oversight and a discursive mechanism through which the withdrawal was legitimized. Together, these mechanisms constitute the causal process that links the preceding structural conditions created by the 2017 constitutional referendum to the observable outcome of democratic backsliding and they form the basis on which the hypotheses formulated above will be evaluated.

4.2 Case Justification

Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was selected as the single case for this study, due to its uniqueness and analytical and theoretical relevance. Turkey being the only country worldwide to have exited the Convention makes the case empirically unique and an opportunity to examine how international gender norms become entangled with processes of democratic erosion.

Second, the case offers a strong theoretical leverage for evaluating the mechanisms outlined in the literature on democratic backsliding and stealth authoritarianism. The withdrawal was executed through an overnight presidential decree rather than through parliamentary deliberation, allowing for the close examination of potential legal manipulation. The subsequent judicial proceedings before the Council of State provide direct insight into the degree of institutional autonomy or deference within the judiciary, making the case particularly suitable for testing expectations about weakened checks and balances under the presidential system. Also, the political narratives used to justify the withdrawal, centered on national sovereignty, conservative morality and family protection, offer a fertile ground for analyzing discursive legitimation strategies.

Third, the withdrawal is highly relevant from a policy and research perspective because it situates gender policy not as a marginal or symbolic domain but as a strategic instrument of executing authority. This particular case illustrates how a decision, framed as a gender-policy issue, can function as a tool of legalistic power consolidation and thereby extending existing research by highlighting a previously understudied dimension of authoritarian entrenchment. The availability of a variety of primary documentation, such as official decrees and public statements, further strengthens the suitability of the case for a process-tracing design. These factors justify the selection of the Istanbul Convention withdrawal as

an analytically powerful and theoretically meaningful case for identifying the causal mechanisms underpinning democratic backsliding in Turkey's presidential system.

4.3 Data Sources

The analysis draws on a set of empirical materials that together capture the legal, institutional and discursive dimensions of the withdrawal. The primary source is the Presidential Decree No. 3718, published by the official gazette of Turkey, on 20 March 2021 which constitutes the formal legal act enabling the withdrawal. Its legal basis, wording and procedural characteristics provide essential evidence for assessing the mechanisms of legal manipulation.

A second key source is the set of judicial proceedings brought before the Council of State, including majority and dissenting opinions. These documents offer insight into how the judiciary interpreted the legality of the withdrawal and whether the court exercised meaningful oversight or exhibited institutional deference. They are crucial for evaluating the hypothesized weakening of institutional constraints. Data from the V-Dem Institute will help to contextualize these developments within broader trends, particularly indicators on executive constraints, judicial independence and legislative oversight. These indicators are not used for causal inference but serve to situate the withdrawal within a long-term path of democratic backsliding.

Finally, the analysis will include a selection of public statements on social media or press releases from the presidency, relevant ministries and government-aligned political actors. These materials will give an insight into how the withdrawal was framed and justified, allowing an analysis of rhetorical strategies.

4.4 Operationalization of Key Concepts

To evaluate the hypotheses, the central concepts derived from Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism are operationalized as follows:

Legal Mechanism refers to the strategic use of legal instruments to expand executive authority while maintaining a façade of formal legality. Empirically, this includes unilateral executive action grounded in broadly interpreted constitutional provisions, bypassing parliamentary procedures previously used for treaty ratification and the reliance on decree powers for decisions of international legal significance.

Institutional Mechanism denotes the diminished capacity of oversight institutions to check executive authority. The concept is operationalized through the degree of judicial autonomy visible in rulings of Council of State and dissenting opinions, the weakness or absence of legislative involvement and V-Dem indicators showing longer-term erosion of institutional constraints.

Discursive Mechanism captures the use of rhetorical strategies to justify non-deliberative decisions. This is observable through references to national sovereignty, cultural authenticity, conservative morality and family protections, as well as delegitimizing frames portraying the Convention as foreign, harmful or incompatible with Turkish values and narratives, that undermine feminist or international human-rights actors. This operationalization allows the empirical analysis and thereby evaluates whether the hypotheses hold.

4.5 Limitations

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged in this study. First, the reliance on a single case naturally limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analysis solely relies on publicly available legal documents, court rulings and

official statements which may leave certain informal dynamics unobserved. Further, judicial reasoning in politically sensitive cases may not fully reflect institutional autonomy, complicating the interpretation of Council of State decisions. And finally, V-Dem data provides contextualization, however it cannot establish causal relationships and must therefore be treated as descriptive background rather than explanatory evidence.

5 Process Tracing Analysis

This chapter reconstructs the causal processes through which Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention unfolded across legal, institutional and discursive dimensions. Following the process-tracing strategy outlined in Chapter 4, the analysis will proceed by identifying empirically observable sequences of events by linking antecedent conditions, triggering developments, the mechanism activation and eventual outcomes for each of the three mechanisms derived from the theoretical framework: legal manipulation, institutional control and discursive legitimation. The main aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed, chronological account of how the withdrawal was executed and justified within the Turkish presidential system.

The analysis hereby relies on empirical material, examined to document how executive authority was exercised, how oversight institutions responded or refrained from acting and how specific narratives were deployed to legitimize this withdrawal. By organizing the empirical findings along the three mechanism and three respective causal sequences, this chapter lays the foundation for the hypothesis evaluation in the next chapter.

5.1 Legal Mechanism

The first mechanism concerns the legal pathway through which the withdrawal was carried out, centering on the use of presidential decree powers under the post-2018 executive system. This section traces how changes introduced by the 2017 constitutional referendum changed the regime into a presidential system and expanded Erdogan's authority, how governing by decree became a routine instrument of executive action and how the developments created the conditions for a unilateral treaty withdrawal. By reconstructing the timeline up to Presidential Decree No. 3718, the official withdrawal, the analysis demonstrates how the legal architecture of the presidential system enabled the executive to bypass legislative involvement and formal checks, thereby operationalizing one of the core mechanisms associated with stealth authoritarian practices.

5.1.1 Preceding Conditions

The legal conditions that enabled the president to withdraw unilaterally from the Istanbul Convention were rooted in the profound constitutional and institutional changes introduced through the 2017 constitutional referendum and the subsequent transition to the presidential system in June 2018 (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2017, Art. 8, as amended by Act No. 6771). According to the Presidency of Supreme Election Council, 51.41 % of the voters approved the constitutional referendum proposal, while 48.59 % voted against it (Supreme Election Council of Turkey, YSK, 2017). However, the presidential system did not take effect immediately after the referendum in 2017. According to Provisional Article 21 (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2017, p. 154), the new system would only become fully operational after the first presidential and parliamentary elections held under the amended rules, which took place in June 2018 and Erdogan was elected (CNN, 2018).

Adopted during a state of emergency, the amendments introduced a comprehensive redesign of Turkey's political architecture. Turkish voters went to the polls to give their verdict on a large set of constitutional amendments that would replace the existing parliamentary system with an executive presidency (Esen & Gümüscü, 2017, p. 303). The constitutional amendment package, that consisted of 18 amendments affecting 72 articles, introduced a far-reaching restructuring of Turkey's political system. The primary purpose was to institutionalize Erdogan's power and influence over the executive, by abolishing the office of the prime minister and fully separating the executive and legislative branches, making the president head of state and head of executive at the same time. The president is directly elected for five-year terms and may serve two terms, with the possibility of a third term if early elections are called during the second term. Further, the amendments granted the president extensive powers, as he appoints and dismisses vice-presidents, ministers and senior bureaucrats without any parliamentary oversight (Esen & Gümüscü, 2017, p. 306). Under Article 104 of the amended Constitution, the President is granted the authority to issue presidential decrees on matters relating to executive power. A competence, that enables the executive to regulate administrative structures, create and abolish ministries and shape the functioning of the central bureaucracy without parliamentary approval (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2019, Art. 104). Certainly, the 2017 constitutional amendments fundamentally transformed Article 104 from joint executive authority within the Council of Ministers and the President into one that gives the entire executive power into the presidency (Law no. 6771, Article 8).

Parliamentary oversight was substantially reduced. While Article 87 of the Constitution formally preserves parliamentary authority to legislate and approve treaties, the mechanisms for executive accountability have been significantly narrowed. Article 98 of the Constitution restricts parliamentary questioning to ministers and vice presidents, explicitly excluding the President from direct interrogation by deputies. Furthermore, initiating an investigation into the

President or ministers requires a three-fifths majority (Article 105 & 106), raising the threshold for political scrutiny to a level that is difficult to meet under conditions of partisan dominance (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2019).

The amendments also reconfigured by the judiciary. The number of Constitutional Court members were reduced to 15 and the Council of Judges and Prosecutors to 13, with the president gaining significant appointment authority over both bodies. Military courts and martial law provisions were abolished, consolidating judicial authority within a civilian framework (Esen & Gümuşcu, 2017, p. 306). These reforms constituted a structural rupture in Turkey's political system, replacing the long-standing parliamentary architecture with a presidential model. The shift fundamentally altered the distribution of power among the branches of government. Although the Constitution does not explicitly assign competence for treaty withdrawal to either legislature or the executive, the amendments created the legal environment that later allowed international treaty withdrawal through presidential decree. This reform did not automatically authorize unilateral treaty withdrawal. However, it introduced two foundational legal shifts that became essential antecedent conditions for the withdrawal: First, it blurred the boundaries between executive rule-making and legislative competence, since presidential decrees can regulate areas where no explicit statutory law exists and second, the empowerment of the President to take binding legal action without parliamentary approval, unless explicitly restricted by law was introduced.

Also, the 2017 constitutional amendments introduced overlapping and inconsistently defined areas of authority between presidential decree power and parliamentary legislation, creating a structurally ambiguous legal space in which the scope of executive action is difficult to limit. This ambiguity comes from the coexistence of Article 104, which grants the President broad decree authority, and Article 87, which assigns the parliament the power to legislate and approve international agreements, without clearly defining how conflicts between decrees

and laws are to be resolved (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2017, Article 87 & 104). This ambiguity would later become central to the legal justification of Presidential Decree no. 3718, the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention (Presidential Decree no. 3718, 2021, Resmi Gazete, own translation).

The institutional transformation was further strengthened through the Presidential Decree no. 9, adopted immediately after the 2018 presidential elections, abolishing the prime ministry by transferring all executive coordination mechanisms under the Presidency. Article 3 of Decree Law no. 9 lays out the president's authority over the structure and duties of ministries, central administrative units and affiliate bodies (Presidential Decree no. 9, 2018). The decree did not address treaty withdrawal directly, but it cemented the unilateral capacity of the Presidency to regulate matters of administrative competence, which became relevant when the government later argued, that the treaty withdrawal constituted an executive matter. The erosion of horizontal accountability is also visible in the Constitution's provisions on judicial review. Article 125 restricts the reviewability of certain presidential acts and grants the president broad discretionary power by specifying that some decisions, such as those relating to the exercise of executive authority, are not subject to judicial oversight (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2017, Article 125).

Together, these constitutional changes granted the president more authority to issue legally binding decrees, a weakened parliament, some interpretative ambiguity in treaty withdrawal procedures and a reduced capacity for judicial oversight. Certainly, all of this did not determine the withdrawal from the Convention but made it legally feasible by establishing the institutional architecture.

5.1.2 Normalization of Governing by Decree

The transition to the presidential system did not only grant the president extensive decree authority on paper, but it also reshaped the practical mode of governance in the years following the referendum and the 2018 elections.

From the time of the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2018, decrees have become the president's primary legal instrument. Shortly after taking office, Erdogan issued Decree No. 1, which restructured the executive branch and the distribution of power, granting more power to the president (Presidential Decree No. 1, 2018, own translation). Since then, decrees have been a frequently used tool by the Turkish president to consolidate his power. Unlike the legislative decrees previously issued by the Council of Ministers, presidential decrees cannot be challenged before the Council of State. Charges against presidential decrees can now only be brought before the Constitutional Court by the two strongest parliamentary groups or a group of deputies occupying one-fifth of the seats in parliament, instead of by citizens as was previously the case (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 9). In fact, the president can only issue presidential decrees on issues that are not already covered by legislation. However, this changes in a state of emergency, which the president can declare independently under the presidential system. This in turn means that under a state of emergency, there are no limits on the president's presidential decrees, as they come into force even without the approval of parliament (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 9).

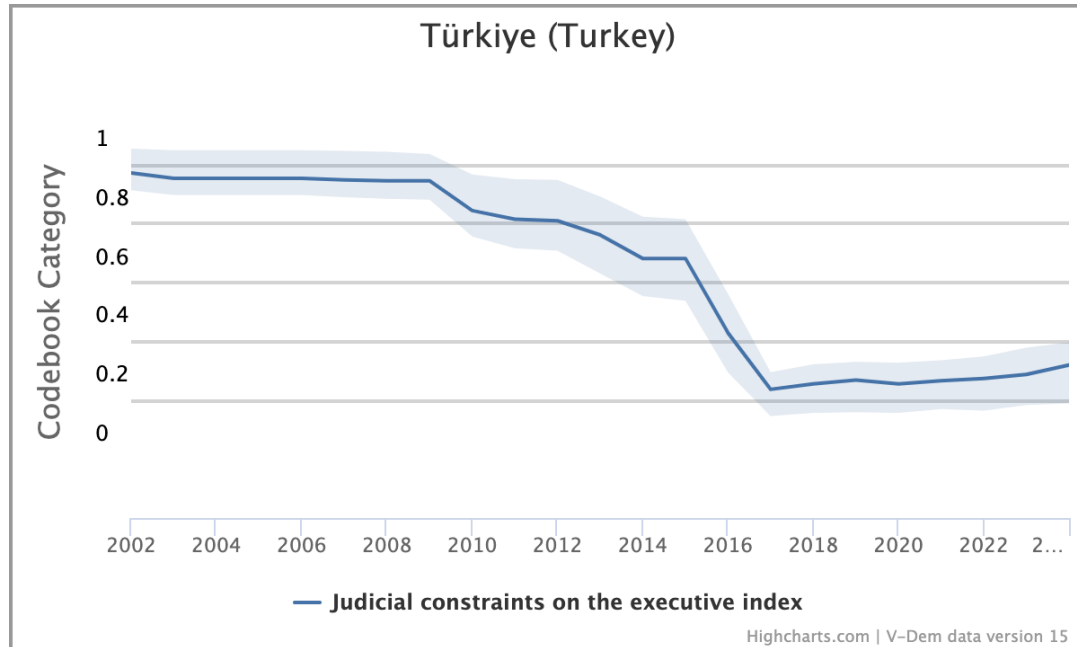
Following Decree No. 1, the entire executive branch in Turkey was constituted by presidential decrees. After 2018, presidential decrees were used extensively as a governing tool, particularly Presidential Decree No. 1, which reorganized the entire executive branch and placed all ministerial structures under the president (Presidential Decree No. 1, 2018). Article 104 of the Constitution grants the president the rank of head of state and the power to act by decree in all areas not regulated by law (Constitution 2017, Article 104). However, control of presidential

decrees is limited, as judicial review can only be initiated by the two strongest parliamentary groups or one-fifth of the members of parliament (Constitution 2017, Article 2017) and, as already mentioned, gray areas can also be found, for example, by declaring a state of emergency (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p.9).

It should be noted that this has led to a shift in power. By using decrees instead of enacting laws, the Turkish parliament is increasingly losing its agenda-setting power. In addition, regulation is increasingly taking place outside of parliamentary procedures and transparency is declining, as decrees can take effect immediately in a state of emergency. The fact that laws not regulated in the constitution can be regulated by the president by decree creates an asymmetrical legal system. This means that decrees can fill in everything that is not regulated by law. This is also the mechanism that later came into force when Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, as it was not explicitly regulated by law. This process of normalizing decrees as an everyday legal instrument is particularly significant because it demonstrates the legal tool that was later used to withdraw from the convention and places it in the context of the withdrawal not being an exception but part of a routine of executive power in which stealth authoritarianism manifests itself.

V-Dem indicators reinforce these developments. V-Dem stands for Varieties of Democracy and is an institute that provides a multidimensional dataset to conceptualize and measure electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian democracy, with scores mostly ranging from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest). The index *Judicial constraints on the executive* (v2x_jugcon) captures the extent to which the executive complies with constitutional limits, respects judicial decisions and faces an autonomous judiciary capable of constraining executive action (V-Dem Codebook, 2025, p. 53).

Figure 1: Judicial constraints on the executive in Turkey (2002–2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Version 15 (2024), Indicator v2x_juxcon. Data derived from: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

Examining the period from 2002, the first year of AKP rule, to the most recent data in 2024 shows that judicial constraints remained consistently high during the 2000s, with values above 0.85. This suggests a judiciary that may not be fully independent but still exercised meaningful oversight. The index begins to decline gradually after 2010 and drops sharply in 2017, the year of the referendum, reaching an all-time low of 0.14. This steep decline indicates a substantial weakening of judicial autonomy and oversight capabilities. The timing aligns with the institutional restructuring described above and confirms that the transition to the presidential system was accompanied by a marked erosion of horizontal accountability.

In August 2020, official representatives of the AKP signaled for the first time that Turkey was considering withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention. The reason for this was the intensifying lobbying efforts of the religious-conservative electorates (Aksoy, 2021). But the public discomfort with the Istanbul Convention

began even earlier. Conservative actors kept the anti-feminist agenda alive, as for example in 2019 when the Turkish Family Council, an initiative of conservative civil society organizations, organized a press release to declare their demands for the abolishment of the Convention (Zihnioglu & Kourou, 2025, p. 855). Taken together, these signals and debates did not trigger the withdrawal on their own, but they created the political mood in which using a presidential decree to exit the Convention suddenly became thinkable.

5.1.3 Mechanism Activation: Presidential Decree No. 3718

On 20 March 2021, the mechanism of legal manipulation became fully activated when Presidential Decree no. 3718 was published in the official Gazette, formally announcing Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. A glance at Decree No. 3718 shows that it is very briefly worded and comes without justification or an expanded legal basis. In short, it merely states that Turkey, which signed the Istanbul Convention on 11 May 2011, is withdrawing from the convention (Presidential Decree No. 3718, 2021, Official Gazette No. 31429, own translation). This step relies on Article 3 of Presidential Decree no. 9, which stipulates that the ratification, amendment, suspension, or termination of international agreements shall take effect by presidential decisions (Presidential Decree No. 9, 2018, own translation). The brevity of the decree and the lack of justification make it clear that it was solely a decision made by the president. It was not coordinated with Parliament and was not publicly debated, which signals stealth authoritarianism. Article 3 of the 9th Presidential Decree is used here as a building block for legal justification, as this article allows the president to claim that the decision to withdraw is entirely within the executive branch's sphere of competence and, since he structures the executive branch, he can use this to argue for his autonomous action.

The legal basis implicitly used here is Article 104 of the Constitution, which gives the president this executive power (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey,

2019). But neither Article 104, which defines the area of responsibility for the president, nor Article 87 of the constitution, which defines the area of responsibility for the parliament, assign authority over treaty withdrawal, leaving the procedure unregulated and generating significant legal ambiguity (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2019, Article 87 & 104).

Further, the Presidential Decision of the withdrawal was issued without consulting or informing the public first (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 3). Also, legal experts argue that the withdrawal decision is unlawful under domestic as well as international law. The arguments include that according to the Article 90 (1) of the Turkish Constitution, the law approving the ratification of the Istanbul convention is not abolished and therefore still in force. Further, legal experts argue that the authority to ratify an international treaty lies in the legislative branch, the Grand National Assembly, meaning that a Presidential Decree cannot override parliamentary ratification (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 3).

In response to these constitutional criticism, the executive referred to Law no. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence against Women, which remains in force still. Although Law no. 6284 is a key domestic instrument for addressing violence against women and was adopted after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention due to sustained feminist advocacy, it does not fully align with the Convention. The law prioritizes the protection of the family and fails to recognize violence committed by former or current partners as domestic violence. Moreover, unlike the Istanbul Convention's emphasis on comprehensive and coordinated policies involving education, the media and the private sector to challenge gender-role biases, law no. 6284 adopts a much narrower approach centered on individualized protection orders issued on a case-by-case basis (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 4).

In sum, the presidential decree no. 3718 is the activation point of the legal mechanism. It operationalizes the legal ambiguity and shows clearly how the

president of Turkey used gaps in the Constitution to change international treaties without the Legislative, making it the first member state to withdraw from the Convention.

5.1.4 Outcome Phase

The publication of Presidential Decree no. 3718 triggered the legal consequences of the treaty withdrawal. Under Article 104 of the Constitution, presidential decisions take effect upon publication in the Official Gazette, meaning that the withdrawal became legally valid without requiring parliamentary approval or additional procedural steps (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 2019, Art. 104). Domestically, the withdrawal decision was immediately contested before the Council of State, where several bar associations, women's and LGBTQIA+ organizations, unions, political parties, and individual citizens filed applications requesting a stay of execution, arguing that the presidential decision was "null and void" under the Turkish Constitution (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 3).

Taken together, the 2021 outcome phase demonstrates how legal mechanism functioned in practice: a single executive decree altered Turkey's international legal obligations, domestic institutional checks proved unable to contest the decision and the constitutional ambiguity surrounding Convention withdrawal enabled the executive to act unilaterally. The withdrawal thus represents the culmination of a legal pathway that had been structurally prepared since 2017 amendments and operationally activated in March 2021. This closely mirrors Varol's mechanism of strategic legalism, in which executives deploy formally valid legal instruments – such as decrees to circumvent democratic deliberation while maintaining a facade of legality (Varol, 2015, pp. 1687–1688).

5.2 Institutional Mechanism

After analyzing the legal mechanism through which Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was enforced in Chapter 5.1, the focus now shifts to the second central mechanism of action: the institutional dimension. Beyond the legal construct, it was the functional design and weakening of key state institutions, especially the parliament and the judiciary, that made the withdrawal politically enforceable. Chapter 5.2 examines precisely this: how these institutions acted or failed to act before, during, and after the decision was made, and the role that their structural passivity played in the overall process. This pattern of institutional inactivity is consistent with the concept of stealth authoritarianism (Varol, 2015), whereby authoritarian rule is stabilized through legally formalized and institutionally secured processes. The aim is to show that withdrawal from the convention was possible not despite but because of the institutional framework, and that this manifests a deeper mode of authoritarian power consolidation.

5.2.1 Preceding Conditions: Weakening of Parliamentary and Judiciary Post-2018

While the legal mechanisms relied on constitutional ambiguity and executive decrees, its effectiveness depended on a prior institutional transformation: the systematic weakening of Parliament and the judiciary after 2018 had removed most functional obstacles to unilateral executive action. This marginalization of Parliament was not only formal but functional. After 2018, the legislative lost its ability to initiate or block policy autonomously (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 9). The transition fundamentally altered the balance of power. The constitutional amendments approved in the 2017 referendum dramatically weakened the legislative branch in favor of the executive, by the abolishment of traditional parliamentary checks, the prime ministers power transferred to the president and

oversight tools were largely eliminated – and these are only a few of the alterations (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, Article 104).

The measures that came with the presidential system are dismissing the separation of powers. The presidential system grants the executive law-making powers in certain domains, resulting in a parallel framework of presidential decrees and administrative regulations that operate within limited legislative or judicial oversight. The legislative power given to the president after the referendum and the absence of parliamentary checks on that authority is a clear example of excessive concentration of power (Bali, 2018).

The judicial branch also experienced a systematic loss of autonomy through institutional redesign. The 2017 constitutional amendments restructured the Council of judges and prosecutors⁴, the body responsible for judicial appointments, promotions and disciplinary procedures. Four of its thirteen members are directly appointed by the president, while the remaining seven are elected by the Parliament – however, if no consensus is achieved in parliament, only a simple majority is required, meaning that the governing party can determine all the members appointed by parliament. Moreover, the new constitution allows the presidents to be a member of a political party, which was not allowed before, and lead to Erdogan resuming the AKP leadership. Combined with the ability to chair a political party, the President has since 2018 been able to control the executive and the largest legislative bloc, while simultaneously dominating the judiciary through the HSK (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 10).

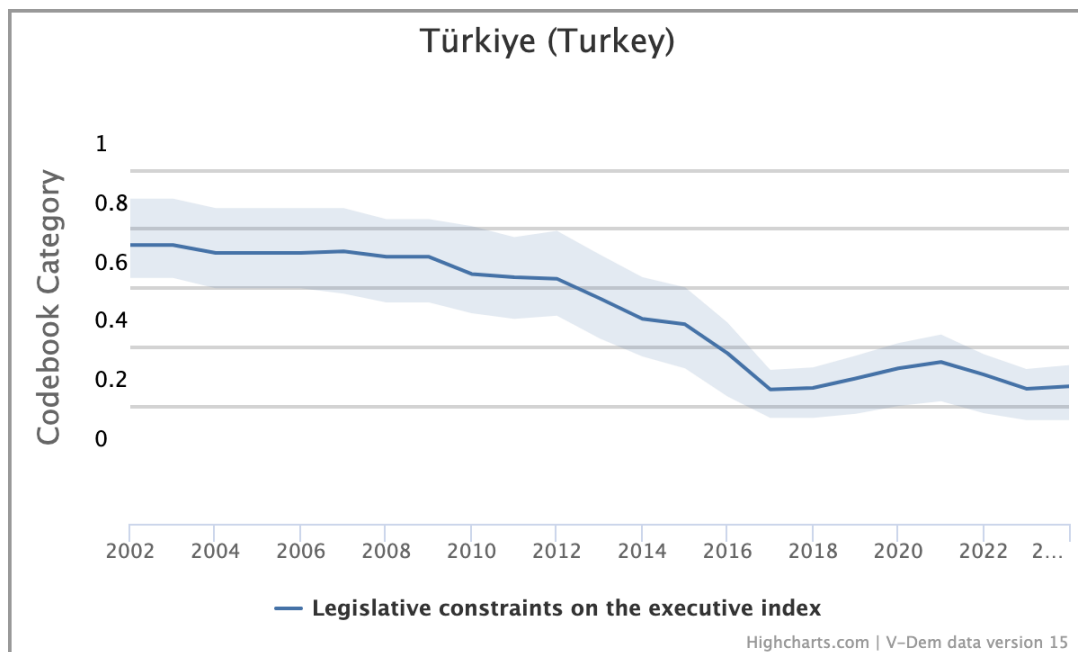
Quantitative data to provide evidence of this institutional weakening can be found in the V-Dem data set. While the judicial constraints on the executive index showed a sharp drop after the referendum, a similar observation can be made with the *legislative constraints on the executive index* (v2xlg_legcon). This variable depicts

⁴ Turkish: Hakimler ve Savcilar Kurulu, abbreviated in this paper to HSK

to what extent legislature and government agencies are capable of questioning, investigating and exercising oversight over the executive. The interval once again goes from low (0) to high (1) oversight (V-Dem Codebook, 2025, pp. 53–54).

The weakening of the parliamentary oversight and the decline of checks and balances are reflected in the graph (see figure 2). Again, we look at the timeline between the first year the AKP got into power and the most recent data of 2024. Similarly to the judicial constraints on the executive, we can see a rather stable legislative oversight up to 2010, with the value staying constantly above 0.55 and a sudden drop in 2017 to 0.16, suggesting a substantial decline in legislative questioning, investigating and exercising oversight over the executive.

Figure 2: Legislative constraints on the executive in Turkey (2002–2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Version 15 (2024), Indicator v2xlg_legcon.
Data derived from: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

5.2.2 Parliamentary Non-Intervention during the Withdrawal Process

The unilateral withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in March 2021 highlighted the passive stance of the legislature. As already mentioned, the withdrawal from the convention took place by presidential decree (Presidential Decree No. 3718), without any justification and without parliamentary debate. In 2011, the Istanbul Convention was ratified by the Turkish Parliament, making Turkey the first country ever to do so (Arat, 2022, p. 924). Yet, the Turkish parliament was completely absent from the withdrawal process.

The Grand National Assembly, i.e. the Turkish parliament, did not formally object to the withdrawal, although many scholars and civil society actors questioned the constitutional basis for the withdrawal. Article 90 of the Turkish Constitution states, that the Parliament must approve international agreements, as it did for the Istanbul Convention back in 2011 (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, Article 90). The withdrawal did not cancel the original ratification law, however, despite this legal clash, the parliament did not use its powers to intervene. An interpretation for that could be the structural asymmetry, as the AKP-MHP majority in Parliament supported the executive's position (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 16). The European Commission also points out that the presidential system weakened the parliaments' legislative function, due to the extensive use of Presidential decrees. As an example, they take the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention and additionally claim that the parliamentary oversight of the executive remained weak and that the parliament lacks the necessary means to hold the government accountable (European Commission, 2021, p. 11).

In short, the parliaments silence during the withdrawal illustrates a core mechanism of institutional passivity. In contrast to its proactive role in the 2011 ratification, the legislature inaction in 2021 signaled an internalized deference to executive authority – one that arguably aligns with broader trends to stealth

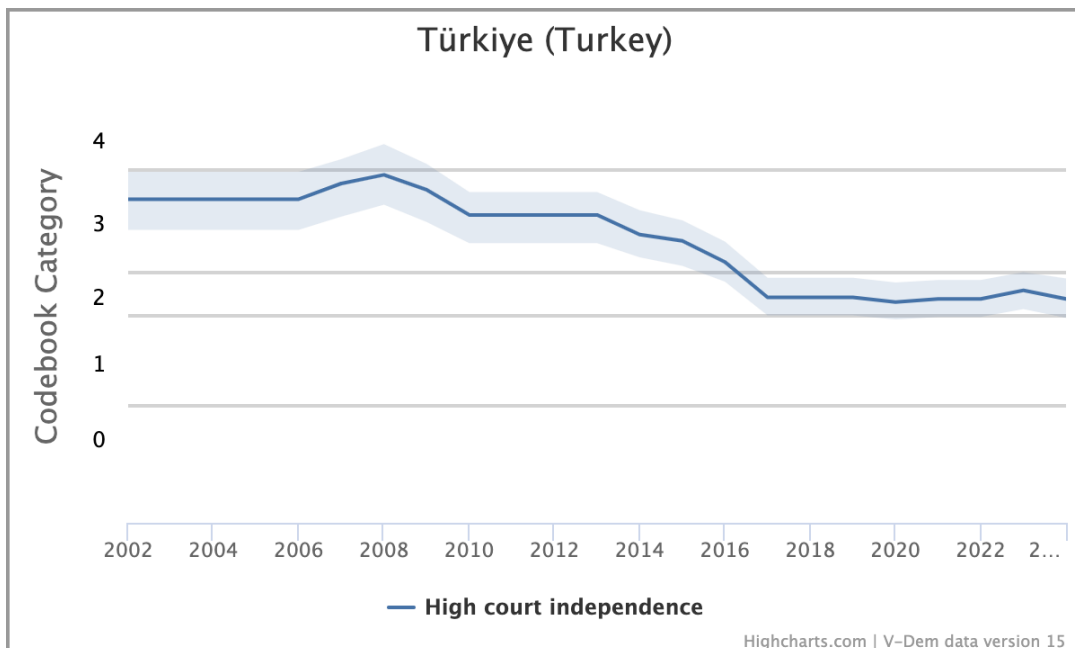
authoritarianism (Varol, 2015), in which legally unchallenged executive dominance unfolds through institutionally accepted procedures.

5.2.3 Judicial Responses

In July 2022, Turkey's top administrative court ruled that President Erdogan's move to pull Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention was lawful (DW, 2022). On March 19, 2022, the State Council Chamber 10 dismissed the lawsuit against the repeal of the Istanbul Convention. Women's and human rights organizations in particular raised objections on the grounds that the Convention's preventive measures played an important role in protecting women from violence (Direk, 2023, p. 418). They claimed that the presidential decision was illegal on the ground of merits, as the convention is a human rights documents and also claimed that the first presidential decree, that constitutes the basis of the president's decision is also illegal (Direk, 2023, p. 418). The Council of State rejected the lawsuit against the withdrawal in July 2022, ruling by a majority vote, that the president's authority to abolish the Convention via the Presidential Decree no. 9 is constitutional and legal. The judges that supported the withdrawal argued, that to claim illegality of the abolishing of the Convention would be to control the operations of the President by examining and evaluating their content and they did not believe that they are authorized to do so (Direk, 2023, p. 419). The Council of State's decision did not only resolve a legal dispute, it was also a major turning point, where the court decided not to get involved, when confronted with a direct challenge to the exercise of presidential power. By claiming it lacked authority to assess the content of executive decisions, the court relinquished its constitutional function of checks and balances. This downgrades judicial review from a fundamental safeguard to a mere optional courtesy, thereby undermining the separation of powers. From a process-tracing perspective, the Council of State's refusal to intervene was not neutral, but a causal step that transformed legal ambiguity into executive entitlement.

To conceptualize the judicial response, the V-Dem indicator *High court independence* (v2juhcind) gives an insight into the independence of the court. This indicator measures the autonomy of the high court by asking experts how often the decisions in cases salient to government reflect the government wishes, with 0 standing for “always”, so minimal to no independence, as the court reflects the governments wishes to 4, which stands for “never”, so a court that is highly independent (V-Dem Codebook, 2025, p. 179).

Figure 3: High Court Independence in Turkey (2002–2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Version 15 (2024), Indicator v2juhcind. Data derived from: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

The score for Turkey shows a vast decline in judicial independence. Looking at the year where the AKP came into power, 2002, the High Court independence index was at 3.16, already suggesting a lowered independence. Again, we can see a massive drop in 2017, after the referendum. The most recent data of 2024 measures the High Court independence at 1.92, indicating a greater lack of independence, with experts agreeing that the court almost always adopts the government’s

position. This trajectory aligns with the judiciary's behavior regarding the Istanbul Convention case, by rather mirroring the preferences of the ruling party than challenging executive overreach, empirically confirmed by a near-zero high court independent score in 2022, where the lawsuits took place.

In total, the silence of the Council of State was not neutral. By refusing to step in, the court allowed the president to turn unclear laws into unchecked power and showed that no real limits were being enforced anymore.

5.2.4 Mechanism Sequencing

To understand how authoritarian decision-making was not only made possible but also silently accepted within the framework of Turkey's post-referendum institutional structure, this sequencing is crucial.

Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention did not occur in a vacuum. It followed a clear sequence of institutional behavior, step by step, culminating in the normalization of unchecked executive power. At the beginning is the Turkish Parliament's inaction when it came to the presidential decree that led to the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Although the parliament had ratified the convention in 2011, it neither intervened during the withdrawal process, nor challenged the presidential decision afterward. This silence signaled an internalized deference to the executive, especially within a system where legislative oversight had already been structurally weakened (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 16). The judiciary also followed this pattern. By rejecting legal challenges and endorsing the president's authority to unilaterally withdraw from international treaties, the Council of State effectively legalized the absence of institutional contestation. By stepping back, the judiciary missed, or rather purposely shut down the last real chance to challenge the withdrawal, transforming legal ambiguity into executive entitlement (Direk, 2023, pp. 418–419).

Looking at this progression, it gets clear that it has a self-reinforcing dynamic, since one institution's passivity enabled the next to remain inactive, until the absence of resistance ultimately served to legitimize the president's unilateral action. In stealth authoritarianism democratic decline occurs not through overt dismantling, but through quiet neutralization of accountability mechanisms. This process fits into that model (Varol, 2015). Further, this sequence also reflects what Bermeo termed as executive aggrandizement, namely the gradual expansion of executive authority through legal, but norm-breaking means. This mechanism unfolds slowly, relying on compliant institutions, such as the parliament and judiciary, that no longer exercise meaningful oversight and thereby enable an authoritarian shift (Bermeo, 2016).

For process-tracing this sequencing is crucial. The presidential decision only became decisive because no institutional intervention happened, which did not only allow the executive to withdraw from the Convention but also redefined the legal boundaries of executive authority.

5.2.5 Outcome

The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was not simply an executive maneuver, it was the product of coordinated sequence of institutional inaction. The parliament did not intervene, despite having originally ratified the Convention back in 2011, the judiciary declined to challenge the presidential decree. Therefore, we can summarize that institutional silence enabled further institutional silence. The absence of contestation became part of the operational logic of the withdrawal. If the parliament had exercised its legislative authority or the Council of State its judicial authority, the withdrawal could have faced procedural delays or even been hindered. This outcome phase confirms the hypothesized mechanism: institutional passivity allowed the executive to unilaterally redefine international obligations.

This shows that the withdrawal was not only enabled by legal mechanisms but also activated and shielded by institutional ones.

The judiciary's refusal to constrain the decree reflects Varol's argument, that judicial review in hybrid regimes often functions to legitimize executive decisions rather than to challenge them, thereby reinforcing authoritarian consolidation under the cover of legal oversight (Varol, 2015, pp. 1687–1690).

5.3 Discursive Mechanism

After closely analyzing the judicial and institutional mechanisms, it is crucial to observe how the Istanbul Convention was legitimized discursively, while narrowing the space for democratic contestation. Discourse functions as a mechanism that allows the government to frame a politically costly and legally controversial move as both morally necessary and democratically acceptable. This section aims to analyze how discursive cues, narratives and state-aligned communication channels shaped the public opinion-making around the withdrawal, contributing to democratic erosion.

5.3.1 Preceding Discursive Landscape

To understand the discursive groundwork that made the withdrawal possible, it is important to look at the time way before the presidential decree in March 2021. Since the AKP came to power in 2002 it had a clear pronatalist and family-oriented stance (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 1). However, during European Union accession negotiations, the AKP's stance and the discourse surrounding the topic of feminism and women's rights became more liberal. The preceding coalition government, before the first legislature of the AKP, had initiated democratizing reforms in pursuit of the EU accession negotiations and the AKP followed, with the goal of becoming an EU member (Arat, 2022, p. 920). In 2004, the women's

movement had been lobbying for an amendment that would extend women's rights on issues concerning gender-based violence and the government amended the Penal Code. Sexual violence, previously defined as "crimes against public morality" was now coded "crimes against individuals" (Arat, 2022, p. 920), shifting the discourse from a morality standpoint to human rights. Further, under the AKP punishments for sexual crimes and domestic violence increased, marital rape and harassment in the workplace were both recognized as crimes punishable by law, the article of the old code that deferred punishment when a rapist married his victim was dropped, as well as articles that distinguished between married and single women as well as between virgins and sexually active women were abolished (Arat, 2022, p. 921). Further, the AKP even added a clause to the constitution that the state would be responsible for gender equality (Arat, 2022, p. 920). But as the AKP became more powerful, the shift towards a more conservative discourse of women and women rights took its place. The party defined woman first and foremost as a mother and a wife (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 1). More and more did the AKP and Erdogan himself demonstrate his thoughts on gender equality at a discursive level. In 2008, Erdogan urged women to give birth to at least three children, arguing with "we have to keep our young generation" (Hurriyet, 2008). In 2010, at a meeting with women's organizations, Erdogan declared that he did not believe in inequality between men and women (Seker & Sönmezocak, 2021, p. 1).

As the AKP consolidated power, this gradual shift from a rights-based discourse towards a conservative, family-centered narrative intensified. It was not a sudden reversal but a steady re-framing of gender equality as culturally foreign, morally suspicious and potentially harmful to national unity. With increasing frequency senior AKP figures articulated open skepticism toward international gender norms. In July 2020, AKP deputy chair Numan Kurtulmus publicly declared, that the initial ratification of the Istanbul Convention had been wrong, emphasizing that its references to gender and sexual orientation had "played into the hands of

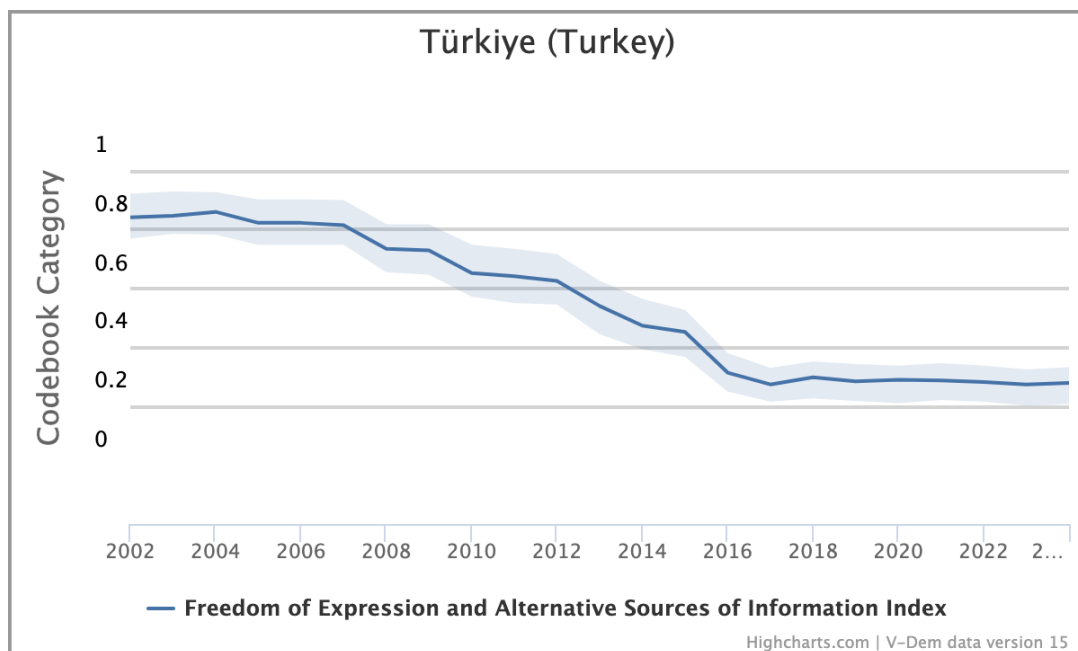
LGBT and marginal elements” and reiterating that several AKP lawmakers shared this view (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020). This statement marked a clear signal that the withdrawal narrative was being normalized and made politically legitimate long before the presidential decree.

This discursive turn was also reinforced by Erdogan himself, who repeatedly linked women’s rights to demographic anxieties and religious morality. In 2016, he urged Muslim families to reject contraception, arguing that “no Muslim family should consider birth control” and insisting that Turkish people must “multiply our descendants” (BBC, 2016). Similarly, Erdogan continued to frame motherhood as the primary social role of women, dismissing gender equality as incompatible with biological differences. In 2014, he had stated that women “are not equal to men” and accused feminists of rejecting motherhood (The Guardian, 2014). These statements demonstrate the long-standing discursive shift in which gender rights were reframed as a threat to social order rather than a matter of human rights – a shift that created the normative foundation for contesting the Istanbul Convention.

Such narratives were not isolated remarks but became integral to a broader ideological construction that portrayed feminists and LGBTQIA+ groups as undermining national identity. Hande Eslen-Ziya researched networked misogyny, especially the online anti- Istanbul convention presence. As Eslen-Ziya has shown, anti-Istanbul Convention actors increasingly promoted a form of “gender-phobia” that depicted gender equality as an ideological lie imposed by external actors and embraced by domestic “enemies within” (Eslen-Ziya, 2022, p. 1744). This discursive logic positioned family, religion and tradition as authentic national values under attack. The virality of anti-Convention content illustrates how these narratives were already months before the withdrawal debate escalated. The prominence and circulation of such messages indicates that the decree and the discursive justification in 2021 did not emerge spontaneously but was deeply rooted in years of reframing gender equality as a moral, cultural and even existential threat to the Turkish nation.

To understand why the discursive framing that preceded the withdrawal gained such broad traction, it is essential to acknowledge the structural transformation of Turkey's public sphere over the past decade. Freedom of expression had already been deteriorating significantly before the withdrawal debate even emerged, narrowing the space in which feminist organizations, legal experts and opposition actors could contest government narratives. The V-Dem *Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index* (*v2x_freexp_altinf*) follows the question to what extent the government respects press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression (V-Dem Codebook, 2025, p. 49).

Figure 4: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index in Turkey (2002–2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Version 15 (2024), Indicator *v2x_freexp_altinf*. Data derived from: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

The index shows a continuous decline from the mid-2010s onward but especially in 2017, coinciding with the transformation to the presidential system a sharp drop is

evident. While in 2002 the index was rather high at 0.74, dropping to 0.55 in 2010 it had a very sharp decline to 0.18 in 2017, suggesting a very low respect of the government towards press and media freedom.

Taken together, these developments illustrate a long-term discursive realignment in which gender equality was reframed as a cultural and moral threat, thereby creating the normative conditions that enabled the government to legitimize an anti-democratic policy choice through seemingly moral argument – an approach fully consistent with the logic of stealth authoritarianism.

5.3.2 Mechanism Activation

This discursive groundwork became fully operational in March 2021, when the presidential decree was accompanied by an official justification that strategically activated these long-established frames to legitimize a legally controversial act under the guise of moral necessity and sovereign authority.

The presidential decree no. 3718, published in the official Gazette 21 March 2021 briefly states the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention but without any further reason or discursive legitimization. Shortly after the decree a statement was published by the Directorate of Communications, explaining why Turkey withdrew from the Convention. An important aspect here, is that the official statement early on states, that the Turkish government is committed to protect women's status in society. The framing here is that the Convention was "hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality" (Directorate of Communications, 2021). Once again, the narrative of the LGBTQIA+ community threatening the traditional values and thereby the protection of women is established here.

Building on this, the official statement further underscores that Turkey will continue to "protect the safety and rights of all women", emphasizing the government's alleged commitment to a "zero-tolerance" approach towards

domestic violence (Directorate of Communications, 2021). At first glance, this reassurance appears to counter fears of weekend legal protections. However, the way it is framed reveals a conservative reinterpretation of women's rights, where protection is articulated primarily through the lens of family preservation rather than individual autonomy. The statement highlights that future reforms will be tailored to the specific needs of society and refers repeatedly to the Constitution, the Penal Code and Law no. 6284 on the protection of the family and the prevention of violence against women (Directorate of Communications, 2021). All of them are legal instrument that embed a family-centered logic and have themselves been criticized for inconsistencies with international standards. The biggest difference between Law no. 6284 and the Istanbul Convention is, that the Istanbul Convention adopts feminist language and forms of reasoning, highlighting the inequality between men and women. Also, the Istanbul Convention required the government to make policies, regulating social life to achieve gender equality while law no. 6284 does not oblige the government to adopt social policies (Direk, 2022, p. 421).

Notably, the statement offers no concrete policy measures, relying instead on broad promises and moral assurances that align with the government's long-standing discursive emphasis on tradition, social harmony and national authenticity. The justification also normalizes the withdrawal by pointing out, that several countries are allegedly considering similar steps, thereby it is setting Turkey's action within a supposedly broader international trend and further legitimizing the decision as reasonable.

5.3.3 Amplification and Diffusion via state-aligned (social) media

This combination of strategic legalism and moralistic reframing did not operate in isolation, its effectiveness depended on a rapid and coordinated diffusion of the official justification across state-aligned media and pro-government social media

network, which worked to normalize the narrative and suppress competing interpretations.

The government's official justification did not remain confined to the presidential statement; it was rapidly echoed and amplified across state-aligned media channels and pro-government social media networks. Opponents of the Convention had long claimed that it encouraged divorce, undermined traditional family values and threatened social cohesion – arguments that resonated strongly with the government's conservative framing. One of the central points of contention was the Convention's clause on protecting individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Critics framed this provision as a covert pathway to legalizing same-sex marriage, reinforcing the narrative that LGBTQIA+ rights posed a direct threat to the Turkish family. This framing was taken up by top government figures, such as President Erdogan's spokesperson, Fahrettin Altun. He claimed that the Convention's original purpose was "hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality" and that it was therefore incompatible with Turkey's social and family values (BBC News, 2021). Such statements were mirrored in increasingly hostile rhetoric from senior officials, including Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu, who publicly described LGBTQIA+ individuals as "perverted", which then prompted a warning flag on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter (BBC News, 2021).

The diffusion was facilitated by the high degree of message discipline within Turkey's increasingly consolidated media landscape, where pro-government outlets have dominated the informational space since the transition to the presidential system. The rapid alignment of these outlets with the government's narrative ensured that alternative interpretations of the withdrawal remained marginal or were framed as politically suspect. Across television channels, print media and online platforms, the framing of the Convention as a threat to family values and national morality became strikingly uniform, creating what can be

described as a discursively homogenized environment in which dissenting voices struggled to gain visibility. This dynamic was further reinforced by pro-government influencers and coordinated, so called trolls, that amplify anti-Convention sentiments and control the narratives in social media outlets, according to the AKP narrative (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022).

Taken together, this broad and coordinated diffusion made the government's framing the dominant way of understanding the withdrawal. As alternative voices faded from view, the decision began to appear both widely supported and morally justified. In this way, the discursive process helped normalize a legally controversial act. This corresponds to Varol's observation that stealth authoritarian regimes increasingly rely on subtle discursive manipulation rather than overt censorship to structure the informational environment in ways that normalize executive narratives and marginalize dissent (Varol, 2015, pp. 1690–1694).

In sum, the analysis shows that the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was not an isolated political act, but a result of a multi-step mechanism that combined institutional weakening, legal ambiguity and discursive legitimation. Examining these steps in sequence demonstrates how the decree became both legally possible and socially acceptable. The next chapter evaluates how far this evidence supports the hypotheses developed in the theoretical framework.

6 Evaluation of Findings

Following the process tracing analysis of the legal, institutional and discursive mechanisms underpinning Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, this chapter evaluates the extent to which the empirical evidence supports the hypotheses developed before. It first tests each hypothesis against the findings of

Chapter 5, before assessing the mechanisms and outlining key limitations of the study.

6.1 Hypotheses Testing

This chapter evaluates the three hypotheses developed in Chapter 4 by examining whether the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 support them.

H1: The withdrawal was enabled through the strategic use of presidential decree, allowing the executive to bypass parliamentary involvement in the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention.

This hypothesis assumes that the withdrawal was possible because the executive strategically used presidential decrees, that only became possible because previous institutional reforms had weakened parliamentary oversight and expanded executive discretion. If this hypothesis is correct, we should observe legal ambiguity and expanded presidential authority after the referendum in 2017, as well as weakened or the complete absence of formal requirements for parliamentary approval. Following the analysis of Chapter 5, the presidential Decree no. 3718 was issued unilaterally under Article 104 of the Constitution of Turkey, whose broad formulation allows the president to regulate issues via decree, when no explicit guidance exists. This vagueness creates substantial legal ambiguity. As Adar & Seufert (2021) put it, presidential decrees have increasingly substituted for legislation since the transition to the presidential system. Legally, the constitution does not specify whether treaty withdrawal requires parliamentary involvement, creating the legal ambiguity that enables executive overreach. Thus, the Turkish president used gaps in the Constitution to change international treaties without parliamentary deliberation or approval.

Thus, the hypothesis is supported. The withdrawal depended directly on the strategic use of a presidential decree exploiting constitutional ambiguity and the absence of an explicit parliamentary requirement.

H2: Judicial and legislative institutions were unable or unwilling to constrain the executive decision, reflecting weakened checks and balances under the presidential system.

Hypothesis number 2 expects that weakened checks and balances prevented institutional constraints on the executive, which means that neither parliament nor the judiciary would effectively intervene. The preceding analysis shows that parliamentary oversight had been significantly eroded following the 2017 constitutional amendments. No parliamentary procedure was activated in response to the withdrawal. This hypothesis therefore indicates institutional weakness; however it does not fully clarify whether the parliament was structurally unable or politically unwilling to act. Regarding the judiciary, several actors, as for example women's rights and human rights groups, filed appeals before the Council of State, demonstrating that a pathway for review existed. However, the court ultimately upheld the decree, aligning with the executive's position and reflecting deference rather than constraint. At the same time the reasoning of the ruling indicates that the judicial review mechanism is not entirely abolished but operates within a narrow and highly politicized margin.

The second hypothesis is partially supported. While both parliament and the judiciary failed to constrain the executive, the evidence does not allow a clear distinction between institutional capacity and political unwillingness. The existence but ineffectiveness of judicial review suggests significant weakening rather than complete absence of institutional checks.

H3: The withdrawal was justified in the aftermath of the decision through political narratives appealing to national sovereignty, conservative morality and family

values, thereby legitimizing a non-deliberative decision through rhetorical rather than democratic means.

The third and last hypothesis expects that the withdrawal would be justified after the decision was made, through moral, national and sovereignty-based narratives that framed the decision as necessary and legitimate. If this hypothesis can be verified, the discourse around it should be coordinated by rhetorical strategies, portraying the Convention as harmful, foreign and socially disrupting. The official communication, through the official statement but also through statements via social media from higher ranking AKP politicians, framed the Istanbul Convention as hijacked, presenting the withdrawal as a defense of national values. Various government figures, Erdogan himself but also Altun and Soylu echoed this framing, linking the Convention to threats against family, morality and social cohesion.

The hypothesis is strongly supported. The withdrawal was legitimated through conservative, moralistic and sovereignty-focused frames that substituted for democratic deliberation, consistent with Varol's conception of stealth authoritarian legitimation.

6.2 Mechanism assessment

This section evaluates how the three mechanism – legal, institutional and discursive – combine into a joint causal process, by assessing the strength, scope and interaction of these mechanisms in producing the withdrawal decision. The process tracing analysis makes clear, that each mechanism fulfilled a distinct function, and that the withdrawal was only possible through these components, that reinforced one another.

The legal mechanism emerged as a strong link in the chain of enabling the withdrawal. Crucial for that was Decree no. 3718 that exploited the constitutional

ambiguity generated by the 2017 shift to the presidential system. Article 104 provided a legal pathway by providing a broad legal basis, that was exploited to justify unilateral executive action, as the clarity of responsibility was lacking, making it a legal grey zone. Without this legal grey zone, there would have possibly been more domestic and international contestation and outrage. Therefore, the legal mechanism constitutes an enabling condition. It created a procedural pathway for the withdrawal with minimal formal accountability.

The institutional mechanism shows a different, somewhat more complex and weaker pattern. Parliamentary oversight was diminished prior to the withdrawal with the change of the system from parliamentary to presidential. In the analysis, we were able to observe that the institutional checks were weakened. Moreover, there is and was a lack of effective constraints. Judicial review existed and was activated by different groups of the civil society; however, the Council of State upheld its decisions, suggesting a pattern of institutional erosion. The institutional mechanisms can therefore be described as a partially constraining environment.

However, the discursive mechanism played a very crucial role in the legitimization of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. The government framed the Convention as incompatible with Turkish social and family values. This discursive mechanism was used long before the decision to withdraw, as well as afterwards to legitimize the withdrawal. The reframing of the withdrawal transformed it from a legally and politically controversial move into one that appeared necessary, protective and even morally demanded. The diffusion of this moralizing rhetoric ensured, that the decision of withdrawal was not only possible but also socially acceptable. In Varol's terms, this is a clear instance of stealth authoritarian legitimation – anti-democratic measures embedded in moral, cultural and sovereignty-based appeals to conceal illiberal implications.

Evaluating the mechanism, the evidence suggests that the withdrawal occurred through a joint causal process, where each mechanism strengthened the others. Arguably, none of the three mechanisms alone would have been sufficient but together they formed a pathway, which led to the outcome of the withdrawal. The mechanism is therefore supported with strong evidence for the legal and discursive component and more ambiguous evidence for the institutional component.

6.3 Limitations

This thesis offers a theory-guided process tracing analysis, uncovering the causal mechanism behind Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. The findings of this study should be interpreted considering several case-specific limitations.

First, the analysis relies exclusively on publicly accessible documents, statements, media outputs and social media content. These sources served as a base how the withdrawal was justified and communicated, but they certainly do not provide insight into the internal deliberations within the executive or the strategic calculations that may have shaped the timing and form of the presidential decree. Therefore, the causal reconstruction is necessarily focused on observable outputs rather than internal decision-making dynamics.

Second, due to stay in focus, the study does not include interviews with policymakers, bureaucrats or members of the judiciary. Such data could have provided more direct evidence of, for example, institutional motivation, including whether the lack of institutional resistance reflected incapacity, political alignment or strategic restraint. The absence of insider perspectives leaves some elements, as for example of the institutional mechanism, remain ambiguous.

Third, the discursive mechanisms are strongly supported by official statements and media analysis, but the study cannot assess how narratives were received by the domestic or international public. A systematic discourse analysis, for example, with a larger corpus or a survey-based design could strengthen this dimension.

Lastly, the findings of this study are all focused on only the case of Turkey. All of the findings are derived from a single, highly specific case of democratic backsliding in Turkey's presidential system. While the case is analytically rich, it is limited in generalizability of the conclusions. The mechanisms identified here may operate differently in other hybrid regimes or in contexts where institutional autonomy or media structures differ significantly.

Despite these limitations, this thesis delivers a focused contribution to the study of stealth authoritarianism and democratic backsliding by demonstrating how legal ambiguity, weakened checks and strategic discursive reframing interacted to enable and legitimize an executive decision that bypassed democratic deliberation.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has examined Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a critical episode in the country's ongoing process of democratic backsliding under the presidential system. By tracing the legal, institutional and discursive mechanisms that enabled the withdrawal, the analysis has shown that this event cannot be understood as an isolated policy reversal in the field of gender politics. It is more a representation of a broader pattern in which executive power is consolidated through tools that remain formally legal, institutionally embedded and rhetorically legitimized.

At the legal level, the withdrawal was possible through the strategic use of presidential decree power under Article 104 of the Turkish Constitution. The absence of clear constitutional rules governing treaty withdrawal created a permissive environment in which Decree No. 3718 could be issued unilaterally, without parliamentary debate or approval. This mechanism is not something that arose spontaneously but relied on institutional changes introduced after the 2017 constitutional referendum, which expanded the President's discretionary authority and normalized the use of decrees as a substitute for legislation. The legal findings demonstrate that constitutional ambiguity has become an opportunity structure for executive overreach.

Institutional dynamics further reinforced this process. The transition to a presidential system weakened not only the parliament but also the judiciary as mechanisms of horizontal accountability. The Turkish Parliament remained passive throughout the withdrawal process, neither insisting on a vote nor contesting the executive's interpretation of its constitutional powers. The judiciary, while formally reviewing the legality of the decision of withdrawal, ultimately upheld it, despite existing significant constitutional concerns. This outcome reflects a broader pattern in which institutions continue to function procedurally yet fail to impose meaningful constraints on executive authority. The analysis showed that this was exactly the case in Turkey. Rather than outright institutional collapse, the Turkish case illustrates a subtler form of erosion, in which democratic institutions survive but their checking capacity is diminished.

Discursive mechanisms added an essential layer of legitimation. Years before the withdrawal, government figures had framed gender equality, feminist mobilization and LGBTQIA+ rights as threats to the Turkish family, national identity and social morality. These narratives created a discursive landscape in which the Istanbul Convention was increasingly portrayed as incompatible with societal values. What was meant by that, is that it was not compatible with the

Islamist-conservative values of the AKP, portraying the Convention as a threat to the Turkish society. When the withdrawal was finally justified, the official statement of the Turkish Government drew directly on this area and the wording was similar. It was claimed that the Convention has been hijacked by actors who seek to normalize homosexuality, portraying homosexuality in a discriminatory way, as something that opposes a threat. The Turkish government further stated that they were capable of protecting women through its own laws, again referring back to Law no. 6284, the law to protect the family and prevent violence against women, which many women rights advocates claim to not be a suitable substitute for the Istanbul Convention. State aligned media, pro-government commentators and coordinated online networks amplified this framing, high-ranking politicians of the AKP spread this framing on their social media channels, legitimizing the withdrawal and at the same time produce a homogenized discursive environment in which alternative interpretations struggled to gain visibility.

Taken together, these findings allow for a direct and explicit answer to the research question: Through which legal, institutional and discursive mechanisms did Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention contribute to the consolidation of stealth authoritarianism under the presidential system?

The analysis shows that the withdrawal emerged from the interaction of legal ambiguity enabling executive unilateralism, weakened institutional checks that failed to constrain the decree and lastly, discursive strategies that framed the decision as morally necessary and nationally grounded. It is the sequencing and combination of these mechanisms, not any of them alone, that produced an outcome representative on contemporary authoritarian consolidation.

These mechanisms closely align with Ozan Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism, which served as the theoretical foundation of this thesis. Varol's concept emphasizes how regimes with competitive or hybrid characteristics use legally plausible, institutionally grounded and normatively framed tools to

entrench executive authority without abandoning democratic façades. Varol argues that courts, decrees and regulatory bodies of the government can be co-opted to confer legality and legitimacy upon measures that, in substance, erode accountability and pluralism.

The Istanbul Convention withdrawal exemplifies this dynamic. The Turkish government did not dismantle institutions outright, it co-opted, instrumentalized and legally repurposed them. Judicial review, one of the main indicators for stealth authoritarianism according to Varol, occurred but it reinforced rather than constrained the executive. The Turkish Parliament remained intact, but was politically sidelined, as it lost more and more of its legislative power. Public communication relied not on censorship, but on a controlled and moralized narrative environment. By acting through courts, decrees and a discourse that centers ethics, security and morals rather than coercion, the executive achieved an authoritarian outcome through mechanisms that outwardly present themselves as democratic (Varol, 2015, pp. 1687–1694). The case thereby situates itself firmly within Varol's theoretical framework and demonstrates how stealth authoritarianism operates in practice.

At the same time, the findings contribute to the broader literature on democratic backsliding. They show that democratic erosion in Turkey is not primarily driven by overt repression or dramatic institutional breakdowns, but through incremental reconfiguration of legal pathways, institutional incentives and discursive structures. Gender politics proved to be a particularly productive arena for this process, allowing the executive to mobilize socially resonant narratives around family, morality and national identity while weakening internationally anchored rights protections. These developments mirror broader global trends in which attacks on gender and LGBTQIA+ rights function as both symbolic politics and as mechanism of authoritarian consolidation.

This thesis also directly addresses the research gap identified in the State of the Art. While previous literature has examined Turkey's democratic backsliding and the political instrumentalization of gender, the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention had not yet been analyzed through the lens of stealth authoritarianism. By applying Varol's framework to this case and tracing the legal, institutional and discursive mechanisms behind the withdrawal, the thesis offers an integrated explanation that was missing from the existing literature. In doing so, it shows that gender-related policy reversals can function not only as symbolic politics but also as a concrete mechanism of executive consolidation, thereby strengthening our understanding of how democratic erosion unfolds in hybrid regimes.

Finally, the persistence of the underlying frames used to justify the withdrawal suggests that these mechanisms continue to shape political discourse in Turkey today. Recent public statements by President Erdogan and senior officials repeat the same moral binaries and threats to family values that underpinned the withdrawal narrative. For instance, in a widely circulated post on the social media platform X by BPT Haber (2025), Erdogan was quoted as warning about "deviant currents" and threats to the "traditional family" (BPT Haber, 2025). This indicates that the Istanbul Convention case was not an isolated episode but part of a continuing pattern in which moralized discourse and legal maneuvering work together to entrench executive authority.

Taken together, the Istanbul Convention withdrawal illustrates how executive power in Turkey is now exercised through tools that appear legal, remain embedded in existing institutions and resonate with parts of the public, yet step by step weaken democratic accountability. The case demonstrates that contemporary autocratization does not require dramatic institutional breakdowns, it can unfold gradually, through the strategic use of constitutional loopholes, the erosion of checks and balances and carefully crafted moral narratives. Turkey was the first

country to sign the Istanbul Convention and the first country to ever withdraw from it – a trajectory that captures the profound democratic reversal traced in this thesis.

8 Outlook

The findings of this thesis open several directions for future research on how gender politics, executive power and democratic backsliding interact in hybrid regimes. This study showed that the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was not an isolated policy reversal but the result of legal ambiguity, weakened institutional oversight and a carefully constructed moral narrative. These mechanisms most likely do not solely operate in this case. They suggest a broader pattern in which gender issues become strategically useful for executives seeking to consolidate power. Future research could therefore investigate whether similar dynamics emerge in other policy areas, such as media regulation, civil society, minority rights or education, to understand whether the mechanism-sequencing identified here appears elsewhere in Turkey's political system.

A comparative approach might also enrich these insights. Other hybrid regimes that went from parliamentary to presidential might have also relied on moralized narratives and selective legal reforms to reshape institutions. Comparing these cases could be helpful in observing if the pattern in Turkey of constitutional ambiguity, weakened checks and balances and discursive legitimation represents a broader script of contemporary autocratization. Such comparisons would also clarify which aspects of the Turkish case are context specific and which reflect broader global tendencies.

Methodologically, future research could benefit from broader and more diverse data. This thesis focused primarily on document analysis. Another approach

could be through interviews with policymakers, activists or legal experts, who might be able to reveal how certain decision-making processes function in the background.

Another possible analysis could be through computational models. A social media network analysis or sentiment analysis of pro-government media could offer a systematic understanding of how discursive frames diffuse across digital ecosystems. Combining such methods with qualitative process tracing could produce a more detailed map of how stealth authoritarian strategies unfold.

Ultimately, this thesis shows that gender politics should not be treated as a secondary or isolated political issue. They form a core arena in which struggles over democratic governance unfold. In hybrid regimes like Turkey, appeals to moral panic and identity-based narratives are not merely cultural rhetoric – they function as strategic tools that reinforce executive authority and weaken institutional checks. This makes it even more urgent to examine how gendered discourse intersects with legal and institutional reforms, especially in contexts where violence against women and LGBTQIA+ groups remain acute and widespread. Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a demonstration that debates over gender equality are never only cultural or moral disputes but deeply political choices that shape the architecture of democratic institutions and determine whose rights remain protected when democratic norms erode.

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