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Examining Political Parties' Perspectives on Foreign Policy through Their Election Manifestos: 2023 General Elections in Türkiye¹

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ABSTRACT

The election manifestos, published by political parties before a general election, provide important information about what the countries' domestic and foreign policies might be like. In Türkiye, it might be argued that the attitudes of political parties toward foreign policy are important to voters. Political parties in Türkiye state, in general, their approach to foreign policy in their general election manifestos. The aim of this study is related to the approaches of political parties' foreign policy perspectives. The perspectives of political parties on foreign policy are examined through their 2023 general election manifestos. More specifically, the aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, to understand how much importance political parties give to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifestos and secondly, to examine what are the raised key issues in foreign policy within the election manifestos.

Introduction

There is no doubt that political parties play a crucial role in modern society, especially ones governed by representative democracy. As it is stated in the 1982 Turkish Constitution, they are indispensable elements of democratic political life. It is worth stressing that this is not only the case in Türkiye but in other representative democracies as well. Political parties, in general, differ in policy priorities and policy approaches from their counterparts. Political parties announce their political approaches through different sources, such as weekly meetings, interviews, social media, and election manifestos. Foreign policy is one of the areas where political parties may have different opinions. Differences in terms of foreign policy are likely to be observed via different sources, such as election manifestos.

Although political parties are likely to have different approaches to foreign policy, it is unclear whether the issue of foreign policy has any impact on the party choice of voters in Türkiye. On the one hand, Yanık (2012: 213) claims that election surveys conducted in the 2000s in Türkiye demonstrate that foreign policy is not the main determinant of party choice of the Turkish voters.

¹ This Article is the revised version of the presentation which was presented at the 11th Annual Conference on International Studies, CESRAN2024 conference held in Venice, Italy, on 01-03 October 2024.

On the other hand, one of the recent studies in Türkiye also shown that although it is not the most important factor, the stand of the political parties on foreign relations is likely to have an impact on how people vote at polls (Kalaycıoğlu, 2009: 82). Based on these findings, it seems that it is not possible to claim that voters completely neglect the foreign policy perspectives of political parties at polls.

It is worth stressing that, almost without any exception, political parties in Türkiye have devoted space to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifestos. Thus, it is possible to argue that they consider it a significant policy area. The aim of this study is related to the approach of political parties' foreign policy perspectives in Türkiye. The perspectives of political parties on foreign policy are examined through their 2023 general election manifestos. More specifically, the aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, I want to understand how important political parties are to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifestos in Türkiye. Secondly, concentrating on the election manifestos to examine the raised key issues in foreign policy in Türkiye.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the next section, related literature is evaluated and the importance of this study is discussed. Then methodology section provides information about the data and how research questions are analysed. After that, findings are provided, and results are discussed. The last section concludes the paper.

Literature Review

Election manifestos are likely to provide quite useful and standard data about the perspectives of political parties. Several issues, such as education, health, migration, economy and foreign policy perspectives of political parties, are presented in the election manifestos. Therefore, these documents serve as valuable resources for comparing political parties. It is worth stressing that during the election period, speeches of the party leaders also provide sufficient data about the policy approaches/priorities of the political parties. However, it is claimed that access to the public speeches of the party leader is not uniform across the parties (Yanık, 2012: 214). Therefore, focusing only on the election manifesto is logical since it is uniform across political parties.

Taking election manifestos into consideration, discrepancies amongst political parties have been analysed from a different angles in Türkiye, such as policy priorities (Aytaç, 2017; Çatı and Cengiz, 2019; Kan, 2023), the issue of gender (Ekici and Acar, 2021; Kan and Kan, 2022; Şahin, 2021), the issue of foreign policy (Akçay, 2018; Apak et al., 2023; Kahraman, 2024; Sancak, 2024), environmental policies (Şeşen and Özkan Ertürk, 2017; Uzun and Özkan, 2019), national identity (İkiel and Bekleviş, 2024) and education (Korkmaz, 2018) and forestry (Atmiş and Günşen, 2019).

Policy priorities of political parties have been studied via election manifestos, in general, to acknowledge whether there is a difference among political parties or to understand whether a political party has shifted its policy priorities over the period being studied. Taking the major political parties into consideration, focusing on the years between 2002 and 2015, Aytaç (2017) investigated their policy priorities. It is found that economy, welfare and quality of life are the most mentioned policy areas in the election manifestos of major political parties (Aytaç, 2017: 9). In a similar vein, focusing on the general elections between 2002 and 2018, Çatı and Cengiz (2019) examine what are the most emphasised issues in the election manifestos. They found that political parties mainly focus on four issues, namely, democracy, economy, social life and culture-technology. One of the recent studies has compared the election manifesto of a political party with the earlier election. In more detail, the 2015 general election manifestos are compared with the 2018 general election manifestos to determine whether the issues emphasised have been changed or remain the same (Kan, 2023). It is found that the election manifestos of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma*

Partisi, AKP) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) have remained quite the same.

The issue of foreign policy within election manifestos, in general, has been examined among other policies, especially focusing on the issue of the European Union. For instance, concentrating on the years between 2002 and 2023 election manifestos, Kahraman (2024) aims to determine the similar and different aspects of the European Union policies of the AKP and CHP. He finds that while the AKP seems to diverge from its emphasis on the European Union, the CHP has shifted its focus to European Union-related values. Furthermore, in a recent study, AKP's perspective on being a member of the European Union was examined through two election manifestos, 2002 and 2023 (Sancak, 2024). Similar to Kahraman (2024), he finds that AKP's interest in the European Union seems to decrease. In addition, considering the 2018 general election, Akçay (2018) investigates two issues through election manifestos. The first one is the foreign policy perspective of political parties, and the second one is to what extent political parties give importance to the European Union relations. Similarly, Apak et al. (2023) analyse the election manifestos focusing on two issues. The first is foreign policy, and the second is women's policies.

Election manifestos of political parties have been analysed, focusing on the issue of gender in Türkiye. For instance, taking the years between 2002 and 2018, Ekici and Acar (2021) analysed the election manifestos of incumbent and main opposition political parties, namely the AKP and the CHP, respectively, concentrating on how they perceive the concepts of gender inequality and women. They found that, among other differences, while the headscarf issue appeared literally in the AKP's election manifesto for the first time in 2011, it did not appear in the CHP's election manifesto between 2002 and 2018. However, while the issue of sexual orientation did not appear in the AKP's election manifestos during this period, it appeared in the CHP's 2011 and so on election manifestos. Furthermore, Kan and Kan (2022) analyse the perspectives of political parties regarding the employment issues of women through the 2018 election manifestos of political parties that have chairs in the parliament. They found that although there are some discrepancies, all political parties support encouraging women entrepreneurs, increasing women's employment level and providing equal opportunities. Similarly, Şahin (2021) analyse the policies and promises regarding the issue of women, taking the election manifestos of the 2018 general election.

Political parties' perspectives on the issue of the environment have also been examined considering the election manifestos. For instance, Şeşen and Özkan Ertürk (2017) analyse the environmental policies of political parties mainly through their election manifestos taking years between 1991 and 2015. In a similar vein, Uzun and Özkan (2019) analyse to what extent the issue of the environment is mentioned within the election manifestos for the 2018 general elections. The 2023 election manifestos of the AKP and the CHP have been analysed from a slightly different perspective. Taking both political parties' election manifestos, İkiel and Bekleviş (2024) investigated the concept of national identity. They claim that national identity is addressed in more detail in the election manifesto of the People's Alliance than in the Nation Alliance. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the issue of forestry has been analysed through the election manifestos, at the 2011 general election (Atmış ve Günşen, 2011), at the 2015 general election (Atmış ve Günşen, 2016) and the 2018 general election (Atmış ve Günşen, 2019).

As can be seen from the aforementioned studies, election manifestos have been examined from different perspectives in Türkiye. For instance, policy priorities, foreign policy, gender issues etc. Considering the 2023 general election, it might be argued how much importance political parties give to foreign policy in their election manifestos and what the key issues raised about the foreign policy in Türkiye still remain unanswered. This study briefly aims to accomplish this challenge.

Data and Methodology

As it is clear from the above, the data of interest in this study are election manifestos. Four election manifestos are included, they are the election manifesto of the AKP which is titled *The Right Steps for Türkiye's Century* (AKP, 2023), the election manifesto of the Nation Alliance which is titled *Common Policies Memorandum of Understanding* (Millet İttifakı, 2023), the election manifesto of the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) which is titled *Approaching Turkish Century, Türkiye, the Power of the Future* (MHP, 2023), and lastly the election manifesto of the Green Left Party (Yeşil Sol Parti, 2023) which is titled *We are Here, We will Change it Together*. All election manifestos are related to the 2023 General and Presidential elections in Türkiye, and they can be accessed from the political party websites.

The data consists of documents, and it is examined through content analysis. Bowen (2009: 28) states that program proposals can be considered as documents, so there is no doubt that election manifestos are documents. Since election manifestos are documents, the document analysis technique is used to address the questions aforementioned above. Content analysis is used here in more detail. It is claimed that one of the most common uses of content analysis is "to describe the relative frequency and importance of certain topics" (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998: 109). Through content analysis, it is possible to determine the message of the text (Cohen et al., 2007: 475). Therefore, content analysis is used to address the questions raised above.

However, it is worth stressing that the results presented here should be cautiously considered. It might be claimed that, in general, rather than used solely, content analysis is used together with other qualitative research methods (Bowen, 2009: 28) to enhance the robustness of the findings. As election manifestos are not the only source of understanding the foreign policy of a political party, other sources, such as public speeches, interviews, etc., might be considered as well. However, it should be kept in mind that since they are written documents, election manifestos are likely to provide the institutional perspective of a political party (Şeşen and Özkan Ertürk, 2017: 194-195).

As mentioned before, this study addresses two main questions: 1) How much importance do political parties give to foreign policy in their election manifestos? 2) What are the key issues raised in foreign policy through the election manifestos? Regarding the first question, the number of pages of an election manifesto and the number of pages related to foreign policy is considered. Moreover, the content order of the election manifesto is analysed, and the location of the foreign policy appears is researched. About the second question, the most ten used words within the foreign policy section are examined as well, and the words cloud are presented. It is worth stressing that while analysing the most used ten words, consistent with the earlier studies (Kan, 2023: 6-7), some words, such as conjunctions, prepositions and verbs, are not included² in the findings.

Findings and Discussion

It might be argued that to understand "how much importance do political parties give to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifestos?" content analysis can be applied. The election manifestos of political parties analysed here are, in general, similar in the subjects that they take into account. However, they differ in terms of the number of pages and the structure of the content order. Regarding the issue of foreign policy, the way how political parties consider it differs from each other. In terms of content order, some political parties give priority to the issue of foreign policy, which appears in the early pages of an election manifesto. In addition, some political parties devote more pages to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifestos than others.

Starting with the election manifesto of the AKP, the first thing to say is that they have the longest election manifesto in terms of the number of pages. The election manifesto of the AKP consists of six

² Words such as and, one, this, for, with, more, to enable, and continuation are the words that are not included in word counts.

main chapters, including a separate chapter on foreign policy. The issue of the foreign policy chapter is titled “Türkiye Axis,” and it appears in chapter five. This chapter has only one sub-chapter that is titled “Effective Foreign Policy”. The effective Foreign Policy section is also divided into seventeen headings directly related to foreign policy issues.

The Nation Alliance comprises six political parties including the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Good Party (İYİ), Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), Future Party (GP) Felicity Party (SP), and Democrat Party (DP). In January 2023, the Nation Alliance announced the Common Policies Memorandum of Understanding to the public. Following the earlier literature, this document is considered the election manifesto of the Nation Alliance (İkiel and Bekleviş, 2024; Apak et al., 2023). The election manifesto of the Nation Alliance consists of nine main chapters. Foreign policy partly appears in the last section of the election manifesto named “Foreign Policy, Defence, Security and Migration Policies”. This main chapter is divided into five sub-chapters and within that, the first one is titled “Foreign Policy”.

The election manifesto of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) comprises thirteen chapters. Neither of these chapters is solely allocated to the issue of foreign policy. Foreign policy is mentioned in chapter eleven, titled “Policies”. Under the Policies chapter, there are twenty-seven sub-chapters, and the issue of foreign policy comes up twenty-fifth, titled “Foreign Policy”. The Foreign Policy sub-chapter is also divided into three parts; the first one is titled “Our Fundamental Principles and Essentials,” the middle one is titled “Versatile and Multidimensional Foreign Policy,” and the last one is titled “Turkish World”.

Taking the election manifesto of the Green Left Party into account, it is worth stressing at first glance it looks different from the others. For instance, it does not have a content page. Furthermore, it consists of only two main chapters, whereas others have at least six. In addition, issues related to foreign policy are slightly mentioned in both sections. In more detail, in the first section, there is a heading titled “Peaceful Foreign Policy,” which consists of only four small paragraphs, nearly half a page long. Moreover, in the second section, two headings are also related to foreign policy. While the former is titled “For a Peaceful Foreign Policy We will Change Together,” the latter is titled “We will Solve the Problems of Citizens Abroad”.

It is clear that, in comparison to others, the AKP is the only political party that devotes its main chapter to the issue of foreign policy in its election manifestos. In addition, it might be claimed that compared to others, the issue of foreign policy appears in earlier pages of the AKP’s election manifesto. Based on this, it might be argued that the AKP gives more importance to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifesto than others.

Table 1: Descriptives of Election Manifestos of Political Parties

	Justice and Development Party	Nation Alliance	Nationalist Movement Party	Green Left Party
Number of main chapters	6	9	13	2
Where does foreign policy appear	5	9	11	1-2
Number of pages	463	216	252	72
Number of pages of foreign policy	48	4	12	4
Foreign policy in election manifesto (ratio)	%10,37	%1,85	%4,76	%5,56

Table 1 above demonstrates the basic information about the content of the election manifestos, the number of pages of the election manifestos³, and how much space is devoted to the issue of foreign policy. The first row shows the political parties, the second row provides information about the number of the main chapters of the election manifestos, the third row shows where the issue of foreign policy appears. The fourth row provides the number of pages of their election manifestos, and the fifth row is about the number of pages of foreign policy in their election manifestos, and the last row provides information about the ratio of foreign policy within the election manifesto. For instance, the election manifesto of the AKP consists of six main chapters, and the issue of foreign policy appears in chapter five. Furthermore, it is 463 pages of which 48 are related to the issue of foreign policy.

In terms of the number of pages, the election manifestos are in a different length. First of all, it is clear that the election manifesto of the AKP is the largest, and what is more it is almost as big as twice than the second one, 463 and 216, respectively. Moreover, while the election manifesto of the MHP and the Nation Alliance is quite similar to each other, the election manifesto of the Green Left Party is clearly the shortest one.

Regarding the issue of foreign policy, not only the number of pages devoted to it but also the ratio of it is the highest in the election manifesto of the AKP. From this, it might be claimed that compared to others, the AKP gives much more importance to the issue of foreign policy in their election manifesto. Moreover, in terms of the number of pages devoted to foreign policy, although it is the shortest in the Green Left Party, they are second regarding to the ratio of it. In addition, although the number of pages of the election manifesto of the MHP and the National Alliance is similar to each other, pages devoted to the issue of foreign policy are apparently different, and they are twelve and four pages, respectively. Therefore, it might be argued the issue of foreign policy takes more place in the election manifesto of the MHP than the Nation Alliance.

It might be argued that to understand “what the key issues raised in foreign policy within the election manifestos” are, word count might be the appropriate way of searching for it. Table 2 provides information about the most frequently used top ten words related to the issue of foreign policy in the election manifestos. Looking at the similarities and differences in the most frequently used words, at first glance, it might be claimed that although there are some similarities, political parties are likely to pinpoint different issues. Starting with similarities, it seems that there is only one word that is common among political parties. It is the “foreign policy”. Furthermore, “Türkiye” is one of the most frequently used words among political parties’ election manifestos, except the Green Left Party. In addition, apart from the “Türkiye”, one more word, namely, “international,” is common among political parties, again except the Green Left Party. Moreover, four words are common between the AKP and the MHP. Similarly, four words are common between the AKP and the Nation Alliance. Apart from the aforementioned common three words, “Turkish” is one of the most used common words between the AKP and the MHP and “cooperation” is one of the most used common words between the AKP and the Nation Alliance within the foreign policy section. What is more, there are two more common words, namely “national” and “peace” between the MHP and the Nation Alliance, other than those mentioned above.

Table 2 below provides information about the most frequently used words in the election manifestos. The first row is about the election manifesto of the related political party or the alliance. The first column provides the most frequently used words in order. Since the documents are written in

³ While the number of pages of an election manifesto is determined, book cover pages, content pages and blank pages are not included.

Turkish, the most used words are sorted in Turkish and then translated to English⁴. Hence, the most used words are also given in Turkish in parentheses and italics. The second column gives information about the percentage of the related words within the foreign policy section.

Table 2: Top ten words (terms) used in the foreign policy section

AKP		Nation Alliance		MHP		Green Left Party	
Word	% in FP	Word	% in FP	Word	% in FP	Word	% in FP
Türkiye (<i>Türkiye</i>)	0,87	Foreign Policy (<i>Dış Politika</i>)	1,42	Türkiye (<i>Türkiye</i>)	2,50	Diplomacy (<i>Diplomasi</i>)	1,4
Global (<i>Küresel</i>)	0,65	Türkiye (<i>Türkiye</i>)	1,42	Turkish (<i>Türk</i>)	1,38	Foreign Policy (<i>Dış politika</i>)	1,4
International (<i>Uluslararası</i>)	0,65	Relation (<i>İlişki</i>)	1,18	International (<i>Uluslararası</i>)	1,12	Resolution (<i>Çözüm</i>)	1,2
Foreign Policy (<i>Dış politika</i>)	0,50	International (<i>Uluslararası</i>)	0,83	Economic (<i>Ekonomik</i>)	0,67	Overseas (<i>Yurt dışı</i>)	1,01
Security (<i>Güvenlik</i>)	0,51	Over again (<i>Yeniden</i>)	0,71	Foreign Policy (<i>Dış Politika</i>)	0,63	Peaceful (<i>Barışçı</i>)	0,80
Overseas (<i>Yurt dışı</i>)	0,45	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<i>Dışişleri Bakanlığı</i>)	0,59	National (<i>Millî</i>)	0,54	Democratic (<i>Demokratik</i>)	0,80
Turkish (<i>Türk</i>)	0,43	National (<i>Ulusal</i>)	0,59	Significant (<i>Önemli</i>)	0,49	Middle East (<i>Ortadoğu</i>)	0,80
UN (<i>BM</i>)	0,42	Peace (<i>Barış</i>)	0,59	Political (<i>Siyasî</i>)	0,49	War (<i>Savaş</i>)	0,80
Effective (<i>Etkin</i>)	0,37	Dialogue (<i>Diyalog</i>)	0,47	Strategic (<i>Stratejik</i>)	0,49	Political (<i>Siyasi</i>)	0,80
Cooperation (<i>İş birliği</i>)	0,32	Cooperation) (<i>İşbirliği</i>)	0,47	Peace (<i>Barış</i>)	0,45	Syria (<i>Suriye</i>)	0,80

In terms of differences, it can be seen from Table 2 that eight words only appear in the Green Left Party's election manifesto. These are "diplomacy", "resolution", "peaceful", "democratic", "Middle East", "war", "political" and "Syria". It is worth stressing that the Middle East and Syria are the words that only appear in the Green Left Party's most used top ten words. Based on this it might be claimed that the Green Left Party puts more emphasis on this issue compared to others. Furthermore, four words only appear in the AKP's election manifesto. These are "global", "security", "UN" and "effective". It is worth recalling that global and the UN only appear in the AKP's most used top ten words. Thus, it seems that regarding the collaboration with global actors, the AKP gives more importance than others. In addition, throughout the ten most used words in the election manifesto of the Nation Alliance, four of them namely "relation", "over again", "Ministry of Foreign Affairs", and "dialogue" appears does not appear others the most used. Moreover, among the most used ten words, three of them namely "economic", "significant" and "strategic" only appear in the MHP's election manifesto.

⁴ Turkish is an agglutinating language. Therefore, in the process of counting, words close to each other both in writing and meaning are considered the same. For instance, foreign policy (*dış politika*), in foreign policy (*dış politikada*) both are considered as one term.

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