



## **Thus Spoke the Turkmen Beg: Constructing a Moralized Regime of Truth in Post-2023 Türkiye**

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### Abstract

This article analyzes how Devlet Bahçeli's post-2023 discourse constructs a moralized regime of truth in Türkiye's competitive authoritarian context. Based on a qualitative analysis of parliamentary speeches and X posts, the study examines how hakikat is framed as a moral and civilizational attribute grounded in national unity, loyalty, and state authority. The findings show that truth is not relativized but recentralized, with dissent recoded as moral and epistemic deviance. Conceptualized as epistemic populism, this discourse fuses populist moral dualism with claims of epistemic authority, transforming truth into a mechanism of political alignment rather than deliberation. The article contributes to post-truth scholarship by highlighting a non-relativist configuration of post-truth politics and advances research on Turkish political communication by foregrounding the epistemic role of nationalist-populist discourse.

**Keywords:** Post-Truth, Devlet Bahçeli, Turkish Political Discourse, Populism, MHP

### Introduction

Türkiye's political trajectory since the early 2010s has increasingly been characterized by a transition from defective democracy to competitive authoritarianism, as institutions that once provided horizontal accountability have been systematically eroded. Esen and Gümüştü (2016) document how, especially after 2011, the ruling party expanded executive dominance by weakening the separation of powers, politicizing the judiciary, and blurring state-party boundaries, producing an uneven playing field in which elections remained formally competitive yet substantively unfair. This deterioration accelerated after the collapse of the 2013–2015 peace process and culminated in the consolidation of the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) in 2023, where the Justice and Development Party (henceforth, AKP) governed with the ideological support of the Nationalist Action Party (henceforth, MHP). Özbudun (2014) argues that Türkiye's shift reflects an increasingly majoritarian conception of democracy that legitimizes executive aggrandizement and minimizes institutional constraints. Somer (2016) further situates this transformation within a broader model of new authoritarianism marked by the erosion of the rule of law, media capture, and crisis-driven legitimation strategies that reconfigure state-society relations toward personalized and partisan forms of power. Together, these developments have elevated political discourse into a central terrain of governance, a site through which authorities determine whose claims to knowledge, truth, and political credibility can be recognized within the national public sphere.

Within this environment, Devlet Bahçeli, the long-standing leader of the MHP, has become a key actor in shaping the discursive architecture of the post-2023 order. Although AKP dominates the executive, MHP provides the coalition with an ideological vocabulary grounded in nationalism, moral discipline, and state-centered conceptions of political legitimacy. As Cengiz (2021) argues, the party's trajectory is marked by ideological immoderation, a durable fusion of Turkish nationalism, religio-moral conservatism, and a historically rooted understanding of the state as a sacred custodian of national unity. Having emerged in the late 1960s

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as an ultra-nationalist and anti-communist movement, the MHP cultivated a worldview centered on loyalty and security-oriented political reasoning, a tradition that Bahçeli has reinforced through doctrinal rigidity since 1997. This ideological repertoire underpins his post-2023 discourse, which relies on a moralized epistemic vocabulary such as *hakikat*, *tecelli*, sincerity, unity, and warnings against deception to frame politics as a struggle over moral and cognitive order in a context of weakened institutional checks. In a political environment shaped by competitive authoritarianism, this rhetoric casts journalists, intellectuals, opposition parties, and various critics as agents of epistemic deviance rather than legitimate interlocutors, echoing Esen and Gümüüşçü's (2016) analysis of discursive dominance, media capture, and the delegitimization of opponents as core mechanisms of governance. As avenues of accountability shrink, political identity becomes the basis of epistemic credibility, and truth shifts from a matter of deliberation to a marker of moral belonging reserved for those aligned with the loyal national community.

These patterns align with the broader structure of right-wing populist discourse identified by Bobba and McDonnell (2016), who outline four elements that organize populist narratives: the people, the elites, the others and democracy. This structure parallels Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) characterization of populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into morally charged camps of pure people and corrupt elites, while claiming privileged access to the national will. In Bahçeli's discourse, the people appear as a virtuous and cohesive national community defined by sincerity, discipline and loyalty, whereas elites are cast as actors who distort this will. The category of the others encompasses domestic and external groups presented as existential threats, reflecting the exclusionary and securitized logic common to right-wing populism. Through notions such as *tecelli*, democracy is reframed as the moral expression of a unified national will rather than the outcome of pluralistic deliberation. Together, these elements create a discursive environment in which truth becomes inseparable from political loyalty and dissent is recoded as deception.

Türkiye's trajectory illustrates a distinctive variant of post-truth politics that departs from Western contexts often associated with epistemic relativism or the erosion of verification norms. Instead, the Turkish case exhibits a moralized and non-relativist form of epistemic closure in which truth is recentralized and claimed as the exclusive property of the loyal national community. As Rogenhofer and Panievsky (2020) show in their comparison of Türkiye, India and Israel, populist leaders in deeply divided societies frequently moralize truth and frame dissent as a threat to the nation, producing environments in which truth functions as a resource to be defended against internal and external enemies. Similar strategies can be observed in the leaderships of Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu, who deploy moralized truth claims to justify exclusion and consolidate authority. Yet Türkiye differs in its combination of competitive authoritarian institutions, state-centered nationalism and coalition-based ideological production, which together create a more structured regime of epistemic control that aligns truth with loyalty and delegitimizes alternative interpretations.

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Against this background, the article conceptualizes Bahçeli's post-2023 rhetoric as an instance of epistemic populism, a mode of discourse in which truth is defined through moral belonging rather than empirical verification. Epistemic populism merges populist moral dualism with claims of epistemic authority by attributing inherent truthfulness to the people and casting opponents as intrinsically deceptive. In Bahçeli's discourse, terms such as *hakikat* and *tecelli* morally anchor truth to loyalty, unity and state fidelity, transforming truth from a domain of deliberation into a mechanism of political alignment and reframing epistemic tensions as moral and security challenges that legitimize vigilance and exclusion. The study therefore asks: (1) how Bahçeli constructs a moralized regime of truth in post-2023 Türkiye, and (2) how this discourse exemplifies epistemic populism within a competitive authoritarian context? By addressing these questions, the article extends research on post-truth politics by showing how truth can be recentralized rather than relativized, contributes to scholarship on Turkish political communication by analysing how epistemic authority is articulated through nationalist and moral vocabularies, and advances the study of populism by demonstrating how truth becomes a domain of knowledge governance that connects ideology, style and strategy across institutional and digital arenas.

### Political and Institutional Context

The consolidation of the People's Alliance after 2018 established a political environment marked by executive dominance, constrained pluralism, and the progressive erosion of boundaries between party and state. The AKP's transformation into a dominant party during the 2000s, driven by electoral expansion and the absorption of the centre-right, laid the structural foundations of competitive authoritarianism. As Çarkoğlu (2011) observes, declining fragmentation and electoral volatility reduced the prospects for genuine alternation in power, enabling the governing bloc to operate within a system that remained formally competitive yet substantively asymmetric. This configuration created the conditions under which the MHP could assume a more decisive role within the governing alliance.

The MHP's influence within this architecture is rooted in its longstanding ideological rigidity. The party has consistently advanced a maximalist orientation grounded in Turkish ethno-nationalism, religious majoritarianism, and a security-centred conception of politics. Cengiz (2021) characterizes this "ideological immoderation" as a durable feature sustained by the fusion of Islam and nationalism, close alignment with state security priorities, and the symbolic authority of *Türkeş*. While such rigidity historically constrained the party's programmatic flexibility, the post-2015 political environment transformed these features into strategic assets, enabling the MHP to exert influence without assuming full executive responsibility.

This capacity is anchored in a deeper institutional posture. As Çınar and Arıkan (2002) argue, the MHP has long defined itself less as a party operating within pluralist competition than as a guardian of the state. Emerging during the Cold War and later hardened around the perceived threat of Kurdish separatism, this self-conception aligned seamlessly with the AKP's shift toward centralized,

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security-oriented governance following the collapse of the peace process. Over time, the ideological repertoires of the two parties converged, producing a mutually reinforcing partnership grounded in state-centric nationalism and securitized political reasoning.

This convergence unfolded alongside a broader transformation in the governing bloc's discursive orientation. As Dudlák (2025) demonstrates, since the mid-2010s the AKP has increasingly articulated political authority through a civilizational discourse that fuses Islamism, neo-Ottomanism, and anti-Western resentment into a moralized account of national identity. This discursive shift reframed political conflict as a civilizational struggle, securitized dissent, and redefined truth claims as expressions of moral and cultural authenticity rather than outcomes of institutional deliberation. Within this environment, loyalty to the nation and the state emerged as a prerequisite for epistemic credibility. The MHP's nationalist and moral-statist vocabulary thus did not merely align with the AKP's authoritarian consolidation but actively reinforced and stabilized this civilizational framing of politics.

Under Devlet Bahçeli's leadership, the MHP's influence within the alliance expanded further. Although his personal political style is often portrayed as restrained, the party's ideological core has remained intact. Organizational networks such as Ülkü Ocakları, nationalist unions, and conservative-nationalist media outlets provide the infrastructure sustaining this continuity. Bahçeli has functioned as a "balancing authoritarian actor," contributing ideological coherence, parliamentary discipline, and symbolic legitimacy. His influence derives less from direct control over executive institutions than from agenda-setting power in areas such as national identity, security policy, and the boundaries of legitimate political representation.

The introduction of the presidential system in 2017 intensified these dynamics. By incentivizing pre-electoral alliances, the system granted the MHP leverage disproportionate to its electoral size. The party's stable vote share, documented by Çarkoğlu (2011), rendered it indispensable for majoritarian legitimacy. As the AKP increasingly relied on identity-based and security-oriented narratives, Bahçeli's discourse both justified and deepened the authoritarian turn. The alliance thus rests on a shared ethno-religious majoritarian vision in which dissent is routinely framed as a threat to national unity.

As a result, the People's Alliance constitutes a hybrid political arrangement that is electorally grounded yet institutionally skewed. A dominant party and an ideologically rigid far-right party jointly produce a form of authoritarian stability in which executive centralization and nationalist immoderation mutually reinforce one another. This evolving configuration, particularly between the 2023 elections and October 2024, provides the political context within which the present study situates its analysis.

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### **Populism as a Thin-Centered Ideology**

Populism is best conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology whose restricted conceptual core revolves around a moralized antagonism between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” Mudde (2004) distinguishes this worldview as the defining feature of populism: political conflict is not framed in terms of competing interests or rational disagreements but as an ethical struggle between virtue and corruption. This moral absolutism simplifies political life by asserting that the *volonté générale* of the people should override institutional mediation. However, because this ideological core is exceedingly limited, it cannot independently generate a coherent political program. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) therefore classify populism as a thin-centered ideology that must attach itself to thicker ideological traditions, nationalism, socialism, religious conservatism, authoritarian statism, to acquire substantive meaning. Populism provides the moral grammar, while the host ideology supplies the content that defines who “the people” and “the elite” actually are.

This structural thinness also explains populism’s adaptability. Since “the people” is a symbolic, constructed category rather than an empirically given social group, its identity is continuously shaped by the ideological environment (Mudde, 2004). As a result, populism can manifest in left-wing, right-wing, religious, or nationalist variants without losing its essential character. Yet thinness alone cannot account for the remarkable ideological volatility often associated with populist politics. Taş (2022) addresses this gap by theorizing populism’s “chameleonic quality,” arguing that populist movements survive “despite and through” ideological shifts. Populism’s “empty-shell composition” allows it to resignify symbols, myths, and demands across changing contexts, reconstructing meaning as political conditions evolve (Taş, 2022).

Laclau (2005) argues that populism should not be defined by its specific ideas or policy content, but by how it organizes political demands. In his view, populism becomes possible when many different social demands remain unmet by institutions. When this happens, these demands begin to come together around a shared sense of frustration. Laclau (2005) calls this the “logic of equivalence”: different groups start to see themselves as part of the same struggle because they all face the same obstacle. Through this process, populism does not represent an already existing group; instead, it creates a new collective subject that comes to be called “the people.”

A key mechanism in this process is the use of empty signifiers. As more demands join this emerging coalition, the terms that unify them must become broader and more flexible. Words such as “the nation,” “justice,” or “the people” gain political power not because they describe a precise program, but because their vagueness allows many different groups to identify with them. The more diverse the coalition becomes, the more these signifiers must “empty out” their specific content to function as a shared rallying point.

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Laclau also emphasizes that “the people” is not a fixed, pre-given social group waiting to be represented. Instead, it is something produced by populist discourse itself. Populism transforms scattered demands into a unified political identity by creating boundaries, assigning meanings, and building connections among them. This insight complements Mudde’s (2004) ideational definition by showing that the real power of populism lies not in what it claims to stand for, but in how it structures political meaning. Through discursive practices, populism turns fragmented grievances into a collective political force.

In Türkiye, the thin-centered core of populism interacts with a moral-statist tradition. In this tradition, the state is imagined as the guardian of both national virtue and epistemic authority. This ideological environment thickens the populist core with nationalist, civilizational, and moral content, making loyalty to the state appear synonymous with loyalty to “the people.” Through this fusion, populism’s Manichean antagonism becomes mapped onto moralized narratives of national unity, security, and authenticity. The result is a hybrid formation in which thin-centered ideology, chameleonic adaptability, and Laclauian logics of equivalence combine to produce a powerful mechanism of political articulation and truth construction.

### **Post-Truth: Relativist and Non-Relativist Approaches** **Relativist Approaches to Post-Truth**

Relativist approaches interpret the post-truth condition as the culmination of a broader epistemic fragmentation and pluralization in which the foundations of truth, justification, and authority become socially and culturally contingent. Rather than viewing post-truth as the victory of falsehood, relativist thinkers argue that contemporary societies have lost a shared epistemic ground. This shift is rooted in long-standing philosophical critiques of objectivity and universal reason. Boghossian (2007) captures this view by defining epistemic relativism as the position that “truth and justification depend on a particular conceptual scheme or cultural framework” (pp. 2–3). In this sense, what counts as a valid belief or credible source is determined not by universal standards but by the norms of specific communities. Because there is “no framework-independent way to determine what is true,” disagreements across epistemic frameworks become difficult, if not impossible, to resolve (Boghossian, 2007).

Harsin (2015) extends this philosophical account into the digital media environment, arguing that contemporary societies have shifted from coherent “regimes of truth” to fragmented “regimes of post-truth,” characterized by proliferating and competing “truth markets” (p. 327). In these markets, truth claims circulate across countless platforms, feeds, and micro-publics, each with its own norms of credibility. The breakdown of fiduciary trust in traditional arbiters, journalists, scientists, courts, creates an epistemic landscape in which “institutions can no longer coordinate truth claims” (Harsin, 2015, p. 329). This environment is intensified by algorithmic personalization and attention economies, where visibility, affect, and virality function as indicators of truthfulness. As Harsin notes, truth now unfolds within “an

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affectively charged attention economy” (2015, p. 329), making emotional resonance more politically influential than empirical verification.

From this perspective, post-truth is not primarily a product of intentional deception but the structural outcome of epistemic pluralization. As competing “truth games” multiply, each community becomes embedded in its own epistemic world, governed by internal standards of evidence, identity, and meaning (Harsin, 2015, p. 330). Boghossian (2007) warns that this leads to a “collapse of objective knowledge” (pp. 10–11) because no shared epistemic criteria remain available for adjudicating between conflicting claims. The relativist condition thus does not deny the existence of truth but disperses it across multiple, incompatible frameworks.

Baer (2018) clarifies how this relativist environment can fuel post-truth rhetoric. She argues that when the socially constructed nature of authority is misunderstood as arbitrary or purely subjective, it creates fertile ground for the belief that “expertise or source authority is merely a matter of opinion” (p. 73). This misconception reflects what she calls “absolute relativism,” the notion that all viewpoints are equally valid and all facts are mere constructions. Baer’s intervention is significant because it reveals how post-truth discourse often exploits such oversimplified forms of relativism to erode trust in expertise. She counters this with the concept of “weak relativism,” which acknowledges cultural and contextual differences in epistemic authority while still affirming shared principles of evidence, reasoning, and evaluation (pp. 74–75). In other words, authority is indeed constructed and contextual, but not arbitrary; facts remain meaningful, and empirical standards continue to function even within culturally diverse epistemic communities.

Taken together, these perspectives frame post-truth as the result of a long-term shift from unified epistemic regimes to fragmented, culturally situated systems of justification. Truth becomes plural, contested, and increasingly mediated by identity and affect. The relativist approach thus explains post-truth politics not as a deliberate rejection of truth but as the structural outcome of epistemic pluralization, digital fragmentation, and misconstrued notions of contextual authority. In this view, truth claims become increasingly dependent on social location rather than shared standards of verification.

### **Non-Relativist Approaches to Post-Truth**

Non-relativist approaches argue that post-truth politics does not emerge from epistemic pluralization or the collapse of universal truth frameworks. Instead, it is a strategic political project that intentionally erodes the epistemic conditions required for democratic communication. McIntyre (2018) captures this dynamic with precision, noting that “post-truth is not the claim that there is no truth, but the claim that truth does not matter” (p. 2). In this view, the central mechanisms of post-truth are epistemic manipulation, institutional delegitimization, and the displacement of verification by affect and loyalty. The objective is not to replace truth with alternative facts but to collapse the distinction between truth and falsehood, producing a public increasingly dependent on partisan and emotional cues rather than shared standards of evaluation.

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McIntyre (2018) traces this strategy to practices such as science denial, propaganda, and the cultivation of epistemic cynicism designed to “create a general atmosphere of doubt” (pp. 3–4). This atmosphere destabilizes democratic judgment and undermines institutions, journalism, science, courts, universities, that serve as arbiters of factual authority. Emotional identification can “crowd out evidence”, allowing leaders to re-anchor truth in charisma, moral affect, and shared identity rather than institutional verification (McIntyre, 2018, p. 10).

This strategic manipulation of truth becomes particularly visible in Türkiye. Taş (2022) demonstrates that Turkish post-truth politics operates not only through epistemic destabilization but also through chronopolitics, the strategic reorganization of temporal narratives. Erdoğanist discourse fuses an essentialized Ottoman past, a conspiratorial present marked by existential siege, and a future hinging on national redemption. This fusion constructs a closed temporal universe in which empirical inconsistencies become signs of moral struggle and dissent is rendered historically treasonous. Chronopolitics thus complements McIntyre’s account: truth is not relativized but subordinated to a leader-centric moral narrative that governs the meaning of past, present, and future.

Yılmaz and Ertürk (2021) further show that Türkiye’s authoritarian Islamist populism anchors epistemic authority in affective and necro-political symbolism, mobilizing emotions such as grief, sacrifice, pride, and national innocence as epistemic touchstones. The AKP’s discourse frames politics as a struggle between the “national” (milli) and the “anti-national” (gayrı milli), a moralized opposition that renders empirical disagreement illegitimate. Necro-political motifs, martyrs, funerals, collective sacrifice, serve as mechanisms for authenticating truth claims: what resonates with national suffering is treated as epistemically valid, while competing interpretations are dismissed as conspiracies or elite deception. In such a regime, truth becomes dependent on affective loyalty, not evidence.

Waisbord (2018) reinforces this non-relativist interpretation by demonstrating that populism is fundamentally at odds with the communication commons, a democratic space grounded in diversity, tolerance, fact-based reasoning, and truth-seeking. Populism’s political ontology is binary and agonistic; it reduces politics to a Manichaean conflict between “the people” and “the elite,” rendering truth inherently partisan and moralized. As Waisbord notes, populism “espouses post-truth politics” because it rejects the notion of shared truth as a democratic good, treating truth instead as the property of the virtuous people against corrupt elites (pp. 21–23). Its dismissal of mediating institutions, journalistic oversight, plural public spheres, independent courts, mirrors McIntyre’s account of targeted institutional erosion. Populism’s unified conception of “the people,” as Waisbord argues, produces an epistemic environment in which criticism is reinterpreted as elite conspiracy and factual disagreement as betrayal (Waisbord, 2018, pp. 23–24).

When read together, McIntyre, Taş, Yılmaz & Ertürk, and Waisbord reveal a coherent non-relativist pattern: post-truth politics in Türkiye is not the consequence of epistemic diversity but the strategic recentering of truth around a morally sanctified

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national subject. Truth is reorganized around the leader's moral authority, the nation's sacred temporality, and affective bonds of loyalty and sacrifice. Rather than dispersing truth across communities, as relativist theories suggest, post-truth populism in Türkiye recenters and monopolizes truth through the destruction of institutional credibility, the emotional scripting of national time, and a Manichaean moral order that dictates who can speak truth and who cannot.

### **The Moralization of Knowledge and the Politics of Truth**

The moralization of knowledge and the politics of truth form the central mechanism through which contemporary populism extends its Manichean antagonism into the epistemic sphere. In this dynamic, truth is no longer understood as the result of institutional verification or deliberative contestation but as a moral attribute believed to reside within the authentic people and their legitimate representatives. Knowledge ceases to be a public good mediated by expertise and becomes a proprietary resource of a morally purified national community. This conceptual shift draws on Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) account of populism as a thin-centered ideology rooted in moral dualism, Krämer's (2017) discussion of emotionally immediate and unmediated truth claims, and Waisbord's (2018) argument that populism collapses the boundary between identity and knowledge by turning epistemic conflict into a contest between virtue and corruption.

Within such a moralized order, epistemic authority is authenticated through affective alignment and political loyalty rather than empirical justification. Institutions historically responsible for producing and arbitrating knowledge, including journalism, the judiciary, universities, and scientific bodies, are reframed as corrupted extensions of a deceitful elite whose claims cannot be trusted. As Waisbord (2018) notes, dissent is interpreted not as legitimate critique but as moral betrayal, marking the dissenter as outside the virtuous community. The result is an epistemic environment in which credibility becomes inseparable from conformity, and disagreement is pathologized as evidence of disloyalty.

In Türkiye, the moralization of knowledge assumes distinctive institutional and discursive forms. Ünal (2025) demonstrates that the pursuit of epistemic hegemony has become a central state objective, as critical, secular, and gender-focused scholarship is delegitimized as elitist or immoral. At the same time, new infrastructures of knowledge production, including regime-aligned universities, councils, and think-tanks, are constructed to generate compliant and morally sanctioned truth. These developments combine repression with proactive institutional engineering and emotional governance, shifting epistemic legitimacy away from verification and toward affective intensity and moral resonance.

Taş (2022) further shows that the moralization of knowledge is structured through chronopolitics, a temporal logic that fuses an idealized Ottoman-Islamic past, a conspiratorial present under permanent siege, and a redemptive national future into a unified narrative of collective struggle. Truth claims gain legitimacy when they align with this temporal script. Empirical contradictions are not treated as falsification but are absorbed as further evidence of an ongoing moral conflict.

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Chronopolitics thus provides the narrative architecture through which epistemic authority is consolidated and insulated from empirical challenge.

Yılmaz and Ertürk (2021) demonstrate that necro-political symbolism, particularly martyrdom, sacrifice, and national grief, functions as an epistemic filter that validates narratives resonating with collective suffering while denouncing competing accounts as treacherous or foreign-inspired. Yılmaz and Morieson (2023) add a civilizational dimension, showing that truth is increasingly framed as inherent to Islamic-Ottoman civilization, whereas Western epistemic forms, such as human rights reporting, secular scholarship, and liberal theory, are portrayed as ideological weapons designed to erode national morality.

Taken together, these processes constitute a comprehensive politics of truth in which knowledge is systematically moralized, re-centred, and monopolized. Independent institutions are delegitimized, temporality is reorganized into a sacred national narrative, affect and necro-political symbolism become criteria for determining truth, and civilizational identity emerges as the ultimate warrant of epistemic legitimacy. In Türkiye's post-2023 environment, truth does not belong to evidence or deliberation but to those who demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the morally defined nation and its leadership. To know correctly is to belong correctly, and to speak otherwise is to place oneself outside both truth and the moral community.

### Methodology

#### Research Design and Analytical Orientation

This study examines how Devlet Bahçeli's post-2023 parliamentary and digital discourse constructs, stabilizes, and governs "truth" (hakikat) as a moralized, securitized, and civilizational category in Türkiye's contemporary political landscape. The analysis adopts a qualitative interpretive research design that combines reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Discourse is approached not merely as representational language, but as a constitutive mechanism of epistemic governance through which political authority defines the conditions of truth, legitimacy, and political belonging.

Reflexive TA is employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) formulation, which conceptualizes analysis as an active, researcher-driven, and theoretically informed interpretive process. Coding was conducted inductively and at a latent level, enabling the identification of moral, epistemic, affective, and temporal assumptions embedded in Bahçeli's discourse beyond surface lexical patterns. Importantly, themes were not treated as static categories. Instead, they were conceptualized as epistemic formations whose meanings and political functions are reconfigured across time and across communicative arenas.

CDA complements this thematic orientation in two interrelated ways. First, the study draws on van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (2008; 2015), which conceptualizes discourse as a primary site through which political elites shape shared knowledge, ideologies, and mental models. Second, it engages the

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discourse-historical approach (DHA) developed by De Cillia et al. (1999), which foregrounds discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification or mitigation within a diachronic and context-sensitive framework. These approaches enable the analysis to connect micro-level linguistic choices with macro-level structures of power, ideology, and institutional authority.

### **Corpus Construction, Delimitation, and Data Sources**

The corpus comprises twenty-two texts produced between May 2023 and August 2024: ten parliamentary group addresses delivered at the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) and twelve posts authored by Devlet Bahçeli on X. Texts were selected based on their temporal proximity to key political and geopolitical milestones and their discursive density with respect to truth, morality, national unity, and security. These milestones include the immediate post-election period following the 2023 general elections, the Republic's centenary, the Gaza crisis of October–November 2023, the aftermath of the 2024 local elections, and major domestic security incidents during 2024.

All parliamentary group speeches were retrieved from the official archival section of the MHP website, ensuring textual authenticity and consistency across versions. X posts attributed to Devlet Bahçeli were collected from archived sources and subsequently cross-verified against his official X account. Archived versions were preserved using platform-based archiving tools and manually stored records, and were cross-checked against the official account as of December 2025 to account for potential deletions, edits, or platform-related access restrictions.

The corpus was deliberately delimited prior to Bahçeli's parliamentary speech of 22 October 2024, which marked a discernible discursive reconfiguration characterized by the emergence of resolution-oriented language and the recalibration of previously rigid moral and securitizing boundaries. This intervention is treated as inaugurating a post-consolidation phase oriented toward the performative deployment of epistemic authority and was excluded in order to preserve analytical coherence and focus on the construction and stabilization of the moralized regime of truth.

### **Analytical Template and Coding Procedure**

All texts in the corpus were analyzed using a standardized, multi-layered analytical template developed through iterative engagement with the data. This template operationalized the integration of reflexive TA and CDA by organizing each text according to recurring analytical dimensions, including but not limited to: forms of truth articulation, sources of epistemic authority, affective framing, temporal construction, security logic, enemy construction, moral lexicon, institutional legitimacy, party identity, and processes of political delegitimization.

Within each analytical dimension, coding followed a consistent structure comprising: (1) analytically defined codes, (2) illustrative textual excerpts, and (3) interpretive commentary situating these excerpts within broader epistemic and

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ideological formations. This code–example–interpretation triad ensured analytic transparency and facilitated systematic comparison across texts and communicative genres.

Rather than imposing a fixed coding scheme in advance, the analytical template evolved reflexively as patterns recurred across the corpus. This process allowed for the expansion, refinement, or consolidation of analytical dimensions in response to the data. Diachronic shifts were identified through comparative analysis of code density, affective intensity, and securitizing logic across time, enabling the inductive reconstruction of higher-order themes and discursive phases.

CDA tools informed interpretation at every stage of analysis, particularly in tracing how nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies stabilized moral boundaries and epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on Fairclough’s (1992) insight that “form is part of content,” attention was paid to how genre conventions, modality, rhetorical intensity, and narrative sequencing contributed to the production and circulation of epistemic meaning.

Taken together, this methodological framework provides a transparent, replicable, and theoretically integrated basis for analyzing how truth is moralized, securitized, and governed across institutional and digital political communication in Türkiye’s post-2023 environment

### Results

The analysis identified four diachronically ordered higher-order themes that organize the discursive construction of hakikat in Devlet Bahçeli’s parliamentary speeches and X posts in the post-2023 election period. These themes are constituted through recurring code clusters that emerge across distinct temporal segments and are reproduced across parliamentary and digital domains. Rather than functioning as discrete or isolated stages, they reflect patterned reconfigurations of epistemic authority, affective alignment, institutional reference, and security framing.

1. Reconstitution of the Civilizational and Moral Truth Frame, Hakikat is articulated as manifested revelation (tecelli), anchored in national conscience, founding authority, and civilizational continuity.
2. Moralized Truth and the Totalization of Threat, Truth claims are organized through moralized and securitized frames in which opposition, media, and external actors are discursively delegitimized.
3. The Global Moral War and Türkiye’s Protective Mission, International crisis is framed through codes of moral catastrophe, international delegitimization, and Türkiye’s positioning as a moral and diplomatic arbiter.
4. Total Securitization of the Domestic Sphere and the Re-Centering of the Alliance, Terror, political opposition, judicial authority, media, and digital platforms are integrated into an expanded security matrix centered on national unity and alliance discipline.

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### Reconstitution of the Civilizational, Moral Truth Frame

Across the parliamentary speeches constituting the first theme, the corpus consistently produces a set of code clusters that define Bahçeli's post-election discourse. The most frequent and structurally central cluster is manifested\_truth / revelation, marked by formulations such as "millet vicdanının tecellisidir" (it is the manifestation of the nation's conscience) and "seçimle tecelli eden TBMM" (the Parliament manifested through the election). These expressions code truth as an event of appearance or unfolding rather than argumentative verification, a pattern reinforced by parallel formulations such as "tezahür ve tekemmül eden ilerleyiş" (an advancement that manifests and matures).

A second stable cluster is Source of Truth = national\_will / founding\_authority, signaled through statements such as "egemenliğin yegâne sahibi büyük Türk milleti" (the great Turkish nation as the sole owner of sovereignty) and "TBMM'de mayalanmıştır" (it was fermented in the Grand National Assembly). This cluster expands through the coding of youth as truth-carriers: "çağa ve zamana yönelik mesajlarımızın taşıyıcı kolonu gençlerdir" (youth are the carrier column of our messages to the era).

Affective registers form another recurring cluster, gratitude/reverence/loyalty, signaled by expressions such as "Türk milletine şükranlarımı sunuyorum" (I extend my gratitude to the Turkish nation) and "sevgi ve saygıyla selamlıyorum" (I greet you with love and respect). These affective markers appear consistently at openings and closings and accompany references to unity and solidarity.

The corpus also generates a clear temporal\_continuity cluster linking "geçmişin hatıraları" (the memories of the past) with "geleceğin yüksek hedefleri" (the lofty goals of the future), with the past coded as guarantor\_of\_the\_future: "Şanlı geçmişimiz aydınlık geleceğimizin kefilidir" (our glorious past is the guarantor of our bright future). These formulations consistently place present political action within a past-to-future continuity frame.

A further cluster, national\_unity and common identity, appears through recurring statements like "Hepimizin ortak paydası Türkiye'dir" (our common denominator is Türkiye) and "birlik, beraberlik, kardeşlik" (unity, solidarity, brotherhood). The moral\_lexicon cluster is equally dense, with terms such as "fazilet," "edep," and "mukaddes" (virtue, decency, sacred) dominating alongside moralized evaluative terms including "güzel ahlak" (good morality) and condemnatory triads such as "günahdır, cinayettir, melanettir" (it is a sin, a crime, a wickedness).

Institutional grounding produces another stable coding field, founding\_authority and delegated\_responsibility, appearing in formulations like "Gazi Meclis kurucu niteliğiyle" (the Veteran Assembly with its founding character) and references to "tevdî edilen vekalet vazifesi" (the entrusted parliamentary mandate). Finally, although explicit post-truth or misinformation vocabulary does not surface in this phase, the corpus includes a minor but traceable correct\_conduct / right\_action cluster: expressions describing the need to "doğruyu bilmek, edep ile taşımak"

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(to know what is right and carry it with decency) function as boundary markers for proper vs. improper conduct, though without naming specific antagonistic actors at this stage.

Overall, this phase yields a coherent code set manifested\_truth, national\_will\_as\_epistemic\_source, affective\_reverence, temporal\_continuity, unity, moral\_vocabulary, and institutional\_anchoring, that define the discursive pattern of the early post-election period.

### **Moralized Truth and the Totalization of Threat**

Across the parliamentary speeches and X posts constituting the second theme, the corpus produces a dense pattern of codes marking a shift toward moralized and securitized truth claims. The corpus frequently encodes Truth\_as\_Moral\_Clarity through formulations that establish truth as illumination opposed to darkness: "Medeniyet ve mehabet timsali Gazi Meclisimizi kim yok sayıyorsa... bir karanlık içindedir" (Whoever disregards our venerable Parliament is in darkness) and "Bizim yönümüz doğrudur, yolumuz doğrudur" (Our direction is correct, our path is correct). X posts extend this moral clarity into crisis settings, framing tragic events as undeniable fact through formulations such as "korkunç bir trajedinin bütün komplikasyonları" (all the complications of a terrible tragedy).

A parallel cluster establishes Source\_of\_Truth through national will, foundational authority, and moral ancestry. Parliamentary discourse anchors truth in the people's sovereign claim "Söz de, karar da Türk milletininindir" (Word and decision belong to the Turkish nation) and invokes Atatürk as an epistemic anchor through commemorative formulations. X posts similarly frame truth through national conscience, positioning "gerçekleri yansıtmayan... tehlikeli isnatlar" (claims failing to reflect the truth, dangerous imputations) against a morally grounded correctness.

The corpus constructs affect through combined registers of reverence and indignation. Parliamentary discourse codes reverence in heartfelt greetings while simultaneously encoding indignation: "CHP... yozlaşmanın uçurum dibine çakılmıştır" (CHP has crashed into the pit of degeneration). X posts intensify affective polarity through formulations such as "Çocuklar yaşasın, katiller kahrolsun" (Let the children live, may the killers perish) and "soykırıma varan kanlı tablo" (a bloody tableau amounting to genocide). Temporal coding frames crisis as part of a historical continuum, linking past heroism to present challenges and marking urgent thresholds through conditional imperatives.

A central cluster in this theme is delegitimization\_of\_opposition\_and\_media. Parliamentary discourse encodes opposition\_as\_moral\_failure: "CHP... milli mensubiyetini kaybetmiştir" (CHP has lost its national belonging). X posts extend this through media delegitimization: "Bir avuç sözde uzman... nefret ve nifak aşısı yapmaktadır" (A handful of so-called experts inject hatred and discord). Security emerges as an equally explicit coding field, with parliamentary speeches framing terror as an existential tool "PKK terörü bir vasıta"dır" (PKK terror is a tool) and calling for eradication: "Bu haşaratların kökü kurutulacaktır" (The roots of these vermin will

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be eradicated). X posts integrate security with moral imperatives, demanding swift and unconditional intervention.

Finally, the corpus repeatedly codes international\_delegitimization, particularly of the United States and Israel, framing U.S. involvement as partisan complicity and characterizing Israeli actions as "aleni insanlık suçu" (a blatant crime against humanity). These codes converge with domestic securitization to form a coherent pattern in which truth, morality, loyalty, threat, and security are tightly interlinked across parliamentary and digital discourse.

### **The Global Moral War and Türkiye's Protective Mission**

The third theme generates a consolidated set of codes that frame international crisis as a moral and geopolitical field in which Türkiye is positioned as the essential agent of resolution. The corpus consistently encodes catastrophe\_as\_moral\_truth through formulations that render suffering as self-evident moral fact: "Vahşet her gün yeni bir boyut kazanmaktadır" (the brutality gains a new dimension every day), "Soykırım raddesine ulaşan hunhar saldırılar" (savage attacks reaching the level of genocide), and "Filistinli masumlar kan revan içindedir" (innocent Palestinians are in blood and pain). This coding is reinforced through quantified suffering "4385 Filistinli... 1756 çocuk" (4385 Palestinians... 1756 children) which functions as numerical grounding for moral certainty.

A parallel cluster constructs delegitimization\_of\_International\_Actors. International institutions are coded as inert "BM... kilitlemiştir" (the UN is locked), "İİT'den hiçbir şey çıkmamıştır" (nothing has come out of the OIC) while the United States is framed as complicit through partisan involvement and veto power. Israel is characterized through total moral condemnation: "acımsız ve ahlaksız saldırılar" (merciless and immoral attacks) and "savunmasız bir halk canlı hedef haline getirilmektedir" (a defenseless people are being turned into live targets).

The corpus amplifies Türkiye\_as\_moral\_and\_diplomatic\_arbiter, framing the President as engaged in sincere pursuit of a solution and positioning Türkiye as the carrier of humanitarian, conscientious, and legal theses to the global agenda. This merges with Securitization\_Through\_Protective\_Duty: "Gazze'yi koruma ve kollama misyonunu üstlenmek... ecdadımızın mirasıdır" (assuming the mission to protect Gaza is the legacy of our ancestors), culminating in the unconditional imperative "Türkiye süratle devreye girmeli... her neyse yapmalıdır" (Türkiye must swiftly intervene and do whatever is necessary).

Affective intensification forms a sustained code throughout. Emotional polarity escalates from "Çocuklar yaşasın, katiller kahrolsun" (let the children live, may the killers perish) to declarations that "Türk milletinin sabrı artık taşma noktasına ulaşmıştır" (the patience of the Turkish nation has reached a breaking point). A distinct cluster introduces Paramilitarized\_Compassion, coding mobilizable publics within a moral-security register through formulations such as "Gönüllü Kudüs Sevdalıları... her türlü göreve hazırdır" (Volunteer Lovers of Jerusalem are ready for any duty). The theme closes with Temporal\_and\_Civilizational\_Thresholding, linking

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the Gaza crisis to national-historical epistemic continuity through the declaration that the final verdict given in 1923 was confirmed in 2023, a formulation that absorbs international crisis into the *longue durée* of civilizational struggle.

### **Total Securitization of the Domestic Sphere and the Re-Centering of the Alliance**

The fourth theme yields a dense configuration of codes through which internal security, alliance politics, and digital space are jointly securitized. One of the most salient clusters is *terror\_as\_total\_ontological\_threat*. The corpus codes martyrdom as moral apex and terror as an existential assault through formulations such as "9 kahraman kardeşimiz şehit düştü... şehit kanları yerde kalmayacaktır" (nine heroic brothers were martyred... their blood will not be left on the ground), while threat ontology is expanded through "saldırı/sızma girişimi" (attack/infiltration attempt), framing terror as a penetrative danger rather than a discrete act.

Closely linked is *expansion\_of\_the\_enemy*, where terror is no longer confined to armed groups. Expressions such as "siyasi veya sivil toplum kuruluşu maskeli odaklar" (actors masked as political or civil society organizations) and "müttefik görünümlü muhasım ülkeler" (hostile countries disguised as allies) code internal actors, NGOs, and external states within a single threat matrix. Parliamentary speeches reinforce this by repeatedly associating PKK, FETÖ, and domestic opposition with coordinated destabilization efforts. Another dominant cluster is *militarization\_of\_state\_response*: Bahçeli declares that "barındığı, sığındığı... her yer meşru hedeftir" (every place where they shelter or hide is a legitimate target), asserting a border-transcending operational logic, while parliamentary discourse consistently codes eradication rather than containment through formulations emphasizing struggle "son terörist ele geçirilinceye kadar" (until the last terrorist is neutralized).

The fourth theme also produces a consolidated *national\_unity\_and\_emotional\_synchronization* cluster. The corpus states "Türk milleti tek ses, tek nefestir" (the Turkish nation is one voice, one breath), while parliamentary speeches frame unity as an affective obligation tied to martyrdom and gratitude, coding emotional alignment as a security resource rather than a rhetorical appeal. A further major cluster concerns *re-centering\_of\_the\_peoples\_alliance\_as\_existential\_safeguard*: the alliance is defined as "Cumhur İttifakı, Türk tarihinin varoluş refleksi" (the existential reflex of Turkish history) and "milli güvence, milletin özgüveni" (a national guarantee, the nation's self-confidence), coded not as a political arrangement but as an ontological security mechanism. Alliance debates are dismissed as "beşinci kol faaliyeti" (fifth column activity).

Digital space emerges as a distinct threat field through *digital\_platforms\_as\_security\_risk*, with global internet platforms and social media channels explicitly targeted as producers of chaos and disinformation, and specific media outlets coded as operational actors rather than communicative institutions. The corpus also sustains *judicial\_delegitimization\_via\_national\_will*: "Anayasa

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Mahkemesi'nin kararı Türk milletinin iradesiyle çöpe atılmıştır"(the Constitutional Court's decision has been thrown away by the will of the Turkish nation) establishes a hierarchy in which national will overrides judicial authority, coding legality through popular sovereignty. Finally, teleological stabilization of power appears through repeated denials of electoral rupture "Türkiye'nin gündeminde seçim yoktur" (there is no election on Turkey's agenda) framing political continuity as a moral and existential necessity.

Together, these clusters demonstrate that the fourth theme is characterized by the comprehensive securitization of terror, opposition, digital media, and alliance politics, articulated through a unified moral–security lexicon across parliamentary and X discourse.

### Discussion

Against this background, the analysis undertaken in this article invites a reconceptualization of Devlet Bahçeli's post-2023 rhetoric not simply as an intensification of nationalist discourse, but as the construction of a moralized regime of truth. What is at stake in this discourse is not primarily the content of political claims, but the redefinition of how truth itself is constituted, authorized, and defended. Rather than treating truth as an object of empirical verification or public deliberation, Bahçeli's rhetoric positions it as an attribute of moral belonging, anchored in loyalty to the state, unity of the nation, and fidelity to a historically constituted political community. Truth, in this configuration, ceases to function as a shared horizon of contestation and becomes instead a mechanism of political alignment.

Conceptualizing this configuration as epistemic populism clarifies how populist moral dualism is extended into the epistemic domain. Epistemic populism does not merely oppose "the pure people" to "corrupt elites"; it attributes inherent truthfulness to the former while casting the latter as intrinsically deceptive or cognitively deficient. In Bahçeli's discourse, concepts such as hakikat and tecelli operate as epistemic anchors that bind truth to moral substance rather than to evidence or procedure. Epistemic disagreement is thus reframed as moral deviance, and moral deviance, in turn, as a security concern. Through this move, epistemic tensions are transformed into grounds for vigilance and exclusion, allowing political authority to govern truth without openly rejecting it.

This dynamic directly addresses the article's first research question by showing how a moralized regime of truth is constructed in post-2023 Türkiye. Truth is neither pluralized nor rendered unstable; on the contrary, it is stabilized through moral clarity and historical continuity. This finding challenges dominant post-truth frameworks, which often associate contemporary epistemic crises with relativism, fragmentation, and the proliferation of "alternative facts." In the case examined here, post-truth operates in a non-relativist mode. Truth is not weakened but monopolized. Rather than multiplying competing truths, epistemic populism recentralizes truth around a single moral axis, thereby foreclosing deliberation while maintaining a strong truth claim.

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Addressing the second research question, the analysis demonstrates how this configuration exemplifies epistemic populism within a competitive authoritarian context. Epistemic populism functions as a regime of knowledge governance that translates moral superiority into epistemic authority. By grounding truth in belonging rather than verification, it allows political power to bypass deliberative institutions without appearing anti-truth or irrational. Truth is constantly affirmed, yet only as something that already exists within the nation and reveals itself through loyalty. Political communication thus shifts from persuasion to boundary-drawing: the central task is no longer to convince skeptics, but to identify those deemed epistemically unfit to participate in truth production.

This perspective also helps explain why epistemic populism is particularly compatible with competitive authoritarian governance. In such contexts, political authority benefits less from epistemic uncertainty than from epistemic closure. A moralized truth regime reduces ambiguity, stabilizes loyalty, and narrows the space for legitimate dissent without requiring continuous coercion. Epistemic populism therefore operates as a low-cost but high-impact mechanism of control, reinforcing existing power relations by reorganizing the conditions under which truth can be claimed.

Situating this argument in comparative perspective further clarifies its contribution. Studies of antidemocratic populism in cases such as India and Israel emphasize moral polarization, securitization, and the erosion of pluralism. The present analysis complements this literature by specifying the epistemic mechanism that underpins these processes. Moralized constructions of “the people” gain political force not only through identity narratives or emotional appeal, but through the monopolization of epistemic authority. Epistemic populism thus serves as the connective tissue between populist ideology and authoritarian practice, translating moral dualism into epistemic sovereignty.

The findings also advance scholarship on Türkiye’s civilizational discourse. Analyses that conceptualize Türkiye as a civilizational state have shown how political authority mobilizes history, religion, and anti-Western narratives to construct moral hierarchies between civilizations. This article extends that literature by demonstrating that such civilizational narratives are sustained by a distinct epistemic logic. Civilization, in this configuration, does not merely define who belongs; it defines where truth comes from. Epistemic populism supplies the internal epistemology of the civilizational state, converting moral identity into an epistemic resource and rendering alternative truth claims illegitimate by definition.

Crucially, this epistemic configuration cannot be understood through an AKP-centric lens alone. The analysis foregrounds the role of Bahçeli and the MHP in articulating and stabilizing this regime of truth. Within the AKP–MHP alliance, epistemic populism performs a structuring function by hardening the moral and epistemic boundaries of political discourse. While other actors may display rhetorical flexibility or strategic ambiguity, Bahçeli’s discourse provides epistemic rigidity and continuity. This suggests that epistemic authority in competitive

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authoritarian regimes may be distributed across actors, with different political forces contributing distinct but complementary functions to the maintenance of moralized truth.

The decision to delimit the empirical analysis prior to Bahçeli's parliamentary speech of 22 October 2024 should be understood in this conceptual light. That intervention does not challenge the moralized regime of truth identified in this study; rather, it presupposes its consolidation. Once truth has been fully anchored in moral belonging, epistemic authority can be exercised more sovereignly, including through the controlled re-signification of previously excluded figures. Such gestures do not reopen deliberation, but instead reaffirm epistemic supremacy by demonstrating that inclusion itself is conditional upon moral submission. The October 2024 speech thus signals a transition from the construction of epistemic authority to its performative deployment, marking a post-consolidation phase that lies beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations that also point toward productive directions for future research. Empirically, the analysis is confined to Bahçeli's parliamentary speeches and X posts within a delimited post-2023 period, which enables analytical depth but limits the ability to assess how epistemic populism operates across other political actors or how it is received by different audiences. Future research could extend this framework comparatively in two directions: first, by examining whether similar moralized regimes of truth emerge in the discourse of other actors within Türkiye, particularly within the AKP; and second, by comparing ideologically similar nationalist-populist parties across different competitive authoritarian contexts to assess whether epistemic populism constitutes a broader pattern of right-wing authoritarian knowledge governance or remains specific to Türkiye's institutional and civilizational configuration. Reception-oriented studies could further explore how concepts such as *hakikat* and *tecelli* are internalized, contested, or reinterpreted by partisan publics, thereby illuminating the social life of epistemic populism beyond elite discourse. Finally, longitudinal analyses incorporating subsequent political crises may clarify how epistemic populism evolves once moralized truth has been consolidated, particularly whether it stabilizes authoritarian governance or generates new epistemic tensions over time.

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