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Published online: 05 Oct 2023.

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A political game?: the dispute over the Canal Istanbul project

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to understand how ideologies become embedded in political projects through strategies of legitimation aimed at justifying specific ideas, beliefs, and emotions. By using the political negotiation between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP) concerning the Canal Istanbul Project as an illustrative example from Turkey to 'ideology in action', this article shows how various rhetorical combinations appeal to an analysis of 'ideology at work'. Our analysis is based on 20 in-depth interviews with both opponents and supporters of the project, in addition to a comparison of two official websites providing scientific evidence from each party's perspective. The results show that the two poles of the dispute aim to recruit more people as their political supporters by using their own scientific reports with claims that they are 'objective' and aspire for the benefit of Istanbul.

Introduction

There is an ongoing political philosophical debate concerning what ideology is, and whether it is a political thought[1] or a distorted understanding of political reality.[2] In this article, we view ideology as an inseparable component of political life and argue that it is through ideological discourse that one encounters power and politics. Ideologies are useful frameworks, or patterned forms of thinking about politics that contribute to shaping our world and our understandings.[3] They are clusters of ideas, beliefs, opinions, values and plans of action for public policymaking through which we sense a

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pattern of political reality. We therefore regard ideology as a mental framework that people use to make sense of how the world should function and within which they see themselves operating.

This natural understanding is a starting point for our research, through which we argue that the blurring of boundaries in meaning, as an inescapable outcome/dynamic of the political game, might be intentional. On this basis, we aim to contribute to these debates about ideology by presenting how ideology(ies) function(s) in the deep-rooted contest in Turkey between the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP). We use the Canal Istanbul Project as a case study. This is a project proposed by the AKP to construct an artificial strait in Istanbul parallel to the Bosporus Strait. Debates over its possible outcomes and benefits between the AKP and CHP constitute the main issue in this study.

Both parties have a history of deep-rooted conflicts based mainly on their opposing secular and religious roots. Their conflicts are also embedded in the economic struggles of Turkey in the 2000s, which gave rise to the AKP's first electoral victory in 2002.[4] In the secularist-religious struggle, the CHP claims to represent the secular side as the first party of the Republic. On the other hand, the AKP was a spin-off of a banned Islamist party.[5] After coming to power, the AKP employed a polarizing populist rhetoric referring an us/them divide, based on who is more religious and who is not[6] as a key element of the aforementioned conflict. The divide was based on the one hand on 'the people', alleged to constitute the popular will and authentic Turks and represented at the political level by the AKP; and, on the other hand, the 'Republican elite', argued to be represented by the CHP.[7]

Concerning the economy-based conflicts, the AKP came to power in 2002, very soon after it was founded, in the context of a major national economic crisis. It has been argued that voting for the AKP in 2002 was a reaction to the personal suffering caused by the economic crisis.[8] The AKP rule continued, with rapid urbanization based mostly on building patronage networks among the local right-wing-dominated professional, business, family and/or neighborhood alliances. These all benefited from the AKP leaders' business relations with the center, and they guaranteed the AKP's power at local level.[9] Research traces this economic organization back to the 2000s, when the AKP won the general elections and began its 20 years' rule.[10] Since that time, the CHP has been the main opposition party. During the AKP's rule, the it captured state institutions, and concentrated power in the hands of its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.[11] As a result, Turkey witnessed democratic backsliding, particularly in terms of freedom of speech and expression.[12] This resulted in protests (most notably the Gezi Park protests in 2013) and a weakening of the AKP's

support base in metropolitan areas while the opposition made some advances.[13]

In the 2019 regional elections, for the first time in 25 years, the CHP won nine of the ten largest metropolitan municipalities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.[14] Ekrem Imamoğlu, as the new CHP mayor of Istanbul, immediately became a leading opposition candidate for the 2023 presidential elections,[15] and was assumed by many to be the only challenger able to defeat Erdoğan, who was himself the mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998.[16] Imamoğlu became the main figure questioning the AKP's mega-sized urban projects, including the third bridge, the third airport, and, particularly, the Canal Istanbul project. The Canal Istanbul project is planned as an artificial channel parallel to the Bosporus, mainly to ease the congested shipping traffic in the strait, although opponents argue that it will damage the overall ecology of Istanbul and the Marmara Region. Imamoğlu became the main figure contesting the idea of the project and created a bloc of civil opposition of experts and environmentalists against the possible damage from the aforementioned projects, in particular the Canal Istanbul.

By studying the conflict concerning the Canal Istanbul project, this study is devoted to the question of how ideological contestation is embedded in political projects and argues that ideologies may be competitions for the control of political language and deeds. Based on the Canal Istanbul project, we argue that it is possible to observe two opposing parties contest a specific issue by using similar strategies and configurations of meanings, even though they claim to be very different from each other. Following Freeden's morphology as a methodology,[17] it is meaningful to consider an analysis of ideology in action, based on three positions that contesting political parties would take: (1) the framing of the predominance of private interests; (2) the intentional distribution of meaning of concepts; and (3) recruiting people to political subjects by using former strategies to reach more supporters concerning the contested area

The Canal Istanbul dispute between the AKP and the CHP will help us to show how ideological contestation can become embedded in political projects. Relying on this case, we seek to advance the political and ideological debate by linking our findings to the crucial question of how ideology legitimizes politics. Based on a descriptive comparison of the two parties' perspectives, customized and shared via websites acknowledging the project's details, and on in-depth interviews with both sides, we aim to provide a conceptual framework and empirical instances that unpack the dynamics of ideology from this specific case. The article follows with a brief information about the Canal Istanbul project, and an explanation of ideological morphology as the main methodological tool, before proceeding with methods and findings.

The Canal Istanbul project

When Erdoğan first suggested the Canal Istanbul project in 2011, he declared that the Canal would be the crown jewel of his legacy, forever changing the city. He declared the Canal to be one of the greatest projects of the century, comparing his dream, via media imagery, to the creations that Ottoman architect Atik Sinan built for Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Mehmed II the Conqueror), who brought the Byzantine Empire to an end in 1453 by invading Istanbul (Constantinople at the time). Ottoman nostalgia, reflected in the visual images (see Figure 1), portrays the building of the Canal as a new invasion of Istanbul, and Erdoğan as the successor to Mehmet the Conqueror.

After the announcement, the AKP consulted technical experts and academics about the project to support the project's legitimacy. The feasibility reports and acknowledgments were made via an official website. As the AKP officials and supporters praised the project, a growing opposition that rejected the project came to the fore The CHP, relying on other experts' reports, organized a workshop[18] to discuss the 'realities' of the Canal project. It also presented its findings via a website like the AKP's. For us, this contestation between the AKP and the CHP concerning Canal Istanbul is a means to explore how ideological framing works and functions in disputable topics. The following section, relying on the two sides of the dispute, will focus on how we conceptualize ideology in this study and how we track its dynamics by using Freeden's morphological analysis.

Figure 1. The grandiose canal project by night, presented by a sultan. **Source:** 'Finished by 2023,' *Radikal*, April 28, 2011.

Ideology as a political game

Ideology has long been defined as political perspective. It is perceived as an organization of opinions, attitudes and values, as a way of thinking about people and society[19], and as an integrated pattern of thoughts and beliefs explaining one's attitude towards life.[20] It is defined as a belief system that includes economics, political beliefs, and other conceptualizations.[21] The critical view of ideology as an error of superstructure and as the manipulation of the political interests of the ruling classes, was reinforced by the writings of Marx and Engels[22], who at the same time gave ideology its critical meaning and highlighted its relation to the class struggle. Ideology, from a critical perspective, is conceived as a product of, and reproduced by, the appearance of social forces, and not their real relations. It is this appearance that differs from what is performed in the political realm, and which distorts people's understanding of social processes. Althusser, following the Marxist tradition, shifted the perspective on ideology from a cognitive process to a material force that exists in ideological practices, rituals and institutions, or what he called the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' regulated by the ruling class. [23]

With reference to the critical ideology discussions, we argue that political parties play a key role in the political game, in which opposing parties base their ideologies on their own perspectives and claim to be legitimate. The contestation concerning topics such as war[24], urban policy[25] and citizens' rights[26] becomes an arena for politicians to apply certain ideologies, which are often situated in historical processes. Overall, politics are constructed as a field for ideological display.

According to this, ideology consists of 'de-contestations', which come to a saturation point after contestation among different parties. Both contestation and decontestation are determined by the values and the meanings assigned to them.

> This sets ideologies on a trajectory that is both logical (in that given kinds of de-contestation only certain subsequent moves may follow) and historical (over time the ideology adapts and develops in relation to events). Morphological analysis explores this trajectory.[27]

For our purposes in this paper, while tracking ideologies we bear in mind that political concepts can be amplified with emotions. By establishing the empirical and evidential investigation of ideology in the case of Canal Istanbul, we will elaborate on the analytical categories and the configurations of meaning in political language,as well as emotional aspects that interact in the political sphere. We are well aware that our task is difficult, since the composition of ideologies is complex, and we also live within the same meaning systems. The limitation of our research is thus similar to a linguist

who seeks to understand the internal dynamics, culture and history of their own mother tongue from an insider point of view. Accepting this limitation as an inevitable component of our analysis, we will provide brief information about our data and how we interpret it in the following section.

Methods

To study the two sides of the dispute. we used two sets of data stemming from the Canal Istanbul project. First, we collected data via the project's official website created by the AKP (www.kanalIstanbul.com.tr) and compared it to (Kanal İstanbul | Kamu Bilgilendirme Platformu) prepared by CHP supporters. Moreover, we conducted a total of 20 interviews with supporters and opponents of the project. Our interviewees included engineers consulted about the project, city planners, and environmentalists.

Based on various indices, such as educational and occupational status, level of income, and gender, the interviews started with a general question and then continued with respondents' opinions about the Canal Istanbul project. The interviews lasted approximately 40 min and were recorded, transcribed and later translated into English by the first author. The interviewees were coded as OP (Opponent Participant) or SP (Supportive Participant) and were given numbers regarding the order of the interviews. Three of the Ops and two of the SPs were female. Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) under project number 642768.

Qualitative data analysis was informed by the morphology of Freeden[28], where we considered three major categories, as mentioned in the previous section; *framing the predominance of private interest;, distribution of significance in meaning of the concepts; and recruiting the public into political subjects* to devise new categories and themes. We then interpreted these within a contextual framework. In this process, meaning categories are determined and integrated in different stages of increasing abstraction, so that both commonalities and differences are established, using the constant comparative method. The computer software package NVivo was used to systematically code and analyse the raw data and to develop and integrate the emerging analytical categories and themes. Based on our analysis, we provide a discussion of our findings in the results section.

Results: a morphology of ideology/(ies) in action

Analysis of in-depth interviews shows how, by building their own ideologies, the AKP and the CHP are in conflict in a whole new ideological terrain, namely the Canal Istanbul project dispute. This section is intended to display how both parties construct the dynamics of this dispute. We thus

show how they (the AKP and the CHP) 'express and embody their political thinking and communicate it to others'[29] and how to this end they employ strategies based on three positions: framing the predominance of private interests, distribution of significance in meaning of the concepts, and claiming the 'objective' interest of human beings and the city through the oppositional websites constructed to highlight their arguments. As we will show in this section, our results confirm the argument that ideology is about persuading others to think and imagine in the same way as the persuader.

Framing the predominance of private interests: discourses on the Canal Istanbul project

People may perceive political polemics as natural and intrinsic to the nature of politics. This *natural* understanding of politics leads to an outcome of perceiving politics and ideology as the same; ideologies are conceived as synonymous with the political thinking in a society. The reason for this synonymity is that the ideological product is identifiable in patterns and is produced and consumed by politics.[30] We found the aforementioned synonymity of politics and ideology through the framing of political interests as identifiable patterns in our participants' narratives about Canal Istanbul.

> This project is a purely political issue. It is advancing in domestic politics over a polemic about the Canal Project. (OP3[31])

This synonymity helps to conceive a society that does not engage in such patterned thought and that does not have distinguishable and recurrent ways of thinking. In other words, patterned forms of political strategies serve to conceal discursive formations and political concepts that are intentionally filled with ideas, beliefs and emotions by politicians. The gap between the political realm and the ideological image as its concealer thereby looks natural to people who are subject to this mindset, even if the discourses constructing the mindset are contradictory.

> I don't know what to believe. One says so, the other says otherwise. (SP4)

Participant SP4′s comment clearly shows the contradiction of discourses and how they manage to create alternative facts for people to believe or not to believe about the contestation. Setting the contradictory discursive field as a starting point for our analysis, which revealed identifiable patterns of discourse, we created a typology of the discourses produced by the AKP and the CHP to frame the predominance of their private interests. Table 1 illustrates the details of this typology whereby the AKP's and the CHP's ideologies frame their parties' self-images. In fact, Canal Istanbul's function and the meaning given to citizenship by the two poles of the dispute.

Table 1. Contradicting discourse as identifiable patterns.

	AKP	CHP
Self-image	Self-image as the servant of the country embracing all people	Revealer of the unspoken aspects, underlying the realities of the project
The Canal's function	Canal Istanbul portrayed as a new page in Turkey's development	Canal Istanbul serves the economic and political benefit of the AKP
Definition of the citizen	'Citizen' conceptualized as the recipient of the service	'Citizen' conceptualized as a person misled by the AKP

The AKP and the CHP produce contradicting discourses, yet their patterns are complementary and function to continue the dispute. These patterns are also identifiable in the sense that they not only create the parties' self-image, but also frame an understanding of the frontier. For instance, our findings also revealed that the AKP aims to embrace all people in Turkey while building the Canal Istanbul. On the other hand, the CHP argues that it is in fact to the AKP's economic benefit to build the Canal and that they do not reveal all of the reality behind the project. A summary of the mentioned contradicting discourses is presented in Table 1 below.

The frontier does not need to be defined as a distinct character, but as we see in Table 1, it provides a crude sense of opposition, which the parties can fill with arguments and feelings. Being a servant of the people and promising a better/newer page for Turkey in the case of the AKP gives its supporters a sense of trust and belief in a better future.

> They did as they promised until now. I trust they will do it again. The Canal will be very good for Istanbul (SP7).

As for the CHP, arguing for the economic and political benefits to the AKP and portraying itself as the revealer of the unspoken aspects of the project, is filled with opposing, but complementary feelings of distrust and disbelief.

> Canal Istanbul is a project prepared by AKP for its own economic benefit. I don't think it can be done because there is not enough money for its construction (OP13).

This antagonistic dynamic of framing the predominance of their private interests is best revealed in the words of one of our participants:

> The late Özal[32] has a saying. He says, 'when I'm going to act, I look at what the opposition says. If there are a lot of objections, I will do that project'. So that's politics. If the opposition is against it, know that there is something valuable for yourself in it. (SP7)

SP7 highlighted the importance of the conflict for a politician finding their way among the disputed topics. Here, we can see that such contestation is a necessary component of building an ideological framework for a political

party to set its interests in relation to the reaction coming from the opposition. As we turn back to our typology, we can also trace how the two parties set their self-images and how they conceptualized the *citizen* in relation to the Canal Istanbul project.

> Canal Istanbul is the biggest project in the history of the Turkish Republic. It will give Istanbul the place it deserves, and it is advantageous for every Turkish citizen in the long run. (SP9)

The quotation above is from the perspective of a supporter participant who believes that the Canal project is for everyone's benefit and that the AKP's purpose is to embrace all people in Turkey. As we know that destabilization and fortification, contestation and de-contestation, go hand in hand[33] in ideology practice, we argue that this new attitude frames towards predominance of the AKP's interests.

The AKP's aim to embrace all people as state *citizens* was accompanied by the broader agenda of a 'future vision', which sought to reformulate the self-image as the servant of the country, with the Canal Istanbul project portrayed as a new page in Turkey's development. Erdoğan stated:

> We view Canal Istanbul as a project to save Istanbul's future. We are opening a new page in the history of Turkey's development.[34]

Supporters of the project suggested that they believe in the AKP's ideals and they also indicated the importance of persuading other people by embracing different perspectives.

> I think this project will be a breath of fresh air, but it is also necessary to persuade the public by embracing all the views. Large projects are not adopted unless the public is convinced (SP16).

> This project will be done, but public support needs to be provided. This can be achieved by explaining this to the public at the level of efficiency and necessity. It will be by persuasion (SP4).

In our view, under the guise of embracing all people, a new self-perception of Turkey's servant – a new doxa – has been constructed, which still entails a commitment to the public interest, but understands and articulates this through economic competitiveness and entrepreneurialism. To be effective, ideological framing leads to maintaining their self-image as a 'servant of public interest' in a new formulation.[35]

As for the CHP, the overall attitude sets their position as revealing *the underlying realities* of the project. Opponent participants have argued that, in fact, Canal Istanbul serves the economic and political benefit of the AKP.

> Canal Istanbul is a multifaceted project. In fact, it is a project of distributing the lands that were previously sold. Nobody talks about that. That's rent seeking. (OP18)

> Canal Istanbul is a structure planned to be built in the north of the Istanbul Bosporus. It is suggested that it reduces the shipping traffic in the Bosporus. I think it's a project that should be rejected without even discussing its engineering issues. A rent seeking project, as capital transfer. (OP20)

The CHP highlights that there is an economic aim for the AKP in terms of rent seeking, thereby framing its argument about unspoken aspects of the project, such as the previous 'sold lands to acquire profit over urban rent' (OP1,2,3,12). This argument thus constitutes a discourse to persuade people that there is more to the Canal project than the AKP shows the public. To validate their point, the opponents highlighted the process of the project, arguing that the preparation process put in action after the official idea of the Canal construction project jeopardized people's democratic right to follow and understand the pros and cons of the project.

> How can I put it … first it comes up with the idea. Then, how do I formulate it? After that, the studies begin. Citizens are not asked; they are brought to a *fait accompli*. To show his power, they (the AKP) polemicize with the opposition and put forward unnecessary mega projects. (OP20)

The meaning given to the concept of citizen in the quotation above is as a pseudo partner in the Canal dispute. However, we know that neither in the AKP's formulation, nor in the CHP's, are citizens ever constructed as a real party to the dispute, but rather are constituted as the audience (for the CHP) and recipient of the service (for the AKP). This alignment with other key signifiers such as 'development', 'future benefit' and 'unspoken realties' justifies and facilitates ideologically motivated discourses on both sides of the dispute.[36]

> With the thought that the propaganda made over the cost of living and the decrease in the purchasing power of the citizens will work, they are opposing Canal Istanbul with the claim that 'you are investing the nation's money in a project that will provide an income for three or five people. (SP14)

Without providing an actual 'acting space'[37] for the public, the Canal Istanbul case shows how the framing of private interests employs transformation of self-identities of the contestation. Both parties seek to approach an advantageous position and 'the spatial expression of the state'[38] can become a spatial conflict over discursive power. To maintain power, it is also crucial to control the distribution of meaning within a given ideological discourse, and to employ emotions. In the next section, we will focus on meaning distribution strategies.

Distribution of significance in meaning of the concepts

Tracing how the AKP and the CHP build their ideologies, we also aimed to understand how power and knowledge are inscribed in the meaning systems.

We cannot understand the meaning and significance of ideologies while tracing them from how they are used in arguments, but we can grasp inherent linguistic properties and internal logic, and also the discursive formations within which they occur.[39]

Our analysis reveals that the Canal Istanbul Project builds on the narrative of a successful developer, the trustworthy, reliable and sovereign Erdoğan himself. The narrative also highlights a neo-Ottoman stance, implying that Erdoğan is the successor of Fatih the Conqueror, perhaps indicating the new invasion of Istanbul via the Canal (as seen above in Figure 1). With these alignments, the AKP also uses the amplifying aspect of emotions in creating its narrative. This narrative is about the vision of a leader who has a dream about the city in which he grew up. By using the elements of narrative building[40] and expressing the semantic power of visual and performative rhetorical elements[41] in their declarations, the AKP defines the Canal project while also building a narrative for its own image. This is presented in Table 2, which shows how the AKP and the CHP distribute significance of meaning to concepts they find relevant to the Canal project through the narrative they build, the narrative's theme and the main figure they personalize in the messages. In addition, both parties use a top-down fashioned narrative to explain their stance towards the project and they personalize the messages based on two figures: Erdoğan as the leader of the AKP, and Ekrem Imamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul from the CHP, as the main characters of the dispute.

The narrative concerning the Canal project reflects the AKP's messages in a very direct and top-down fashion. Erdoğan addresses people in a straightforward way, saying that the Canal project will be 'one of the exemplary Canals in the world'[42] and will be of economic benefit to Turkey. He also gives 'his word'[43] that the Canal will be completed in six years (in 2027). This example creates credibility by appealing to the character of the speaker: his perceived trustworthiness, expertise, charisma and, more generally, authority.[44]

> This is a project that the president calls 'my dream'. (SP15)

By personalizing the messages, Erdoğan maintains his relationship with the idea of the Canal and makes a personal claim for the project. He mainly uses public openings and the AKP group meetings to deliver the messages. His

Table 2. Distribution of significance in meaning of the concepts.

	AKP	CHP
The direction of the narrative	Canal Istanbul narrative in a top-down fashion	Canal Istanbul narrative in a top-down fashion
Theme of the narrative	Narrative based on a successful sovereign	Narrative based on corruption in state affairs
Main figure	Personalizing messages using Erdoğan	Personalizing messages using Imamoğlu

narrative also implies the strength of his economic ties to construct such a big project by making reference to other mega projects that were realized. By using personalized leadership and mentioning previous experiences, Erdoğan thereby ensures that the narrative is alive.

> They do not have the ability and experience to carry out big projects, and they also lack the vision of serving the country, which is necessary to imagine 'crazy projects' like Canal Istanbul. (SP14)

The main figure associated with opposing the Canal project is the Mayor of Istanbul, who represents the CHP. The CHP uses the same strategy of personalizing the issue by invoking the Mayor of Istanbul, Imamoğlu.

> I see it as Imamoğlu 's positioning of himself as the future president. He has been working on Canal Istanbul since he came to power. (OP 9)

Here, the two sides of personalized contradiction are significant, since Erdoğan was the Mayor of Istanbul in 1994–1998, and he dates his idea of the Canal project back to his days as Mayor. Now, Imamoğlu is the figure who is actively working against the idea of Canal Istanbul, organizing workshops and funding publications to reveal the unspoken aspects of the project. Unspoken aspects are usually associated with the narrative of corruption. In Turkey's context, corruption usually refers to taking advantage for an economic end. The CHP thereby appeals to the idea that the AKP and its allies will take advantage of the Canal project by relying on examples from state affairs.

> For a few years, tenders and zoning arrangements have been planned for this project. We don't know who bought what, who went to whom. We cannot follow up because the tenders are not open to the public. (OP17)

The CHP constructs its ideological narrative based on a social context that is embedded in the already existing argument concerning corruption in state affairs[45] that the AKP is showing favoritism towards its allies.

> If you have bad intentions, you will get a rent. Look, the Ministry of Transport is going to tender for the road, it is being launched for the Sazlidere Dam. In other words, it is said that it is a road tender, but it is about Canal Istanbul. (OP 20)

Here, we can see that in the process of ideological formation, the meaning of concepts is temporarily stabilized, and the structure of discourses is attached to key signifiers[46], in this case corruption, as it has a history between the AKP and the CHP.[47] Deploying logical reasoning in relation to experience of corruption is crucial for constructing a narrative so that it is received by a given audience as natural.[48]

This takes us to the heart of Freeden's assumption that concrete ideologies are systems of ideas, and that they are special configurations of political

concepts from a pool of unlimited possible combinations.[49] As mentioned in the theoretical section, subscribing to one of the contrasting meaning systems, such as socialism and fascism, may not 'necessarily rule out the endorsement of the idea system of the other.'[50] In other words, different ideologies would feed from one another.

We think this formulation fits the Canal Istanbul case, where the two conflicting sides of the dispute, with all their historical and social situatedness in the Turkish context, are seeking to advance their course of action towards one another. To achieve their aims, both parties use a specific configuration/distribution of meaning. For instance, supporters of the project believe that the opposition has neither the experience nor the vision to think of such a big project as the Canal. This shows that the narrative for the Canal involving multiple elements, such as the reference to the main opposition party as being inadequate, was generally maintained.

> Canal Istanbul can turn into an advantage for the government as it will accelerate economic growth in the process leading up to the elections. This is the main motivation for their opposition. (SP 15)

Here, we can see that the rhetorical appeal for competition with the opposition is not only ideologically motivated but is also built as a causal relationship. SP15 clearly puts forward that within the competition, the opponents are motivated to cut down the possible economic benefit because it is achieved by the AKP. We argue that constructing causal relationships between the possible economic benefit and the AKP's possible empowerment by it, the construction of the Canal and the increasing risk of an earthquake in Istanbul, and the possible environmental and historical damage to Istanbul, are such oppositional practices of the CHP in response to the narratives that the AKP constructs. These acts thus cannot create an autonomous discursive existence; they rather produce and reproduce the contestation loop between the AKP and the CHP.

According to Finlayson, the use of cause and effect, cost and benefits, and means and ends relationships in ideological narratives is not to prove, but rather to persuade.[51] As for the Canal, the main persuasion competition is based on disputes regarding environmental sustainability and the urban transformation of Istanbul. In the next section, we will examine how the two sides of the dispute claim to represent the objective interests of Istanbul, in order to persuade the general public from an evidence-based perspective.

The websites in dispute: recruiting the public into political subjects

We extended our aim to understand ideologies by examining a third dimension and exploring how ideologies justify specific ideas (i.e. the Canal project

is necessary for Turkey's future versus that it will be disastrous for the environment), beliefs (the Canal project will end the Bosporus traffic versus it will cause an earthquake, and values as natural), and strategies of legitimation. The dispute concerning the Canal Istanbul project is visible from the websites of the two poles of the debate. As mentioned before, both sides created websites from their own perspective to share the expert reports that amplify the possible benefits/problems that the Canal project is claimed to bring.

The official website of the Ministry[52] contains sections addressing disputable issues. The information on the website reflects the official state perspective. Since it is also backed up by the political declarations of Erdoğan and the AKP officials, the narrative concerning the Canal seeks not only to secure its place through construction, but also to develop popular support and win legitimacy to handle any opposition.[53] The opposition website[54] was created by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, run by the CHP. Table 3 depicts the structure of the websites, where the two parties apply a logical/rational language and show the details of means-ends, cost–benefit and cause–effect relationships to present their perspectives.

We found two cases of legitimization. One is the AKP's legitimization of the Canal's construction, and the other is the CHP's legitimization of the dangers and reasons not to build the Canal. The authorities, such as experts, appointed commissions and their reviews and reports were drawn on and presented on each website. In doing so, and by using the authority of expertise, both sides are seeking effective persuasion.

The function of ideology in framing cases and providing a sense of the 'natural' can be best seen in the dispute, since both parties provide 'scientific' reports of their own, claiming that they are 'objective' and aspire to be for the benefit of Istanbul. We focused particularly on the crucial role of rhetorical appeals in identifying and naming the subjects of politics and the

Table 3. Structure of the websites.

AKP's Official Canal Istanbul website	CHP's Website for Public Acknowledgement of Canal Istanbul
Why Canal Istanbul?	How did we get here today?
'Bosporus will breathe, Turkey will win'	What is the 'Reality of the Project'
Preparation Process	Effects of the Project
I want to know everything!	on risk of a possible earthquake
Aim of the project	on marine regulations
Route of the project	on urban planning
Sections and dimensions of the Canal	on cultural and natural sources
Ship collision and stranding scenarios	on traffic and transportation
	Questions I have in mind
	Public
	Opinion
	Publications

appropriation of imaginative power, and thereby in inventing common sense and public opinion.[55] To do this, it is vital to know the situated character of the audience and 'recruit … the individuals into political subject.'[56] A highly visible example of such identity fabrication[57] is obvious from the Canal Istanbul dispute between the AKP and the CHP, through which they both claim the 'objective' interest of human beings and the city.

The official website of the Canal Istanbul project (AKP) starts with this opening quote: '*Bosporus will breathe, Turkey will win*'. In this case, breathing refers to the reduction of maritime traffic and how Istanbul will benefit environmentally from the project. The messages embedded on the website reflect this motto, and the website provides three sections explaining the main aspects of the project. These sections mainly address pro-Canal arguments, the reasons for building it, and the project's preparation process. The last section is designed to provide answers to the opposing views on the project. In general, the website is prepared to convince the audience of how Istanbul would benefit from the construction of the Canal. The arguments embedded on the website are supported by news, feasibility reports, and the results of scientific collaborations.

On the other hand, the opponents' website uses the same strategy of appealing to reports from scientific experts on the issue. The website uses infographics of the chronology of the project, addressing '*How did we get here today*?'. Another section is called the '*Realities of the Project*', mainly highlighting expert ideas about the project's adverse effects on Istanbul city and its climate, on the risk of earthquakes and on environmental sustainability.

An interesting point here is that the two sides of the dispute show their position by addressing scientific research and reports. The websites include route evaluation studies, preliminary studies and detailed lab studies (Wind and Wave Climate, Current, Sediment and Water Quality, Navigation, Earthquake, Tsunami, Traffic, etc.). The opposition's main argument is that all the AKP reports followed Erdoğan's announcement declaring that the project had started. Even though they stated that they had prepared the project in the light of the data obtained from the studies mentioned, the reports came later than Erdoğan's announcement of the project. As oneparticipant puts it:

> Big construction projects are first debated for years, and then the decisions are made As for the Canal, the decision-making process was the other way \around. (OP1)

To complement and reinforce the rhetorical appeals, scientific reports are used in the case of both the AKP and the CHP. By carrying the dispute into an expert arena, they have also made experts (scientists, engineers, city planners) into allies in line to recruit more people to support their perspective.

'*I want to know everything*' and '*Questions I have in mind*'[58] are other mottos used on the project's webpages. On both sites, these sections are devoted to answering questions related to the project, and its possible benefits and risks. The language of the motto is the first-person singular, which refers to a 'participatory understanding'. Both websites are also created as a space to provide answers to environmental issues that the project will probably cause. These issues have been central to various debates between the AKP and the CHP.

On both websites, the information is detailed, and is tailored to describe the project's advantages/disadvantages in the opinion of the related party. The title of '*Allegations and facts*' on the AKP website is mirrored by the '*Realities of the project*' on the opponent's website. These website headings are important because these are the very assertions made by the opponents of the Canal Istanbul project, and the website has, in a way, been designed to 'convince' or 'calm' such challenging views in the case of the AKP and 'to make people realize the facts' in the case of the CHP.

Conclusion

In summer 2022, as we were conducting the interviews for this study, we witnessed how an urban development project was used as political material by both sides of the dispute surrounding it. Although there was a considerable amount of technical debate, participants spoke of these technicalities as if they were political strategies to win the political battle. The significant aspect is that this dynamic was natural to their understanding. In fact, they considered the realm of politics to be the same as the realm of ideology. Taking this synonymity as a starting point, in this study we relied on ideologies' socially and historically situated contested ideas, as dynamic thinking frameworks which in fact provide a natural pattern of political reality. On contributing to the debate about ideology at the start of this article, we argue that ideological boundaries are sharper and more visible when we seek to trace them from an empirical perspective. To do this, we deployed Freeden's[59] paradigm of morphology to understand the ideology formation with respect to Turkish politics and the case of the Canal Istanbul project.

We sought to show that various rhetorical combinations appeal to *an empirical analysis of ideology at work,* while examining the contestation between the AKP and the CHP concerning the project. These rhetorical combinations function to, firstly, frame the predominance of private interests; secondly, create narratives by using distribution of significance in meaning of the concepts; and finally, they are used to claim the 'objective' interest of human beings and the city through the oppositional websites constructed by the two parties to highlight their arguments. Our results confirm the argument that ideology is about persuading others to think and imagine

in the same way as the persuader. We can argue that the AKP and the CHP produce contradicting discourses, yet their patterns are complementary and serve to continue the dispute. In addition, both parties use a top-down fashioned narrative to explain their stance towards the project and they personalize the messages using two figures: President Erdoğan and Mayor Ekrem Imamoğlu.

The narrative created for Canal Istanbul from the AKP's perspective is based on an image of a successful developer, the trustworthy, reliable and sovereign leader, President Erdoğan. With these alignments, the AKP also uses the amplifying aspect of emotions in creating its narrative. The narrative also highlights a neo-Ottoman stance, implying that Erdoğan is the successor of Fatih the Conqueror, perhaps indicating the new invasion of Istanbul via the Canal. As for the CHP, the Canal Istanbul is narrated as a project of which the only benefit is to the AKP. This narrative thus appeals to feelings of distrust and disbelief concerning the AKP. Finally, we found that the two poles of the dispute aim to recruit more people as political supporters by using scientific reports of their own, while claiming that they are 'objective' and aspire to be for the benefit of Istanbul.

In the light of our findings, we argue that the function of ideology in framing cases and providing a sense of the 'natural' can be seen in the Canal Istanbul dispute between the AKP and the CHP. We conclude that both parties aim to appropriate rhetorical power amplified with emotions and to invent common sense and public opinion by using the tools of ideologically distorted perception.

Notes

1. Kennedy, "Ideology."
2. Freeden, "Interpretative Realism"; Laclau, "The Death and Resurrection"; and Zizek, "Between," 51.
3. Freeden, "Fundaments and Foundations."
4. Pamuk, "Globalization, Industrialization."
5. Aktas, "The Rise and Fall."
6. Göl, The Identity," 800.
7. Aydin-Düzgit and Balta, "When Elites Polarize,"155.
8. Gidengil, and Karakoç., "Which Matters More," 327.
9. Ayata, "Patronage," 44.
10. Atikcan and Öge, "Referendum Campaigns," 455.
11. Öniş, "Monopolizing the Center," 27.
12. Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net*, 22.
13. Esen and Gümüşçü, "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism," 320.
14. Taşkın, "The 2019 Provincial Elections, 165.
15. However, in 2023 Imamoğlu was not nominated for the presidency. Instead, the leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, ran (unsuccessfully) in the 2023 presidential election as the opponent of Erdoğan.

16. Gürpınar, "Between," 512.
17. Freeden, "Fundaments and Foundations," 112.
18. Kanal İstanbul Çalıştayı | Şehir Planlama Müdürlüğü (ibb.istanbul) Accessed on 29.11.22.
19. Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality*, 750.
20. Loewenstein, "Political Systems," 700.
21. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems," 35.
22. Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 145.
23. Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," 114.
24. Carlton, "War and Ideology," 122.
25. Gunder, "Planning as the Ideology," 299.
26. Hansen-Thomas, "Language Ideology," 255.
27. Freeden, "Ideologies as Communal Resources," 79.
28. Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis," 120.
29. Finlayson, "Rhetoric," 758.
30. Valdeon, "Political and Sexist Bias," 240.
31. Opponent participant #3.
32. Candar, "Turgut Özal".
33. Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis," 128.
34. https://www.dredgingtoday.com/2021/06/28/Canal-Istanbul-project-begins/ Accessed on 13.07.2021
35. Freeden, "Ideologies as Communal Resources," 412.
36. Grange, "In Search," 2678.
37. Grange, "In Search," 2683.
38. Jensen et al., "Has Social Sustainability Left," 96.
39. Davoudi, "Discursive Institutionalism," and Schmidt, "Taking Ideas," 14.
40. Yilmaz and Albayrak, "Instrumentalization," 842.
41. Laclau, "The Death and Resurrection," 210.
42. Turkey's Erdogan takes first step in 'crazy' canal project in Istanbul | Al Arabiya English Accessed on 30.11.2022
43. In Turkey, Erdogan's Proposed Istanbul Canal Project Is Controversial – and It Could Shape the Next Presidential Race (foreignpolicy.com) Accessed on 30.11.2022
44. Davoudi et al, "Reinventing," 25.
45. Gürakar, *Politics of Favouritism*, 7.
46. Norval, "The Things," 315.
47. Main opposition CHP will continue digging out ruling AKP's corruption: Kılıçdaroğlu – Türkiye News (hurriyetdailynews.com) Accessed on 19.11.2022.
48. Davoudi et al, "Reinventing," k29.
49. Freeden, *Ideology*, 24.
50. Freeden, "The morphological Analysis," 24.
51. Freeden, "Interpretative Realism," 5.
52. Boğaz nefes alacak, Türkiye kazanacak | Kanal İstanbul (kanalistanbul.gov.tr) Accessed on 19.11.2022.
53. Adaman and Akbulut, "Erdoğan's Three-pillared," 281.
54. Ana Sayfa | Kanal İstanbul | Kamu Bilgilendirme Platformu Accessed on 19.11.2022.
55. Finlayson, "Rhetoric," 758.
56. Yack, "Rhetoric," 423

57. Freeden, "Ideologies as Communal Resources," 43.
58. Please see Table 3.
59. Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis," 126.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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