

Populism and Femicide in Turkey

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On 21 July 2020, 27-year old university student Pinar Gültekin was murdered by her ex-boyfriend, becoming another victim of Turkey's wave of femicides. Gültekin was declared missing for six days before she was found dead, strangled to death for refusing to reconcile with her former partner.

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The news of Gültekin's murder sparked protests across the country, with [women taking to the streets](#) in more than ten cities. The largest demonstrations [took place](#) across various neighbourhoods of Istanbul, gathering thousands of people. Smaller-scale protests also took place in less-populous Turkish cities including İzmir, Edirne, Mersin and Malatya.



Pinar Gültekin, a 27-year-old student murdered by her ex-partner in July, whose death began the #ChallengeAccepted movement on Instagram. Source : Ahval/Facebook

On more than one occasion, women protesting gender-based violence were met with violence themselves. In İzmir, police officers brutally intervened in the protest and several women were [beaten](#). Videos from the event captured scenes of women being manhandled and dragged away by police officers. 12 were taken into custody, although they were later [released](#).

Women in Turkey have also taken to social media to protest femicides and express support for the [Istanbul Convention](#) - an international treaty on preventing violence against women - from which the Turkish government has expressed its intention to withdraw. The social media movement has involved women sharing photos of themselves in black and white on Instagram or Twitter under the hashtags '#ChallengeAccepted' and '#IstanbulSozlesmesiYasatir' (the Istanbul Convention Keeps Women Alive). Although it first started to trend in Turkey after Gültekin's murder, this movement has now spread outside the country. Millions of women have participated in this [social media movement](#) - including high-profile celebrities such as Jessica Biel and Christina Aguilera.

Since the news of the murder of Gültekin, 11 women - Bahar Özcan, Seher Fak, Mücella Demir, Süheyla Yılmaz, Derya Aslan, Emine Yanıkoğlu, Döndü and Beyza Kandur, Gönül Gökçe, Sümmeye Ateş, Şule Bilgin and an unnamed 4-year-old girl - have met a similar fate. These tragic murders are, unfortunately, in no way isolated incidents. They form part of a larger pattern that has been emerging in Turkey under the country's increasingly authoritarian Justice and Development Party

(AKP) government.

Populism Meets Anti-Gender Discourse

Under the AKP, the number of women killed by men has increased rapidly. Since 2010, more than 3,000 women have been murdered as a result of male violence, with the figure more than doubling over the years. The vast majority of these women were killed for making decisions about their own lives - breaking up with a partner or rejecting men's advances.



The increasing rate of femicide in Turkey. Source : We Will Stop Femicide Platform

Turkey's recent controversy around the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention can be interpreted as a manifestation of the broader anti-gender discourse of many right-wing populist parties. Similarly, Poland's conservative Law and Justice Party government has also been [attacking](#) the Convention, framing it as a menace to the family structure - with some of its officials arguing that it promotes 'gay ideology.' The debate around Turkey's possible withdrawal began after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in typical populist fashion, [stated](#) that 'if the people want us to leave it, we'll leave it.' The arguments for leaving the Convention have been similar to those in Poland. In both cases they are built upon decades-old anti-feminist discourses, with advocates of withdrawal [claiming](#) that it 'empowers LGBT+ groups' and 'destroys families.'

As part of the AKP's polarising strategies against political opposition, the party's officials have vocally [criticised](#) forms of womanhood that do not fit into the roles envisaged by their conservative understanding of the family structure. With increasing emphasis on women's traditional roles, in 2011 the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs was [rebranded](#) to remove reference to women, becoming the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. In the past, AKP officials and Erdoğan himself have repeatedly made discriminatory [statements](#) against women. For instance, the president has been quoted saying that 'women are not equal to men' and called for women to have 'at least three children.'

The Way Forward

The government's attempt to turn the Istanbul Convention into a wedge issue has backfired. There is

no clear segment of society against it, and according to an [opinion poll](#) by Turkey Report only 8.8 percent of the population want to withdraw, and 51.7 percent are not even aware of its contents.

While the number of femicides has steadily increased, the Turkish government has failed to implement measures to protect women or introduce any reforms to tackle gender inequality. According to the Judicial Records statistics in 2019, most of the complaints made by women of sexual and physical violence do not result in a prosecution. This year, Turkey [ranked](#) 130th out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Index*. Women's rights activists are outraged by the deteriorating situation that is worsened by the proposal to withdraw from the treaty, with many [arguing](#) that it was never properly implemented in the first place.

Mobilised by outrage and solidarity, the women's movement has made its presence felt in the mainstream of Turkish society, through both vocal social media campaigns and a tangible presence in the streets through mass protests. Gülseren Onanç - who served as the vice president of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the founder of the [Equality, Justice and Women Platform](#) - has told the authors that she is administrating a new project called 'the Voice of Women,' which aims to empower women on social media. She, like many feminist activists in Turkey, believes that effective use of social media is crucial to create awareness of, and action on, women's rights and equality demands.

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P.-S.

- lse.ac.uk. August 17th, 2020 : <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/17/populism-and-femicide-in-turkey/>

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