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# Transnationalization of Opposition Strategy under Competitive Authoritarianism: Evidence from Turkey and Hungary

Pelin Ayan Musil<sup>1</sup>  and Şebnem Yardımcı-Geyikçi<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>School of International Relations and Diplomacy, Anglo-American University, Prague, Czech Republic and <sup>2</sup>Institute of Science and Ethics, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany

**Corresponding author.** Pelin Ayan Musil; Email: [peлин.ayan@aauni.edu](mailto:peлин.ayan@aauni.edu)

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## Abstract

Despite a growing body of literature on the advancement of autocratic tactics and toolkits in competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs), we lack sufficient knowledge on the strategies that the opposition builds against populist-authoritarian governments. Using two top autocratizing cases – Turkey and Hungary – this article singles out ‘transnationalization’ as one such novel strategy. ‘Transnationalization’ is defined as a strategy through which opposition-led subnational executives transform local and global boundaries by consciously forming a link with the liberal-democratic world in order to expand their space for manoeuvre. Conducting a qualitative content analysis of the Istanbul and Budapest mayors’ international Twitter accounts and using evidence from elite interviews with officials from Istanbul and Budapest municipalities, we demonstrate the material, symbolic and political means of this strategy and the rationalist and normative motivations behind it. By discussing the what, how and why of a transnationalization strategy, we fill an important gap in the scholarship regarding opposition strategies in CARs.

**Keywords:** transnationalization; opposition strategies; competitive authoritarianism; international linkage; Turkey; Hungary

Democracy is experiencing its deepest crisis across the world. By 2021, 33 countries, constituting 36% of the world population, had autocratized in the hands of anti-pluralist governments (Boese et al. 2022). Such governments lack commitment to democratic procedures, threaten political opponents, disrespect minority rights and tend to accept political violence (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). When they try to boost their grip on power via distorting national politics, violent conflicts often emerge.

Amidst this global wave of autocratization and what some scholars call the crisis of the liberal international order (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021), there are still pockets of resistance and democratic survival with local opposition gains in some countries. Analysing how these local forces strategize when central authority is controlled by an anti-pluralist incumbent party can give valuable hints about ways of resisting the

trend of autocratization. We conduct this analysis for two competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs), Hungary and Turkey. In CARs, even though elections are regularly held and are generally competitive, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate election results to such an extent that the regime fails to meet the minimum standards of democracy (Levitsky and Way 2002). Despite a growing literature on the advancement of new autocratic tactics and toolkits, we lack sufficient knowledge on the novel strategies the opposition builds to resist the populist-authoritarian governments on such an uneven playing field.

Exploring two cases that experienced subnational democratic progress in CARs (Istanbul and Budapest municipalities), our goal is to single out one such novel strategy. We show that, through the subnational executive offices it controls, the opposition uses transnationalization as a strategy in its political struggle against the populist-authoritarian government. By ‘transnationalization’, we mean the ways in which the opposition-led subnational executive offices transform and reinvent the global and local boundaries through consciously building a link with like-minded global institutions and actors. We argue that the transnationalization strategy emerges out of the rationalist and normative incentives of the opposition-led subnational executive offices. In rationalist terms, they transnationalize in order to generate their own resources and govern against an oppressive populist central government that strives to deprive them of their assets and governing tools. In normative terms, they aim to preserve the long-suffering liberal norms of the country under a populist government. Because of these normative incentives, the populist government’s demonization of the ‘internationalist liberals’ or ‘globalists’ does not deter the opposition from establishing links with liberal international actors. We demonstrate how and why the transnationalization strategy unfolds, by triangulating evidence from the international Twitter accounts of the Istanbul and Budapest mayors, with interviews conducted with officials in each municipality, and examining web archives of media outlets.

In the following, we first provide the current state of knowledge on the opportunities that controlling a subnational executive provides for the opposition in CARs and then present our theoretical contribution via introducing transnationalization as a key opposition strategy. Second, we provide the justifications for our case selection, Hungary and Turkey. Third, we introduce our data and methods. Fourth, we empirically demonstrate how and why the opposition-led subnational executives transnationalize in our selected cases. We then end our discussion with the implications of our research for future studies.

### **Transnationalization as an opposition strategy: what, why and how?**

Existing studies have shown that controlling a subnational executive office provides critical resources for the opposition in CARs in two ways. First, an opposition victory in subnational elections can make the public accustomed to the possibility of alternation of power (Carothers 2018). Second, having control over the subnational executive office – especially in capital cities – helps the opposition to use this office as a ‘springboard’ for increasing its visibility to the voters (Lucardi 2016). An important channel that turns subnational offices into a ‘springboard’ is their potential to show voters the opposition’s ‘effective service delivery’ and ‘to dispel fears that it is unsuited to govern’ (Levitsky and Way 2010). Governing well locally transforms the opposition

forces into a viable alternative to the incumbent party and helps the opposition parties to expand their support base (Farole 2021). It is an opportunity for the opposition parties not only to gain experience in government but also to maintain access to resources that can increase their electoral support in the future.

However, access to resources and governing may be difficult for opposition-led subnational executives when they are faced with repression (i.e. authoritarianism leading to squeezed political space). In order to facilitate the continuity of the regime, we know that autocrats employ all possible means of repression, such as restricting or violating political and civil liberties (Davenport and Armstrong II 2004; Escribà-Folch 2013). Since the independent courts and the media are either weak or absent in these regimes, the incumbents use state resources and coercion to ensure their survival (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006). The incumbents often use disinformation or fake news to manipulate public opinion to attack the opposition officials and embrace technology to surveil them (Boese et al. 2022; Diamond 2019; Morgenbesser 2020). Some choose to 'undo' the opposition's electoral victories by replacing elected politicians with state-appointed trustees (Tepe and Alemdaroğlu 2021).

In such a repressive context, the opposition adopts several strategies to survive, such as broadcasting through social media platforms, fighting against disinformation or introducing new and innovative social policies to respond to the disgruntled citizens who are most open to populist messages (McCoy and Somer 2021; Tomini et al. 2023). Among these efforts to survive in such authoritarian contexts, we think one strategy is particularly worth exploring. This is what we call a 'transnationalization strategy'. Transnationalization refers to the opposition's conscious formation of links with global actors and liberal international institutions through a subnational executive office. While in the extant literature transnationalization refers to 'the regular interactions between state and non-state actors across national boundaries aimed at shaping political and social outcomes at home, abroad, and in an emerging global sphere of governance' (Orenstein and Schmitz 2006: 485), we define the opposition's transnationalization strategy as their conscious effort to cross national boundaries and extend their space for manoeuvre through linking with international and global actors.

The contention is that subnational opposition leaders consciously seek to expand their international linkage by highlighting issues related to universal and liberal norms, establishing relations with international actors/global networks and increasing their agency over the foreign policy agendas of their country. In other words, taking advantage of their local control in a strategic city, the opposition transnationalizes its power struggle against a central government that continues to distort national politics and harass the opposition actors.

Yet, using transnationalization as an opposition strategy comes with certain risks. Anti-Western populism, which rejects the political and cultural values of Western liberal democracy, has been one of the leading political narratives adopted by populist authoritarian governments (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Using anti-Western rhetoric, these governments accuse the opposition forces of being part of a Western-led alliance that undermines national identity and sovereignty and justifies their crack-down on opposition parties and activists (Engler et al. 2019). The question is, despite these potential risks, why do the opposition-led subnational executive offices still pursue transnationalization as a strategy? Why do they seek to generate their resources through transnationalization but not through, for instance, opting to work with a

populist-authoritarian government? We contend that transnationalization occurs as a result not only of rationalist motivations but also of normative concerns. Rationally, opposition forces seek to retain their own material, symbolic and political resources and serve their local constituencies. Normatively, they legitimize their strategies and provide a deeper meaning for their actions. As a result of the past internalization of the norms to Western and global multilateral institutions, one should not expect an entire erosion of liberal norms in an autocratizing regime ruled by populist-authoritarian governments. There is always an element of continuity that endures throughout all the democratic up- and downswings of recent decades and, despite a trend of autocratization, a deeply internalized appreciation of democracy's liberal-egalitarian inspiration can still sustain (Welzel 2021). Therefore, the opposition-led subnational executive offices employ a transnationalization strategy out of both rationalist calculations such as attaining resources from independent channels and normative motives such as sustaining the liberal values in the country.

With regard to *how* transnationalization occurs, we argue that this strategy unfolds through material, political and symbolic means. Materially, the opposition-controlled subnational executives engage in global networks and build partnerships and alternative funding channels from international resources. Politically, these actors try to reframe the foreign policy agenda of their country along with an emphasis on democratic values. Their commitment to democratic norms and increasing agency in international platforms, in turn, symbolically gives them a visibility among international circles.

Figure 1 summarizes our argument and defines the transnationalization strategy of the opposition-led subnational executive offices, outlining the motives, means

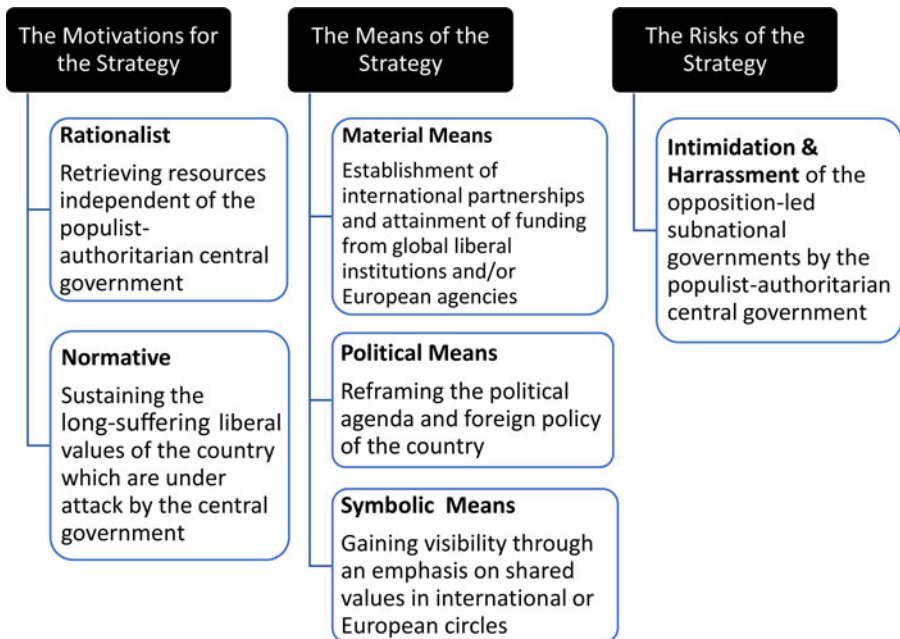


Figure 1. Transnationalization Strategy of the Opposition-Led Subnational Executive Offices

and risks. In the next sections, we demonstrate *how* and *why* a transnationalization strategy unfolds by applying this theoretical framework to two cases of subnational opposition control in CARs: Budapest and Istanbul.

### Case selection: Hungary and Turkey

According to the V-Dem 2022 report, Turkey and Hungary are among the top 10 autocratizing states in which anti-pluralist incumbents drive autocratization (Boese et al. 2022). Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán are both known to be populist-authoritarian leaders who empower their autocratic agendas through ‘revolutionary’ and ‘ideological’ levels of polarization that help them maintain their power in successive electoral victories (Somer 2019; Vegetti 2019). Even though both countries have had strong links with the European Union (EU), one at the internal and the other at the external periphery of the EU, both of them later adopted strikingly illiberal practices and swiftly de-Europeanized (Onis and Kutlay 2019). Both the Orbán and Erdoğan governments have taken positions criticizing the EU from a value-based perspective and confronting EU institutions. In both countries, the ministries of foreign affairs went through strategic restructuring through which the Western-oriented diplomats and foreign policy experts have been sidelined (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019; Varga and Buzogány 2021). The governments engaged in greater bilateral cooperation with authoritarian powers such as Russia and China to maximize their autonomy vis-à-vis their relations with the EU.

In both countries, electoral politics still remained competitive despite the growing autocratic practices of the incumbents (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Esen and Gümüşçü 2019). In the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, until the final weeks of the electoral campaign, an opposition victory still looked plausible even though Orbán’s chances increased in the later stages of the elections (Scheppele 2022). In Turkey, at the time of writing this article, the polls suggest a tight race between Erdoğan’s ruling alliance and the opposition bloc in the presidential elections (CBS News 2023).

Furthermore, the most strategic subnational offices, the Istanbul and Budapest municipalities, have been controlled by the opposition for similar periods of time. In June 2019, young and assertive opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu won a rerun of Istanbul’s mayoral race, while the liberal challenger Gergely Karácsony became the mayor of Budapest, defeating the Fidesz-backed incumbent in October 2019. Both cities had been traditional venues for protest against the central governments, and had earlier triggered nationwide resistance movements – the Gezi resistance (2013) in Turkey and ‘one million people for freedom of press’ (2011) in Hungary. By the time the opposition gained control of the two cities in 2019, the Fidesz and AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments had been engaged with massive urban transformation projects for each city, entailing a neo-authoritarian vision of nationhood to reinvigorate their power and weaken the protesting voices (Akçali and Korkut 2015). The loss of control over these cities, hence, came as a major blow to their hegemony-building projects. Running as opposition mayoral candidates under similarly authoritarian conditions,

İmamoğlu and Karácsony showed signs of solidarity with one another during the local elections (Climate Home News 2019).

While the extant literature has already noted the rising similarities between the Orbán and Erdoğan regimes (Hisarlıoğlu et al. 2022; Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Onis and Kutlay 2019), the opposition's control of strategic subnational executive offices provides another prospect for comparing and drawing generalizable lessons from the two contexts. The local actors that we examine in our study are the two mayors, each of whom is among the leading figures of opposition in their respective countries. One can draw parallels between what we consider to be their transnationalization strategy and the strategy of local governments in other autocratizing contexts such as the state governments in India, departments of Bolivia, or the municipalities in Serbia or Poland.

## Data and methods

In our study, the empirical evidence showing *why* and *how* the Istanbul and Budapest mayors transnationalize is based on triangulating online elite interviews with Twitter data as well as media resources. The seven interviews – four from Budapest (R1, R2, R3, R4) and three from Istanbul (R5, R6, R7) – were conducted with the officials responsible for coordinating the foreign affairs of the Istanbul and Budapest mayors and their municipalities (see Appendix I in the Supplementary Material for the list of interviews). We carried out interviews with these officials between October and December 2022. Within these interviews, we asked our respondents in what direction the opposition mayor had changed the foreign policy strategy of the municipality since his election; why he did so; and whether his relationship to the central government played a role in this change. In order to find details signalling the central government's repression of opposition-led municipalities, we complemented the interview data with the web archives of the opposition media outlets.

In showing *how* the mayors use transnationalization as an opposition strategy, we relied on data collected from the international Twitter accounts of the two mayors. Twitter is a microblogging space where politicians often release their activities for marketing purposes (Bode and Dalrymple 2016). Even though Twitter does not cover the full or actual spectrum of the politicians' activities, it can reflect a significant portion of it. In order to understand to what extent the international Twitter accounts of the Budapest and Istanbul mayors covered their actual international activities and interactions with foreign actors and institutions, we asked our interviewees (the top officials responsible for the foreign affairs of the Istanbul and Budapest municipalities) for their perspectives on these accounts. The responses showed that the mayors use these accounts mainly to present their messages and activities to international media outlets and to be visible by international actors. Therefore, these accounts do not particularly show all types of communication that they engage with the global actors and institutions but include the most tangible stories emerging out of them (such as the actual visits and the emerging partnerships). In fact, as R1 and R6 stated, 'being active on an international social media account itself is part of their strategy'.



We collected all the tweets from the international Twitter accounts of the two mayors, starting from their first day using the account until the end of 2021. Incorporating the retweets into our analysis, we observed that the Budapest mayor tweeted a total of 111, and that the Istanbul mayor tweeted a total of 624 messages (in English) during this period. We coded and categorized these into three groups: local, national and international. Since our goal was to understand the constituents of a transnationalization strategy, we narrowed our analysis down to the tweets covering only national/international issues and actors. In other words, we *excluded* the tweets that referred to city-related issues such as municipal services.

The content of the tweets ranged from pure textual statements to photos and videos as well as to website links including information on the mayors' bilateral relations with foreign actors, participation in multilateral meetings, the launch of international projects, commenting on foreign policy agendas and emphasizing liberal values. Overall, our analysis included 108 international tweets from the Budapest mayor and 396 international tweets from the Istanbul mayor. As we reviewed the collected data, we identified three major patterns that suggested the means of a transnationalization strategy: material, symbolic and political. We coded all tweets according to these three patterns (see Appendix II in the Supplementary Material for the coding procedure, coding values and results).

To explain why the opposition forces use transnationalization despite the risks of harassment and intimidation, we use the seven interviews (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6 and R7) that we conducted with the officials responsible for international affairs in both municipalities.

## Empirical analysis

### *How is transnationalization implemented as a strategy?*

Our analysis of the international Twitter accounts of the Istanbul and Budapest mayors reveals three means of transnationalization strategy: material, symbolic and political. The material means of transnationalization includes the *establishment of international ties* and the enhancement of the mayors' bilateral and multilateral relations with a variety of international organizations and foreign actors. As a result of being actively engaged with global, translocal or regional actors and networks, they build sustainable partnerships and secure funding sources for their activities. The symbolic means includes their *commitment to universal and liberal norms* by emphasizing, for instance, the importance of rule of law, gender equality, climate change, peace and multiculturalism. It is through their emphasizing commitment to such values that they gain visibility and respect within the global networks and international media and sustain their partnerships. The third means is political and includes their *increasing agency in reframing the foreign policy agenda* of their countries by commenting on global or European politics, the national government's policies and the international successes of their country. In this way, the mayors aim to show their political power in shaping the foreign policy agendas. [Table 1](#) shows the extent of the coverage of these three means of transnationalization in the tweets of the Budapest and Istanbul mayors (see the Supplementary Material for the coding procedure and our code sheet).

**Table 1.** The Transnationalization Strategy of the Budapest and Istanbul Mayors: Content Analysis of International Twitter Accounts

	(Material means) Establishment of international ties	(Symbolic means) Commitment to universal and liberal values	(Political means) Reframing foreign policy agenda
Budapest mayor			
Number of tweets	52	61	52
Extent of coverage	48%	57%	48%
Istanbul mayor			
Number of tweets	159	136	148
Extent of coverage	40%	34%	37%

Note: The three categories are not mutually exclusive.

Below, we illustrate the three means of transnationalization (which are not mutually exclusive) through some examples.

### **Material means of transnationalization: establishment of international ties**

In their international Twitter accounts, the mayors highlighted the relationships that they had with a variety of global institutions and foreign actors. Among these were the EU, intergovernmental organizations (for instance, the specialized agencies of the United Nations), mayors of Western capitals, representatives of foreign governments such as ambassadors and the heads of states themselves.

Among the institutions with which they sought to strengthen ties, as our interviewees also stressed, the EU was the priority for the mayors of Istanbul and Budapest. Karácsony aimed to establish novel forms of partnership between the European Commission and the mayors of other EU capitals for his policy priorities, such as social justice and a greener environment. Consistent with the central government's discriminating behaviour against opposition-led municipalities in Hungary, he reminded the EU of the need to take countermeasures against violations of the rule of law in a member state (tweet no. 98). The Istanbul mayor, on the other hand, followed the EU priorities closely and made sure to implement these in his city in cooperation with EU representatives residing in Turkey. For instance, within the framework of the European Mobility Week that aimed to raise awareness of sustainable urban mobility, he organized a car-free day in the streets of Istanbul, and the EU delegation to Turkey attended the event to support his effort (tweet no. 147). Forming relationships with the European Parliament, he expressed his willingness to establish closer partnerships with mayors and local governments across Europe.

Engagement in bilateral and multilateral relations with local authorities in Western capitals was another frequent tactic the Budapest and Istanbul mayors followed to strengthen their ties with the West. Their official Twitter accounts often demonstrated their activism in building relations with the mayors of other world cities and together implementing what they called 'transparent' and 'pluralistic'



policies. Both the Budapest and Istanbul mayors established translocal alliances in their countries' geographic regions. The 'Pact of Free Cities' initiative was among the most important alliances to this end for Budapest, created in the name of protecting liberal democracy and lobbying together to make EU funding directly accessible in their cities (tweet no. 26). The 'Balkan Cities Summit', in a similar vein, was the most important initiative of the Istanbul mayor, aiming to protect the same values through a network of cities (tweet no. 493).

Furthermore, both mayors paid attention to forming bilateral relations with the official representatives of Western governments, often meeting with the ambassadors or consuls general, and even communicating with foreign ministers or heads of government from time to time. For instance, during a visit to Athens, a trip made by the Istanbul mayor 'to return a recent visit' by the Athens mayor, İmamoğlu reported that he was invited to a meeting with the prime minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, with whom, he tweeted, he had a 'stimulating conversation' that would be constructive both for Greece and Turkey (tweet no. 455). On the very same day, he also met with the former Greek prime ministers George Papandreou and Alexis Tsipras in Athens, with whom he talked about 'how the democratic forces in the two countries should remain in touch to contribute to peace and strengthen cooperation' (tweet no. 456). On the other hand, prior to the German federal election in 2021, the Budapest mayor reported a meeting that he held with the then-finance minister (and future chancellor) of Germany, Olaf Scholz, and tweeted that they shared the same vision for their countries based on 'a just European recovery & social cohesion' (tweet no. 77).

Meeting with ambassadors or consuls general in their own cities was also a regular practice for the Istanbul and Budapest mayors to explore areas of economic and social cooperation. Shortly after his election as the mayor of Istanbul, İmamoğlu, for instance, organized a meeting with the consuls general serving in Istanbul to share his vision for a 'human-centered, equitable city' (tweet no. 164). Later, he posted photos of bilateral meetings or tweeted about bilateral relations with several consuls general (from Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany) with the goal of strengthening trade relations and promoting new investment opportunities in Istanbul. Similarly, Karácsony met with several ambassadors to establish what he called 'both value and project-based' cooperation, especially 'in introducing green technologies', 'pandemic protection' and 'boosting Budapest's global outlook'. He met not only with EU-based ambassadors but also with the ambassadors of the UK, Taiwan and Japan, whose political vision, he stated, 'overlapped' with his own.

Although not as common as tweets on other topics, the tweets of the Istanbul and Budapest mayors also showed their interest in building relations with multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe. Just as the Budapest mayor lobbied the EU for the creation of direct financial access to local governments on climate change policy, he called for the UN to raise climate ambition and strongly involve cities in global climate policymaking (tweet no. 105). On the other hand, in partnership with UN Women, the Istanbul mayor organized an awareness campaign on the elimination of violence against women (tweet no. 226). To share their democratic visions, both mayors participated in the Congress on Local and Regional Authorities, a political assembly operating under the auspices of the Council of Europe.

These material means of a transnationalization strategy required high international credibility for the mayors with the goal of contradicting the potential government rhetoric on the inability of the opposition mayors. Through maintaining material benefits such as funding, inclusion in regional networks, bilateral partnerships and sources of know-how, the mayors aimed to show that the opposition was able to create its own sources and govern even under unfair conditions.

***Symbolic means of transnationalization: commitment to universal and liberal norms***

Both in their efforts to establish relations with Western actors and institutions and in their evaluation of national or global events, the mayors of Istanbul and Budapest often used a discourse referring to liberal norms such as the rule of law and human rights and emphasized the universal nature of their urban policies based on the principles of social justice, gender equality or environmentalism. We call this discourse the symbolic means of transnationalization that aimed to bring visibility to their policies among the global networks that they were part of. More than half of Karácsony's international tweets and almost half of İmamoğlu's tweets referred to these values and issues, which stood in stark contrast to the domestic and foreign policies implemented by the populist-authoritarian governments of their countries. This contrast was drawn on purpose and corresponded to their normative motivations. The mayors enhanced their cooperation with Western actors by calling attention to the illiberal policies of their governments and promoting their own municipal policies at the international level.

Karácsony quite frequently underlined the importance of the rule of law in his tweets. For instance, when the Fidesz-controlled parliament gave Orbán the power to rule by decree in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Karácsony stated the EU should sanction the government and divert the 'next generation of EU funds' to the local level (tweet no. 37). While the European Parliament stated that the Hungarian government's COVID-19 measures were incompatible with European values, this statement did not have a direct effect on the Budapest municipality's power to implement its own policies. Hence, in alliance with other mayors from Central Europe, Karácsony lobbied the EU to consider the Orbán government's attack on the rights of the opposition municipalities in Hungary as part of a broader discussion on the rule of law in the EU.

Karácsony, as a leader of the Green Party, often also publicized social justice and environmentalism in his policies. As a post-COVID recovery plan, he advocated an alternative to the government proposal in order 'to boost the green transition and social justice' and added, 'that is not what we see in Victor Orbán's thinking' (tweet no. 64). He took part in the European Greens' COVID recovery campaign to make 'Europe green and social' (tweet no. 36). The Budapest mayor also tweeted about gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights and multiculturalism even though these issues were not as popular as social justice and environmentalism. Especially when the Orbán government took over Hungary's top arts university and initiated what Karácsony called a 'sham' referendum on the anti-LGBTQ+ law (tweet nos. 7 and 64), the Budapest mayor did not hesitate to condemn the Hungarian government publicly.

İmamoğlu's main emphases in terms of universal and liberal values were peace, multiculturalism, women's rights and the environment. He publicly celebrated religious holidays with Istanbul citizens who came from diverse religious backgrounds and emphasized his pride as the mayor of a city 'where different faiths dwell side by side' (tweet no. 225). Demonstrating equal regard for all religions, he stated that the Istanbul municipality employed 50 religious officials from different faith groups to deliver equal services to all 16 million Istanbulites and gave a message of peace among all religions (tweet no. 232). This policy contrasted with the Erdoğan government's reference to religion, or more specifically Islam, as 'an exclusionary, boundary-making identity for the Turkish nation' (Yabancı 2023). Three months before a government decree converted the 1,500-year-old Hagia Sophia into a mosque, İmamoğlu shared a photo of Süleymaniye Mosque, commemorating the legacy of Mimar Sinan, who had 'turned Istanbul into a rising star of its age, next to others from Sarajevo to Baghdad, Jerusalem to Mecca' by building this magnificent work (tweet no. 301).

Regarding women's rights, İmamoğlu addressed the issues of integrating women into the labour force and combating violence against women. He shared the images of the first-ever female crewmembers boarding Istanbul ferries, female firefighters or female hockey players. He took pride in giving statistics on the rising number of women employees at different ranks within the Istanbul metropolitan area (tweet no. 357). He cooperated with UN Women to raise awareness of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. As opposed to a national government that withdrew from the Istanbul Convention (a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe against violence against women), İmamoğlu stressed his awareness-raising campaign on this issue.

Overall, the two mayors' policies promoting universal issues, such as social justice, climate change and women rights, on the one hand, and their discourse on liberal norms, such as the rule of law and multiculturalism, on the other, constituted an important means of their transnationalization strategy at the symbolic level. In compliance with their normative motivations, they showed that they not only shared the same values and principles as liberal democracies from the West but also sent credible signals about their willingness to protect these values against the illiberal policies of their governments. Both actors, in this way, aimed to create a competent and respected image of the opposition in the international arena and gain visibility in global and international forums as a reliable partner.

### ***Political means of transnationalization: reframing foreign policy agenda***

The tweets of the two mayors also show that they acted assertively in taking foreign policy positions. In more than half of their international tweets, they commented on international events, EU politics, or the central government's foreign policy. This is particularly innovative and surprising since local governments are rarely concerned with foreign policy areas. In sharp contrast with the assumption that political agency necessarily requires participation in decision-making procedures or filling central positions, the two subnational actors put a conscious effort in becoming transnational political agents by raising issues, taking positions and articulating claims in the foreign policy arena.

Climate change occupied a central place in both mayors' foreign policy agendas, demonstrating their involvement in international politics. In several tweets, they raised their concerns over the climate crisis, underlying the importance of the role of local governments. İmamoğlu, for instance, attended the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow, and many tweets mentioned Istanbul's willingness to work in close cooperation over the climate crisis with decision-makers and leaders (tweet nos. 465, 418, 379, 166). Accordingly, Istanbul, together with several other international cities, became a signatory to the Glasgow Declaration, which guaranteed a commitment to develop sustainable food policies. Furthermore, taking part in global climate action, as the mayor of Istanbul, he met with not only other international mayors but also with the US climate envoy John Kerry, with his stated goal to 'secure a sustainable and equitable future for all' (tweet no. 418). In a similar vein, Karácsony referred to the climate emergency in various tweets, designating climate change as 'the single most important policy priority of our time' (tweet no. 42). He also did not refrain from relating climate policymaking to the ideals of democracy to criticize the central government's ignorance of the issue. While incumbents in both countries rarely engaged in the questions of the climate crisis, both mayors differentiated themselves from their national governments, forming a foreign policy agenda with a willingness to participate in the global environmental regime.

In addition to climate change, the two mayors also commented on a variety of international political events as part of their foreign policy agendas. For instance, İmamoğlu sent his condolences to the families of victims of the explosion in Beirut, commemorated the genocide in Srebrenica and shared his concerns over Australian bushfires and the terrorist attacks on London Bridge. Karácsony, likewise, celebrated the new US administration, stating his support for a peaceful and sustainable world. With regard to foreign policy on relations with the EU, Karácsony seemed to be more concerned than İmamoğlu. In most of his tweets about the EU, Karácsony strongly criticized the Orbán government for violating European norms and values. On several occasions, Karácsony praised acting in concert with the EU and emphasized his full agreement with the EU objectives regarding all policy areas, including foreign policy (tweet nos. 35, 37, 40, 65). For instance, challenging Hungarian vetoes on condemning Russia for the covert military operation in Chechnya, Karácsony openly sided with the EU and other Visegrád Group countries (tweet nos. 61, 65). Furthermore, he urged the EU to engage more with local governments and to sanction corrupt governments such as Hungary (tweet nos. 32, 37, 65).

There are more examples showing how Karácsony and İmamoğlu, as the key figures of opposition in their countries, revealed their own stances against their central governments' policy orientation, often criticizing the incumbents. Karácsony, for instance, in contrast to the Orbán government's rapprochement with Russia, took a strong stance against autocracy and illiberal practices, supporting international liberal values such as commitment to the rule of law and democracy. He commented on Russia's detention of Alexei Navalny and joined the #FreeNavalynNow campaign (tweet no. 45). Likewise, he expressed his support for the protesters at Bogaziçi University in Turkey (tweet no. 53). Similarly, İmamoğlu blatantly showed his disagreement with the central government's

Syrian policy, calling for a stable Syria and return of Syrians to their homes safely and freely (tweet no. 157), and expressed his sympathy for the Uyghur cause by helping Uyghurs protesting in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul (tweet no. 388). However, unlike Karácsony, while emerging as a transnational political agent, İmamoğlu occasionally showed support for the central government when it was in line with Turkey's traditional foreign policy. For instance, he condemned the US administration's remarks on the events of 1915 (tweet no. 410) and celebrated the news of the discovery of natural gas in the Black Sea (tweet no. 341).

Overall, the political means of the transnationalization strategy includes articulating claims over international issues such as climate change, the US presidential elections and criticizing the policies of the main authoritarian powers, Russia and China. In this way, the mayors signalled that they had the skills to be the national representatives of their country and would be a reliable partner for the West if they or their parties got elected. Despite having no access to decision-making procedures at the national level, both actors constantly commented on foreign policy issues related to international, European or national politics, using social media as a medium for communicative action.

### ***Why is transnationalization used as an opposition strategy?***

Based on our interview evidence, we argue that a transnationalization strategy (through material, political and symbolic means) occurs out of rationalist and normative motivations. The mayors care about sustaining their relations with the EU and with the liberal-democratic world in contrast to the foreign policy decisions of their populist-authoritarian governments.

#### *The rationalist motivation*

The rationalist motivation of transnationalization is the goal to survive against government repression through the cultivation of new political, material and symbolic resources. Since Gergely Karácsony was elected as the mayor of the capital Budapest, political distrust was evident in the relations between his city administration and the national Hungarian government. The Orbán government started threatening the functioning of the municipal government through restricting its financial autonomy (Bloomberg 2019). For instance, according to our interviewee (R2), the most important source of revenue for the Budapest municipality was the local industry tax paid by local businesses. But in the beginning of 2021, the Hungarian government reduced this, cutting a significant sum from the city budget. It started discriminating between cities led by mayors from the ruling party and those led by the opposition – including Budapest – in terms of the distribution of EU funds. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in early 2020, the Hungarian government seized control of another major source of funding for the municipalities – the motor vehicle tax – and redirected it to the federal relief effort (R2). According to interviewee R3, these financial restrictions affected the Budapest municipality most. While the municipalities led by the ruling party could access state resources on an ad hoc basis, the opposition-led municipalities, including Budapest, were not granted such access (R3). The financial attacks on the Budapest municipality were accompanied by government-led campaigns. According to R1, the Hungarian government initiated political campaigns that

constantly portrayed an image of the city government as incompetent and the mayor as incapable of governing. The government even used the Budapest city government as a case to intimidate the entire opposition, arguing that the opposition parties cannot govern and should not be voted for.

Through adopting a transnationalization strategy, the Budapest municipality hence aimed to lobby institutions to create a direct link with the funds. The representation of the city of Budapest in Brussels turned into an office that lobbied the EU institutions. Its mission is ‘to stress the principle of subsidiarity’, ‘to explain the corrupted situation in the country’ and ‘the financial and political attacks that the municipality faces’ (R1). The Pact of Free Cities between Warsaw, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague called on Brussels to allocate funds directly to municipal budgets, bypassing national governments (R1, R3). This effort was not entirely successful but, thanks to it, there were small achievements (R1 and R4). For instance, during the negotiations of the EU’s 2021–2027 long-term budget (Multiannual Financial Framework) in early 2020, the municipality was able to open the channel for local and regional entities towards the EU’s ‘Connecting European Facility’ programme, by making them eligible to apply for funding (R1). All in all, through a vision of linkage to the EU and Western capitals, the Budapest municipality implemented various projects and sustained its resources while continuing to serve its city constituency.

In a similar vein, the relationship between the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi – IBB) and the Erdoğan government had been extremely tense since the election of Ekrem İmamoğlu as the mayor of Istanbul. Losing the Istanbul elections was the biggest blow the incumbent party had ever experienced at the time of the interviews (R5). As such, the IBB and the mayor had been the target of all sorts of repression, intimidation and harassment. No public banks, for instance, lent money to the IBB (Sözcü 2019). Even more, the loan taken for the construction of the subway was unlawfully withdrawn by VakıfBank – one of the public banks. Without any legal charges, the minister of the interior demonized the IBB and claimed that ‘1,668 people or their relatives who were hired in the IBB have records of contact or affiliation with a terrorist organization’ (BBC Türkçe 2022). The Ministry of the Interior also seized more than 40 files investigating past corruption and irregularity but took no action. Furthermore, during the pandemic, donations made by philanthropists to the IBB to be delivered to those in need were blocked by the Ministry of the Interior and the bank accounts where the donations were accumulated were blocked (Sözcü 2020). Some service buildings and properties owned by the IBB were transferred to the AKP district municipalities. In our interviews, R7 also highlighted these problems and named the municipality’s foreign affairs activities as a survival strategy in a hostile domestic environment.

Despite such a repressive environment, the IBB led by İmamoğlu considered itself as an example of what the opposition could do and how the opposition could govern at the national level (R5 and R6). The Directorate of Foreign Affairs of the Istanbul metropolitan municipality transformed into a Department of Foreign Affairs with a new vision under the banner of a ‘fair, creative, green Istanbul’ (R6). While the directorate was formerly only a support office managing the international travel and logistics of the Istanbul mayor, the new department



established by İmamoğlu connected other municipal units under its auspices to implement this new vision. From this point on, the goal was to create an agenda for the mayor in his visits abroad and in hosting foreign visitors in Istanbul (such as the local government representatives, senior executives and bureaucrats). The Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), established in early 2020 under the leadership of İmamoğlu, further aimed to implement the new vision by bringing together a wide stakeholder network consisting of non-governmental organizations, academic, private sector and international organizations, and planning agencies of different cities from different parts of the world (R5). The Balkan Cities network turned into an IPA initiative to strengthen partnerships with 24 mayors from 11 Balkan countries. All in all, rationally, lacking loans from public banks, the transnationalization strategy allowed the Istanbul municipality to receive a significant number of external resources to govern, more specifically to complete the subway works or to purchase new buses (Sözcü 2019). As such, external funding was one of the major resources through which the municipality could continue to work and serve (R7).

#### *The normative motivation*

A transnationalization strategy surely has risks for the opposition-led Istanbul and Budapest municipalities. According to R1 and R4, Budapest was the city most targeted by the central government. The Budapest municipality and the mayor himself were portrayed as the ‘enemy of the Hungarian people’ (R1). According to R2, the central government often depicted the Budapest administration as an enemy of the country, using phrases like ‘Budapest versus the rest of the country’ and showcasing ‘the Budapest mayor as an ally of the United States and the globalists’. With regard to the question of why these costs did not deter the municipality from pursuing its transnationalization strategy, our respondents (R1, R2, R3, R4) shared the same view. In the words of R4, the damage by the central government had already been done and one could not expect more. The financial cuts and political attacks were what the Budapest municipality was accustomed to. These attacks were already intense prior to transnationalization, so it was important to resist them (R4). In dealing with the attacks, the normative motivations of the transnationalization strategy dominated the material ones: according to R1 and R3, the aim of the Budapest municipality, above all, was not only to retrieve material sources but also to show to the EU and the Western world that Hungary was not just a country ruled by an illiberal, autocratic government. It was also a country that included other power centres that shared democratic values (R1 and R2). For instance, the Pact of Free Cities (which enlarged over time and included global cities not only within Europe but also in other continents) was not only a practical alliance in pursuit of material benefits, but also one that promoted the shared values of the democratic world, such as the rule of law, inclusiveness, diversity and fight against climate change. According to R1, R2 and R3, the international partnerships embracing such values provided an important source of support and knowledge for Budapest, whose territory encompassed an important share of the population of the country. The transnationalization strategy helped the Budapest municipality to ‘convince the international decision-makers that Hungary was not completely lost’ with regard to liberal values (R1).



In contrast to the case of Budapest, the central government in Turkey did not demonize the Istanbul municipality based on its relations with foreign actors. However, realizing that the IBB continued to serve through relying on external funding, the central government and the AKP-dominated municipal assembly attempted to prevent the practices of the municipality either via slowing the process down or making borrowing difficult. For instance, after the COVID-19 crisis, the AKP members, who had the majority in the municipal assembly, approved only 400 million of the 2 billion 50 million lira external borrowing request (*Gazete Duvar* 2020). Or the central government (such as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Environment, or other ministries) slowed down the bureaucratic process for the Istanbul municipality when it came to signing international protocols (R5, R6 and R7). One of the most notable examples of these efforts was the acquisition of a loan from foreign sources to purchase buses that ended up being inaccessible for nine months due to Erdoğan's reluctance to approve it (*Cumhuriyet* 2021).

However, even though there are risks, the IBB continued to employ a transnationalization strategy thanks to the normative motivations of the Istanbul mayor – that is, the preservation of liberal and universal values. According to R6, the mayor wished to see Istanbul as an actor on the global agenda. The aim was to create a city that set an example for others in producing policies in answer to global problems. According to R5, the mayor's shared vision with the EU and the liberal world led to a two-way interaction: İmamoğlu's municipality became more engaged in Western and liberal-democratic arenas, and the municipality's attention to these values drew increased attention from these platforms.

To sum up, the search for alternative material resources forms the major rationalist motivation for a transnationalization strategy. Facing political attacks and severe financial cuts, the opposition-led executives in Budapest and Istanbul established links with international actors and institutions to gather their own sources through material, political and symbolic means so that they could govern. Nor did these attacks deter them from allying with the EU institutions or retrieving funds from international agencies due to the existence of the normative motivations of their strategy, which is based on preserving liberal norms at home and continuing to be part of the liberal international order.

## Conclusion

In our article, based on the evidence from the top two autocratizing countries, we have shown a novel transnationalization strategy implemented by opposition-led subnational governments. These subnational governments implement a transnationalization strategy through consciously forming links with global actors and multilateral institutions. Through establishing international ties, showing commitment to universal and liberal norms, and increasing their agency over the foreign policy agenda of their countries, the mayors of Istanbul and Budapest transnationalized in material, symbolic and political terms. Despite facing the risks of repression by the populist-authoritarian governments, they took this challenge and used it as a strategy to create their own resources (i.e. rationalist motivation) and preserve the liberal norms (i.e. normative motivation) as part of their resistance against the

autocratization trend in each country. This new strategy is different from the conventional strategies used by the opposition that we are aware of in CARs.

This research brings to the fore the questions of the role of international and global forces in supporting democracy and how they can provide effective assistance to democratic agents in authoritarian regimes. As conventional efforts to promote democracy have created a backlash and given rise to strong anti-Western sentiments in many countries, international democratic forces no longer have the power or willingness to engage in democracy promotion (Levitsky and Way 2020). Populist-authoritarian leaders such as Erdoğan and Orbán have a long tradition of inflaming nationalist sentiments by accusing opposition forces of allying with international ‘enemies’. However, even so, we demonstrated in this article that the opposition-led subnational executives battled to form links with the West as a result of their rationalist and normative motivations. They were in dire need of support by global institutions. Through the symbolic, material and political means of transnationalization, they aimed to build international credibility and to enhance their ability to govern, which is particularly important when the opposition-controlled municipalities are subject to discrimination by the central governments.

Whether the strategy of transnationalization helps the opposition in elections and most importantly brings resilience to the opposition in CARs is another question that future studies should seek to investigate. Although existing findings cannot tell us whether this strategy can lead to regime change, its material, symbolic and political means certainly help the opposition to continue to govern and serve the constituencies in an increasingly repressive environment.

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