

Interview – Lisel Hintz

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Hintz studies the arenas in which struggles over various forms of identity – national, ethnic, religious, gender – take place. Her regional focus is on Turkey and its relations with Europe, the US, and the Middle East. Her first book with Oxford University Press (2018), *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, examines how contestation over national identity spills over to shape and be shaped by foreign policy. Her current book project, under contract with Cambridge University Press, investigates popular culture as political battleground for policing, promoting, and contesting identities in Turkey. She has published in academic journals including *Security Studies*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Nationalities Papers*, and *European Journal of International Relations*. Professor Hintz contributes to public sphere discussions in outlets such as *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, *War on the Rocks*, *The Boston Globe*, and *BBC World Service*, as well as to academic and policy panels on Turkey's increasing authoritarianism, opposition dynamics, foreign policy shifts, media dynamics, and identity-related topics including Kurdish, Alevi, and gender issues. Professor Hintz received her Ph.D. in Political Science from George Washington University, was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell University's Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, and was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

For me, some of the most exciting research is being produced by those doing super deep reads of the everyday politics of major political questions. Scholarship that immediately comes to mind is Basileus Zeno's work on how the Syrian conflict became sectarianized, Sarah Parkinson on how social networks shape rebel groups' responses to state violence and logistical challenges, Noah Amir Arjomand on the role of local fixers in news production, Nermin Allam on the role of emotions in anti-sexual violence protest, Jose Ciro Martinez on the politics of social welfare provision through the lens of bakeries, Elif Babül on how pre-existing attitudes toward human rights as a Western construct inhibit the efficacy of human rights training for Turkish bureaucrats, etc. I'd actually love to do/see a review essay that pairs Babül's book *Bureaucratic Intimacies: Translating Human Rights in Turkey* with Diana Kim's *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia*, Mai Hassan's *Regime Threats and State Solutions: Bureaucratic Loyalty and Embeddedness in Kenya*, and maybe another looking at the roles of bureaucrats and other local- and mid-level officials in major political outcomes. Sibel Oktay's *Governing Abroad: Coalition Politics and Foreign Policy in Europe* would fit well in there, as would Dan Honig's current book project on mission driven bureaucrats.

Not coincidentally, some of these scholars are outside political science, and I think political scientists have much to learn from anthropology, sociology, media and cultural studies, etc. My own approach to studying identity and political power struggles is heavily influenced by the work of media scholars like Ergin Bulut, Bilge Yeşil, Aslı Tunç, Feyda Sayan-Cengiz, Sunem Koçer, and Burak Özçetin – and that's just from Turkey. Marwan Kraidy, for example, has both produced seminal scholarship and is creating invaluable opportunities for scholars of media and culture at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern in Qatar. While the race for the most sophisticated statistical methods and creative uses of big data and longest appendices continues – and continues to find a home in top journals, thus reinforcing its own incentives – ethnographically informed research, deep country expertise, and close attention to everyday and cultural politics continue to provide much-needed insight.

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What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I have what I think of as my origin story, but I don't know if it's authentic. So many factors and individuals have influenced me along my long, windy path. I do know that I've always been deeply intrigued by identities, and I believe I came to study Turkey because of its many overlapping, contested lines of identification – ethnic, sectarian, linguistic, urban-rural, pious-secular, White Turk-Black Turk, pan-Turkic, neo-imperial, etc. I think my initial interest in identities came from my childhood, from my grandmother's position as a children's librarian and my mother's position as the manager of an international music and arts non-profit organization. Although I grew up in a very small, overwhelmingly white, rural town in Wisconsin, I was exposed to a huge variety of cultures through stories, travel, and interacting with artists from all over the world as a kid. I navigated most of my adolescence thinking in terms of characters, roles, languages, cuisines, symbolic and affective meanings of things like flags, contextual differences in how people present themselves in different settings and how they're perceived/received, etc. I started out as a drama major in college, ended up a German major, went to cooking school and worked as a pastry chef after. All that is to say I've had a super circuitous trajectory getting to academia but it was only last summer that while I was interviewing a Turkish TV actor that it all made sense to me. He was curious why a political scientist wanted to speak with him and asked if I had any relevant experience. When my story sort of tumbled out he said "of course, that makes sense you study politics through culture." I wish he could have spoken to 22-year-old me so I knew it would all make sense someday.

In terms of influences on my academic approach, I've been incredibly fortunate to work with immensely talented scholars who are also fantastic humans. My dissertation committee chair was Marc Lynch, and his first book *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* took very seriously the role of media as a site of contestation over Jordanian national identity and foreign policy. He was the ideal mentor to help me develop the kinds of arguments that I wanted to make in my dissertation and beyond. I was also extremely lucky to work with Martha Finnemore and Henry Hale. Henry Hale is one of the leading experts on ethnic politics, regime behavior, and party politics, and Martha Finnemore has made some of the most important, ground-breaking contributions to constructivist theory in IR. In large part because of these three scholars, there was an openness to the kind of study of identity that I wanted to do with the culture-as-data and ethnographic methods I wanted to use in my department at GW. That's unfortunately not very common in political science departments.

Were the 2023 Turkish Presidential election results surprising for you given that polls predicted an opposition victory?

The results weren't surprising for me because I was very skeptical of the prospects of any opposition candidate being able to secure a victory and take office in the first place. This is not solely because I doubted the opposition's ability to obtain enough votes given the unfair playing field, the unknowable governance capacity of an ideologically divided coalition behind opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the limited appeal of that candidate, and an identity politics landscape that favored Islamic nationalism and Erdoğan as vaunted *Reis* ("Captain"). I was also relatively skeptical that the AKP, more specifically Erdoğan himself, would accept any opposition victory. It seemed to me that governmental figures were laying the rhetorical groundwork to declare a Kılıçdaroğlu win illegitimate. Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu implied that an opposition victory would be a Western political coup. Further, government officials were claiming that Kılıçdaroğlu's team had partnered with terrorists, referring to the fact that the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) had thrown its support behind Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy. The AKP and its nationalist alliance partners have used a wide rhetorical paintbrush to discursively associate the HDP – and in many ways all Kurds – with the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since the HDP became a political threat to the AKP in 2015. That brush has now grown to paint Kılıçdaroğlu and his political allies as linked with the PKK via HDP support. Further, what turned out to be a fake montage video apparently portraying PKK support for Kılıçdaroğlu was aired at an Erdoğan rally. Given these tactics, I was concerned that if it looked like election numbers were in the opposition's favor, the government would challenge the victory. I was also concerned that if the government declared victory when it looked like they didn't have the votes to do so, there could be unrest. I was concerned about the potential for violence from regime security forces as well as paramilitary organizations that had declared loyalty to Erdoğan such as SADAT.

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In terms of what turned out to be the opposition's overconfidence, I think there was an element of motivational bias in terms of wanting to believe that victory was possible and thus internalizing only particular pieces of information that told the opposition alliance and its supporters this was the case. We also saw a bit of this kind of exuberant optimism in the 2018 elections around "Tamam (Enough) Campaign." I do think the opposition came much closer to a victory in the 2023 campaign and for that they deserve credit – for being able to garner the votes that they did, for getting people mobilized, and for deploying electoral observers (although, as it turns out, not enough and not in all places). But I believe there was an overestimation of the popular appeal of the opposition alliance outside urban centers. As additional evidence of motivational bias, I believe there was a disregard of criticism coming from within the opposition. There were many supporters who voiced public concerns, and even a number of political scientists who wrote an open letter trying to communicate their concerns to the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and its six-party Nation Alliance more broadly. Internal critics emphasized Kılıçdaroğlu was not the ideal candidate, that politicians can't rely on social media as a primary campaign platform, that parties need to follow that up with face-to-face interactions on the ground, that voters wanted concrete policy proposals for tangible improvements in the economy and education system, etc. I think the messages of unity and the embrace of Alevi, Kurdish, and LGBTQ identities represented important progress but that this form of communication did not resonate as much as anticipated – particularly because of Erdoğan's vilification of these identities.

How do we account for Erdoğan's victory amidst chronic economic decline, catastrophic earthquakes, and popular discontentment with its refugee policies?

I think these conditions pose a useful puzzle for political scientists. You have a worsening economic crisis comprised of inflation, a plummeting lira, massive debt, unemployment, and brain drain. And added to that you have Erdoğan's obtuse insistence on low interest rates and other forms of mishandling the economy that exacerbate these conditions. We see this dynamic with the earthquakes as well. They were already a devastating natural disaster, but their effects on lives and homes and transportation infrastructure and individuals' ability to earn a living were exponentially compounded by the crony capitalism in the construction industry – a massive growth tool for the AKP. So many buildings were structurally unsound, and/or were built in zones that were restricted, and developers could buy amnesty permits to keep their unsafe building in place – all of this showed government mismanagement with catastrophic impact. So, the fact that electoral support for the incumbent remained as high as it offers a puzzle in terms of voting behavior. Indeed, I think Turkey offers a number of important puzzles and wealth of literature for political scientists to draw on as I wrote in a recent APSA MENA newsletter piece, 'AKP Foreign Policy for Wider Audiences: Spotlighting Puzzles and Voices from the Region.'

However, for people who study Turkey quite closely, the electoral support for Erdoğan despite economic and other material woes is not much of a puzzle. A careful read of on-the-ground attitudes across central Anatolia indicates traditional pocketbook explanations for voting behavior do not apply – or if they do, we should rethink the ways in which we conceptualize how voters feel affected by current economic conditions and prospects for change under both candidates on the ballot. First, we need to remember the populist economic policies around the election time: the AKP had raised the minimum wage multiple times and lowered the retirement age, it was providing various forms of handouts, making promises about earthquake reconstruction aid, etc. So, if you've been benefitting from these handouts and expect to continue to benefit from them, when you're confronted with an unknown factor – what will life under alternative leadership look like? – you naturally hesitate. This is especially the case when there are ideological divides and infighting within that proposed alternative leadership structure. And it is even more the case when the incumbent you've been benefitting from tells you that alternative is supported by terrorists who will be released from jail if you don't keep me in office. For all kinds of reasons, it was natural for voters to doubt the opposition's governance capacity.

I think that observers may have different understandings of economic well-being than voters on the ground, particularly in central Anatolia. So, I think it's incredibly important to speak to those people, not to look at the numbers and assume voting behavior. We need to do the due diligence: do interviews, do participant observation, and figure out what people are actually thinking. One of the new sources that gave me the best insight was *Turkey Recap* because these were people who were on the ground in Adiyaman, Antakya, Kahramanmaraş, etc. They were going from place to place in the hard-hit earthquake areas, and they were reporting that voter sentiment is not really shifting

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very much. People initially were very angry but then they became more worried about the unknown more than they were about the status quo.

Finally, going back to the identity politics, for so many Erdoğan is almost a cultish figure that they worship. In many of my interviews, AKP voters don't talk in terms of party, they talk in terms of Erdoğan. So, the fact that people have idolized this individual, that they see his trajectory as one of their own, tells us so much. They say: "look, he was victimized by the Kemalist government, he was in jail. His daughters couldn't go to university with headscarves. He comes from a rough and tumbled neighborhood, he's a Black Turk. Look what he's been able to achieve and what he's been able to do for us." A lot of people in the opposition thought that the headscarf issue was kind of done and dusted, but, there is a long and painful historical memory for a lot of conservative individuals who were repressed by previous secularization policies. So, I don't think that goes away quickly. Plus, Erdoğan keeps reminding them of how he, and they, suffered. And while simultaneously "one of us" as a representation of these people, he's also iconic in that he's built the bridges, the airport, the drones, the defense industry. There's a fixation with and pride in these large projects, as there is Erdoğan demonstrating that Turkey is strong on the international stage, that he can command powerful audiences. Look what happened with NATO, with Turkey holding out on Sweden's membership for that long to build up to a tense, TV drama series-like cliffhanger moment, an all-eyes-on-Turkey moment at Vilnius. Look what he was able to obtain in terms of concessions, and how Turkish media reported what should have been the very mundane approval of membership of Sweden: events at the highest level of international diplomacy unfold as Erdoğan says, as he wants, as he specifies. This status matters to domestic audiences.

What do the 2023 election results mean for the Turkish political system?

Turkey is, by all scholarly accounts, a competitive authoritarian regime and perhaps in some respects a personalistic one. A lot of observers and opposition voters saw these elections as a last opportunity, a final effort to stop the country's slide into authoritarianism. Part of that calculus is that conditions in 2023 appeared to be the most likely opportunity that the opposition had to pose a veritable challenge to Erdoğan and the AKP since the party came to power in 2002. In 2018, opposition presidential candidate Muharrem İnce did not have much support, the pro-Kurdish party ran with its own candidate, and we didn't have an alliance like the six-party Nation Alliance, which received additional support from Kurdish and labor movements. This potential to be a formidable opponent created a good deal of the initial optimism, and the later disappointment and disillusionment. However, the AKP didn't even have to engage in extensive electoral fraud in order to pull off a victory.

I think that any kind of sense that Erdoğan will loosen his grip on politics in the post-election period is misplaced. By looking at the Turkish media, the judiciary, the Supreme Electoral Board, and more, this has been an iterative process of increasing authoritarian consolidation from an institutional perspective. But the rhetorical perspective is equally important. Particularly since the 2013 Gezi park protests that sharpened Us (regime, pious obedient nation) and Them (opposition, immoral terrorist outsiders) polarization, Erdoğan has been vilifying various forms of opposition. These statements, the news, and entertainment media that the regime produces and/or influences through political economy ties shape people's beliefs about appropriate behaviors towards other individuals.

Examples of prescriptive and proscriptive rhetoric include AKP officials saying women should have at least three children, or that they should not wear shorts or shirt skirts, respectively. Or that the LGBTQ community is not an acceptable part of Turkey's society. The labels that they use and the prescriptive and proscriptive norms they articulate get picked up by people as appropriate behavior and appropriate ways of thinking about people. That matters a great deal in the way that society functions – in everyday interactions, employment decisions, court decisions, acts of violence. So, I'm very concerned about the future of Kurds, the LGBTQ community, women, and others. Some of the allies that the AKP associated with during the election are now calling for gender-segregated education. It seems there's going to be another regression in terms of gender equality in addition to what we've already seen. Turkey has witnessed an escalation in the number of femicides over the last ten years, and often such cases do not result in justice being served. We cannot dissociate such an outcome from the rhetoric used and disseminated by regime actors, media, and their cronies.

So, I see increasing institutional consolidation. I see increasing clampdown on society. I don't expect political

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prisoners to be released unless Erdoğan receives a massive concession from the US. I think the fact that people were calling for the execution of Selahattin Demirtaş (jailed former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party) as Erdoğan celebrated his victory was horrifying. I think the fact that there's a television show that is vilifying Osman Kavala as a traitor and a Western-linked spy is horrifying. I think such trends are indicative of future attitudes toward, and treatment of, various forms of political opposition. So, I'm worried both as a scholar and as someone as who cares deeply about Turkey and its people.

Did you find the race to the far-right during the second round of the elections alarming?

I think it was predictable – they saw the unity and love messaging didn't work so they pivoted. But in some senses less than claimed. Kılıçdaroğlu has had long taken a hard line on asylum-seekers and particularly on Syrians. The rhetoric gets ramped up but the political stance doesn't change drastically. I think a main challenge of the opposition was trying to overcome some of the identity and structural divides within the Turkish opposition landscape. And, of course, the refugee issue is salient amongst those divides along with the Kurdish issue. I think that instinct to try to court Sinan Oğan, the third-party nationalist candidate, and the partnering with Ümit Özdağ's far-right Victory Party in some form of secret "protocol" we're now learning about, are worrisome both for the intra-democratic nature of the main opposition party and for the future of democracy in Turkey.

What do you think about the future of the opposition, the Table of Six? Will they ever be able to create a united front again against the ruling party?

We have already seen the Table of Six fragment into multiple parts and new, smaller coalitions, but in general I think the future of the opposition putting together a united front that could successfully challenge the ruling party in a future presidential contest looks bleak. The first consideration would be whether Erdoğan runs again. He said he would not, and legally he cannot, but by most accounts he legally should not have been able to run this time around as well, as this was his third presidential election. He found a way to get around that, he may be able to do it again. Then the question is whether a different candidate could actually oust him. A lot of people believe that if Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu had been the candidate, things could have gone differently. But again, my take was, if he gets the votes, then Erdoğan says, well, look, there's a court case against you anyway and there's a jail sentence pending because you worked with terrorists. So, you're out. I think that was part of the hesitation with choosing İmamoğlu.

The second consideration is the opposition's prospects if the AKP candidate is not Erdoğan. As I mentioned earlier, he has the kind of charismatic legitimacy that inspires, a personal story of victimhood, that resonates. He also has the mega projects he's presided over and the international stage presence. So, while I'm not highly optimistic about the opposition's ability to contest against Erdoğan in the future, the opposition would face a different contest if the candidate is someone else. That could be Selçuk Bayraktar (the younger son-in-law of Erdoğan who is a highly accomplished developer of military technology), it could be Hulusi Akar (a former four-star Turkish Armed Forces general who served as the minister of national defense from 2018 to 2023 and is now the foreign minister), or someone else. Whoever might be the next candidate, things would look quite different. In terms of the opposition's chances the only optimistic view that I have looking towards the future is that Erdoğan is a singular creature, and he has a singular appeal. I think contesting against a different candidate would be a whole different ball game.

The third consideration is whether the opposition could build a broad enough base again via another coalition. Apart from the candidate, what's clear is that there's been a rise in xenophobic nationalism that had already existed in many parts of Turkey but has been exacerbated since 2015 with the partnership of the AKP with ultra-nationalist allies and the breakdown of the peace process with the Kurds. That increased nationalism makes establishing the broad base I mentioned extremely difficult. The effects of amped up nationalist rhetoric are very hard to roll back. And again, I think for political scientists, taking the political and societal impact of that rhetoric seriously is extraordinarily important.

What are the implications of the elections for the Turkish foreign policy? Do you expect continuity or change in the following years?

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I don't expect to see many differences at all. I think the opinion that Erdoğan's call for EU membership and his greenlighting of Sweden's NATO membership just before the Vilnius summit are signs that Turkey is turning toward the West is incorrect. I think some Western observers would like to see such a turn, and they interpret the president's moves as evidence of such thinking that he must have realized that Turkey can't manage on its own from an economic perspective, or that he has finally acquiesced to being a cooperative NATO ally because Russia's power is waning. I don't have a lot of sympathy for those arguments. Maybe from a rationalist perspective that's what he should be thinking and doing, but it's not reality. My advice is always: read Turkish-language media. Acknowledge that pro-government communication is not truth of course – in any regime context – but that it is nevertheless informative.

I do think that foreign policy moving forward is going to be focused on the economy, on trying to find sources of investment, of credit swaps and loans, of tools with which he can fix the crisis that Turkey is in now. But I do not see this leading to any kind of substantive progress in improving relations with US or EU or NATO. I don't think that he is genuinely interested in EU membership, and I don't think that he even believes that is a possibility. I think that he would like to push for membership in the Customs Union or some other pathway toward visa liberalization that is advantageous to Turkish businesspeople traveling to Europe.

Rather, likely financial fixes will continue to China and Gulf countries. We've seen a recent significant uptick in diplomacy with Saudi and UAE, and that has brought massive tangible rewards in the form of investment, trade deals, and arms sales. Relations with Qatar – which had previously drawn the ire of Saudi and UAE, especially over Ankara's support of Doha during the GCC crisis – have remained strong.

As long as Putin is in power, I believe we will see a continuation of Turkey's moderator role between Ukraine and Russia to the extent this is possible. Turkey continues to benefit from both relationships and as a moderator cannot take a side, which is an ideal position to be in. So, I don't see any kind of significant foreign policy shift in the future. I think that Erdoğan's focus on developing the domestic defense industry, trying to make Turkey a weapons hub, and trying to establish as much independence as possible from the US in the defense will continue. I think the F-16 and F-35 fiascoes have shown that Turkey's past practices of military purchases from the US have made it dependent in terms of acquisition and production, and Erdoğan wants to be as independent as possible. So, we will see a continuation of current arrangements.

I think the most important takeaway is: Do not assume that recent events indicate that Turkey has turned away from Russia and is gravitating toward the West. Erdoğan's foreign policy is transactional, contextually dependent, and full of tactical gambits and pivots. However, it is also undergirded by an understanding of Turkish national identity – one that is deeply rooted in anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism – that both motivate and constrain these moves, as I discuss in my first book.

How do you try to overcome the methodological and fieldwork challenges of political science research?

Incorporating various research methods and gaining fieldwork expertise is challenging in political science for reasons ranging from access in authoritarian regimes to disciplinary gatekeeping to tenure clocks ticking down during fieldwork. My long-term goals therefore include establishing a working group for political scientists whose subjects and methods of research overlap with media and cultural studies to help early career researchers navigate these challenges and find solidarity and intellectual networks in doing so. I was fortunate enough to benefit from the supportive intellectual committee of POMEPS, and have been extremely impressed with the dedication and productivity of participants in the Zoom writing group sessions I've been organizing for students and scholars from Turkey and Syria following the February earthquakes. I think the more community-building we can engage in, the better for all.

What is the most important advice you could give to early career or young scholars?

I would say that finding scholars who are sort of informal mentors, who are in similar intellectual circles, who have done work that you aspire to do in your own way, can be extremely important. In addition to my committee, I've been

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extremely lucky to have had extraordinarily productive and supportive exchanges with anthropologists Jenny White and Sylvia Wing Önder, who I see as two of the best non-Turkish scholars on Turkey. Her intellectual interests overlap a lot with mine in terms of everyday politics, identity, and gender. Finding those individuals who can be intellectual allies, who can offer constructive criticism and lend support during difficult times is critical because academia can be very frustrating and isolating. If you can find an intellectual community outside of your university that includes not only Ph.D. students, but also senior scholars, it can be extremely beneficial. Looking outside one's own university is important because politics within departments can be very competitive, and junior scholars may not feel comfortable asking questions or sharing concerns in such an environment.

For example, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), of which I am a steering committee member, is dedicated to promoting the work of the junior scholars, and junior scholars from the MENA region in particular. POMEPS offers opportunities such as paper workshops, book manuscript workshops, travel and research grants, professional development seminars, academic panels, published essay collections, and more. It's also an excellent network for building useful intellectual and professional connections as scholars navigate their way in the discipline.

I would also recommend not discounting any kind of experience as relevant to the study of politics. I think, whether it is the curation of a museum exhibit or the portrayal of villains in a film, the particular dishes taught at a cooking school or the role of football stadiums as arenas of political contestation our everyday encounters reveal numerous sites of identity politics, of attempts to construct, contest, promote, and police particular understandings of Us and Them by governments and private actors alike. Indeed, governments take cultural production extremely seriously, and I believe we, as political scientists, should as well.