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Terrorism in the 2015 Election Period in Turkey: Content Analysis of Political Leaders' Social Media Activity

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Abstract: In this research, a case study was conducted, analyzing the Twitter messages posted between July and November 2015 by six political leaders in Turkey. The Twitter messages posted by President Erdoğan, AKP's leader Davutoğlu, CHP's leader Kılıçdaroğlu, MHP's leader Bahçeli and HDP's co-chairs Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ were all examined. The analysis focused primarily on the messages that were related to terrorism. The research utilized a descriptive and qualitative approach as well as thematic content analysis. To consolidate the thematic content analysis, numerical data (total word amount and arithmetic mean), charts and tables were used. During the relevant period, terrorism and political instability dominated Turkish politics, and, on 1 November 2015, early elections were held. This research concluded that the six leaders differed in their approaches towards terrorism, which constituted a key issue for the political leaders in Turkey by dominating the political discourse during the electoral campaign.

Keywords: Political discourse, Turkey, Elections, Twitter, Terror, Content Analysis
Categories**:** H.3.1, H.4.3

1 Introduction

Election campaigns conducted through digital public media enable political party leaders to pursue a different political discourse. When analyzing the effect that political discourse has on the electorate, it is necessary to examine the discourse of party leaders towards voters during the election period. The main objective of this study is to determine which topics and specific terms (particularly related to terrorism) have been highlighted by the politicians and how they adopt social networking sites for political discourse purposes in the Turkey 2015 general elections, with Twitter as the principle focus. Terrorist attack activity sharply increased after the decline in the "peace process" after the general elections held in June 2015 in Turkey. Having failed to establish a coalition government after these elections, Turkey held

early elections in November of the same year. As terrorist incidents increased in the period between November and June, the politicians consequently relayed their messages related to these actions on Twitter. These messages did have an impact on the voters for the November elections, even if this effect was limited. Therefore, aiming to understand the political stance against terrorism in the politicians' tweets can be considered as the starting point of this research. In the November 2015 elections, it was observed that fearful, concerned and anxious voters closely followed the messages that were transmitted by the political leaders. Therefore, it is apparent that the electoral campaigns were dominated by terrorism, which is discernible in the messages the politicians disseminated on Twitter. The manner in which politicians presented terrorism in their political discourse and incorporated the issue into their messages in the November 2015 Turkish elections should thus be researched. This research analyzes the political discourse of the political leaders in relation to the terrorist incidents during their electronic election campaigns through content analysis, particularly in the case of Twitter. In the study, the tweets by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [President], Ahmet Davutoğlu (AKP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (CHP), Devlet Bahçeli (MHP), Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yüksekdağ (HDP) between June-November have been taken as the sample. To summarize the aim of the study, the answers to the following research questions are sought:

1. How did Turkish politicians use Twitter (June 7, 2015- November 1, 2015)?
2. What did Turkish politicians mention in their tweets (June 7, 2015- November 1, 2015)?
3. What was the frequency of specific words that the leaders used in relation terrorism in their *tweets*?
4. What did leaders relay to social media users in their tweets about terrorism during the election period?

2 Literature

In this section, the digital public opinion, digital public sphere, social media usage of politicians and the political conditions in Turkey prior to the November 2015 elections are summarized.

2.1.1 Digital Public Opinion

In modern politics, the formation of public opinion is increasingly influenced by the social networks, which are progressively being used as political communication tools. According to Solis and Breakenridge [Solis and Breakenridge 09], the developments in our lives [political, cultural, economic, artistic, etc.] have spread globally through social networks; therefore, social networks enable information sharing by making it more accessible. Furthermore, they also enable people to follow developments instantly and even to become participants in these events.

The interactive communication opportunities provided by social networks permits individuals to be active rather than passive in their relationship with the society and state [this refers to digital activism; not to street activism]. This phenomenon strengthens the role of social networks in forming public opinion as well as the political sphere [Eren and Aydın, 14]. The influence of social networks on political

participation has been recognized and adopted by many politicians and the general public. As a result, social networks have assumed significant roles in both political participation and political actions. Research shows that citizens' access to Twitter empowers them through digital means to become more actively involved in democratic activities. This encourages more public discussions about politics and enables the democratic process to become more dynamic when compared to the traditional media [Ifukor, 10; Kasmani et al., 14]. However, it cannot be said that social media is the sole factor beyond socio-political mobilizations, as social media is only a conduit for such activities. The main reasons behind socio-political mobilizations are corruption, poverty, human rights and restriction of freedoms [Joseph, 11]. For example, protestors utilized the power of social media networks in events such as Wall Street in the USA, the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Gezi Park in Turkey, which provided them with increased visibility. As a result, their protests made more of an impression and respective causes moved into the public realm. Moreover, they have created a form of public opinion that differed from the mainstream media and this played a pivotal role in shaping the political discussions [Çöteli, 15; Fábrega and Sajuria, 13; Shirky, 11].

2.2 Social Media, Politics and Elections

As social networks have been transformed into the digital public sphere, politicians have now emerged who perceive the necessity to develop and disseminate their political discourses. The politicians, who have started to use social networks to strengthen their political ideologies, frequently use Twitter among other social networks to directly communicate with the electorate, criticize recent political developments and express their opinions. There have been several academic studies analyzing political party representatives that organize election campaigns through social networks [Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 11; Conover et al., 11; Garimella et al., 16; Halpern and Gibbs, 13; Kushin and Kitchener, 09; Robertson et al., 10]. As Maireder and Ausserhofer [Maireder and Ausserhofer 13] stated, Twitter users perceive the tweets about the political discourses in different ways, "the reality of political discourses Twitter users' experiences are shaped by the bricolage of messages and media objects they access through their individually composed streams, an assembly produced in a process of networking meaning by dispersed actors mutually referencing each other" [p. 1]. Studies show that social network users can readily access the political discourses of the politicians and can become participants in the development of the digital public sphere [eg, Aday et al., 10; Benkler, 06; Bennett, 03; Farrell and Drezner, 08; Nguyen 11; Sunstein, 02; Tumasjan et al., 11].

Social networks have been intensively used by politicians, in particular in relation to elections. In election periods, social networks provide an environment for politicians to present their personalities, to express their opinions and objectives and to assess the mood of the electorate. Politicians often obtain feedback before elections so that they can strategically manage their election campaigns. Consequently, they have the opportunity to respond to voters' questions, to increase the voter turnout and to criticize the opposing candidate(s) [Gibson and Ward, 02]. Social networks provide an opportunity for the voters to identify their policies and to respond directly to the politicians rather than an environment where politicians orate and participants simply

applaud in rallies. This contributes to the elections by making them more democratic, free, transparent, and open to discussion.

When US President Obama actively used the social networks in 2008 Presidential Election, his actions drew significant attention. General Eisenhower was considered the President of radio, John F. Kennedy was the President of television and Barack Obama became the President of the Internet [Yağmurlu, 11]. It can be argued that Obama initiated a revolution, which has changed our perspective towards political communication and political communication tools. President Obama increased his popularity and electoral power by utilizing methods and tools that were different those that had been applied in the conventional political communication campaigns of the past [Hendricks and Denton 10; Metzgar and Maruggi, 09]. The digitalization of his electoral campaign, as well as the messages targeting the younger generations as the primary target audience via social media networks, are considered to be the critical factors that were the foundation for Obama's electoral success [Baysal, 10; Kenski et al., 10].

Based on the literature, one can see that Twitter's importance in driving electoral campaigns is significantly increasing. The leaders (and opinion leaders) tend to perceive Twitter as an important tool for public expression and delivering messages to the populace [Park, 13]. A recent research study showed that, in the 2010 Greek local elections, only 7.4% of the candidates had Twitter accounts. Furthermore, in the Greek local elections held in 2014, only 9.2% of the candidates adopted Twitter as an election tool [Lappas et al., 16]. On the other hand, another research study indicates that, in the 2013 general elections in Italy, virtually all the party leaders and candidates had Twitter accounts. Additionally, the messages they posted on Twitter increased the political activeness of their followers (e.g. by attending offline electoral activities) [Vaccari et al., 15]. In regard to the general elections and the use of Twitter, it has been claimed that the social media networks were particularly advantageous for the smaller or less organized parties in terms of delivering their messages to the electorate. However, research focused on the 2010 general elections in Netherlands indicated that the larger and more organized parties were inclined to use Twitter at least as extensively as the smaller parties [Vergeer and Hermans, 13]. Furthermore, even though this is not in the scope of this particular study, other researchers have been attempting to generate Twitter analysis models that are capable of predicting the general election results [Singhal et al., 15].

2.3 Political Conditions in Turkey Prior to the November 2015 Elections

In the 1990s, the struggle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who attempted to instigate Kurdish secessionism, constituted the central issue in the political agenda of Turkey. In 2002, the AKP[1] accomplished electoral success for the first time and it assumes power in Turkey by enjoying overwhelming public support. It recorded noticeable success in solidifying civil rule and diminishing the army's influence in the political domain. It also achieved significant progression in expanding the rights and liberties enjoyed by the Kurdish citizens and the religious segments, as well as launching the peace-process aimed at a constitutional settlement between the Kurdish and Turkish communities [Hale and Ozbudun, 09]. However, it was soon realized that

[1] AKP is a liberal-conservative party.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leader of the AKP, had the intention to introduce constitutional amendments, not only to resolve the Kurdish Question, but also to transform the Parliamentary regime into a Presidential system. In 2013, the anti-AKP protests that were instigated in Istanbul spread to 78 other cities. The protestors were mainly composed of middle-class seculars who were displeased with the AKP's policies aimed at the promotion of Islamic values in Turkey. During the protests in 2013, opinion leaders, party leaders and protestors used social media effectively in shaping socio-political manipulations. As a result of the public disorder that occurred, access to Facebook and Twitter was temporarily prohibited [Kuymulu, 13].

In 2014, Erdoğan won the presidential elections and progressed further towards achieving his goal of establishing a presidential democracy. As a result of the escalation of violence conducted by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, there had been significant dissatisfaction amongst Kurdish citizens, accusing the AKP of not acting seriously to preserve the security of external Kurds. At this point, the PKK re-launched its violent actions, which represented a threat to public order due to the increased socio-political polarizations and led to repeated social media restrictions. In the elections held on 7 June 2015, the AKP failed to win the majority of seats; however, due to the sharp political polarizations that existed, the four parties in the Parliament could not establish a coalition government and early elections were held. The AKP's leader, Ahmet Davutoğlu, established a temporary minority government and he was named Prime Minister. Terrorist attacks by ISIS and the PKK, political instability and social polarizations all overshadowed the electoral campaign [Kalaycıoğlu, 15]. The AKP's main rivals were Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's[2] party CHP[3] (led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu), the MHP[4] (led by Devlet Bahçeli) and the HDP[5] (led by two co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ). However, the AKP successful gained a majority of seats by winning 49.5% of the votes.

3 Methodology

This research is based on the qualitative research approach. In accordance with this approach, the study aims to analyze the politician's tweets, which are the subject of the research, in depth and detail, as Bogdan and Biklen [Bogdan and Biklen 06], Glesne [Glesne 11] and Maxwell [Maxwell 96] stated. Furthermore, the objective is to understand and interpret the reality of political communication in the social networks in Turkey [post-positivist science and interpretative paradigm] in line with the fact that perspectives may change depending on the available conditions and where there many varied (several) opinions.

The study is based on the "case study" approach, which is a form of qualitative research model. In the definitions made by Yin [Yin 14] related to case studies, it has been expressed that a recent phenomenon has to be studied within its real life cycle (content) and in an integrative manner. In this study, Turkey has been specified as the

[2] Founder of Republic of Turkey.
[3] CHP has a secular-social democrat political orientation.
[4] MHP is a nationalist-conservative party.
[5] HDP is a pluralist -leftist party. Additionally, it is the main political organization representing the demands of ethnic Kurds in Turkey.

case study and the objective is to define or, in other words, to understand and interpret the situation in Turkey on the basis of the contemporary phenomenon of terrorism.

The reason that Turkey was chosen for this research is that the researchers have a thorough understanding of this country and have lived there for a period of time. Furthermore, it was considered to be significant to reflect the socio-political polarizations in Turkey. The country has cultural characteristics that reflect those of Eastern countries with a largely Muslim population and, at the same time, it reflects the characteristics of Western countries as it bridges between Europe and Asia with its secular and laic nature. Therefore, in countries such as Turkey, where freedoms such as demilitarization, democracy, and accountability are all experienced, there are also elements of ethno-cultural conflicts, conservatism, authoritarianism and control driven by government practices. Taking this contradiction into account, it is important to examine the use of social media in forming public opinion and political policies in Turkey.

3.1 Sampling

In this study, "Twitter" and "terrorism" have been chosen as the subjects in the social networks by using "purposeful sampling". According to Patton [Patton 02], purposeful sampling allows for the study of cases/topics that are considered to contain rich information. The reason Twitter was selected among other social networks in the study is because, in world literature, studies have shown that Twitter is an important medium among other social networks, particularly in political matters and political communication [see Jungherr, 14]. Furthermore, there are some findings that indicate that Twitter is more intensively used in Turkey when compared with other countries around the world [see www.monitera.com & https://www.tweetping.net/]. For example, Bostancı's [Bostancı 15] research concludes that Turkish politicians use Twitter predominantly for political communication. Above all, although there are general freedoms in social media use in Turkey (except for restrictions on crime, terrorism and pornographic sites), Twitter has been selected as it has been completely restricted on several occasions, unlike other networks (see https://tr.wikipedia.org/, Twitter ban in 2014-2015 in some periods and statement of President of Turkish Republic as "We will root out "Twitter"[6]). Therefore, as previously mentioned, Twitter has been included in this research purposefully (because of the political communication emphasis in literature, its intensive use in Turkey and as it is one of the rare networks that has been banned in Turkey). This presents an intriguing contradiction in that the government in Turkey bans Twitter and also actively uses it for its own purposes

Finally, terrorism has been consciously chosen for this research. It is regrettable that Turkey is now in the global spotlight where terrorism. It can be observed that Turkey is experiencing an ongoing armed conflict with the PKK terrorist organization. Furthermore, another terrorist organization called ISIS has become a prime focus after the Suruç suicide attack on July 20, 2015, with a total of 10 large explosions occurring over the following year (For more information, you can access

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http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/52603/Erdogan__Twitter_in_kokunu_kaziyacagiz.html#, accessible through this link

the news below[7]). Furthermore, the June 2015-November 1, 2015 period (this period can be called repeated election or second election term) has been included in the study intentionally as it provides the opportunity to assess both the election and the messages on terrorism posted by the political leaders. Finally, in order to limit the research, we have included five leaders from four political parties in the parliament in Turkey (Davutoğlu, Kılıçdaroğlu, Bahçeli, Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This research has included the tweets of six political leaders in Turkey between June 7, 2015, and November 1, 2015, as the basic data source. Firstly, the tweets sent by each leader during this time (audio, video, photograph, hash tag etc. not only content) have been listed and recorded. Accordingly, it was revealed that Bahçeli posted 346 tweets, Davutoğlu posted 150 tweets, Demirtaş posted 59, Yüksekdağ posted 56, Kılıçdaroğlu posted 99 and Erdoğan posted 154 during the given period. Since Bahçeli's tweets from June could not be accessed from his Twitter feed, (it is presumed that such tweets could not be found due to the large amount of posts he made), they are excluded from examination.

In the study, the analysis was based on four research questions. The number of followers, users followed, and the video-audio sharing count etc. of the leaders on their Twitter pages has been tabulated under the first research question. For the second research question, thematic content analysis has been conducted in the research and the researchers have identified the relevant topics (trend topics) after examining the tweets of the leaders individually. As a consequence, similar topics have been formed into groups and their frequencies have been identified and shown in chart. In some cases, it was discovered that a tweet could involve many topics and, in such cases, all topics have been included without making any distinction. The topics commonly referenced by the leaders (mentioned at least by five or all six leaders) have been presented in the chart to summarize the data related to the tweets. In order to see clearly what the leaders have referenced, tweets have quoted after being translated (from Turkish to English) without changing the context. The quotations have been placed in quotation marks, in italics, indicating which leader it belongs to and by numbering in the findings section.

In the other research question, the words used in the tweets have been analyzed. The words to be analyzed were determined by the three researchers listing the words that they associated with "terrorism". Then, these lists were assessed separately and the numbers of repetitions (frequency) within the messages were examined by identifying 18 common words (such as terrorism, nation, religion, ISIS, PKK). The words reflected in the tweets were categorized from “mostly used” to “least used”, as a result of the frequency analysis.

Finally, a detailed analysis was conducted by focusing purely on the terrorism-related messages in the fourth question of the study. First, the messages related to terrorism were examined in terms of numbers and were reflected in a chart. In this context, the data such as the number of likes, retweets and word-sentence number were all presented. The respective frequencies and averages and were determined

[7] http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160628_istanbul_havalimani_saldiri

through the application of Microsoft Excel software. The posts in the terrorism related tweets were assessed through content analysis under this research question. Keywords (codes) were identified in every message and themes were created by combining such codes and, finally, the terrorism perception (perspective) of each leader was revealed on an individual basis. In order to illustrate the terrorism perceptions of the leaders, the most liked, retweeted and attention-grabbing tweets were quoted through translation (from Turkish to English).

3.3 Validity and Reliability

In order to demonstrate the reliability of the thematic content analysis used in the study, the two researchers randomly chose one of the six political leaders (Demirtas) and analysis was conducted. The two researchers coded all tweets by Demirtaş individually and the related topics were identified. In total, they concurred on 53 out of 59 messages after coding. As a result of the calculation, the consistency between the researchers was determined to be 89.83%. For the reliability of the research, a consensus of at least 70% has to be achieved between the coders [Miles & Huberman, 94]. Therefore, in this study, it was concluded that the tweets have been reliably analyzed, as this value exceeds the required percentage. After preliminary analysis, three researchers analyzed all the data for proper data analysis in order to eradicate the difficulties and for adaptation.

To ensure the validity of the study, the data has been written in detail, information has been provided concerning how the analysis has been conducted, tweets have been directly quoted, analysis has been conducted based on research questions and maintained within the limits of these research questions and generalization of the research results has been avoided (for example the opinions of the six political leaders are not expressed as the general opinion of the parties and, as the study has been conducted only in Turkey, it is not generalized for other countries).

4 Findings

The findings of the research are provided below, according to the four research questions.

As indicated in Table 1, it has been observed that the leaders who held power have more followers when compared to the leaders in opposition. Amongst the six leaders, Erdoğan is in the first position and Davutoğlu in the second. Likewise, in regards to the number of followers of the opposition leaders, Kılıçdaroğlu is in the first place. Bahçeli comes second and Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ had the least amount of followers. Therefore, if the number of followers of the six leaders on Twitter are collated in terms of political party, AKP is in the first place, CHP second, MHP third and HDP fourth. In regard to the votes gained by the four parties in the elections of 1 November 2015, the order was relatively similar. The AKP (first party) gained 49.50% of votes, CHP (second party) 25.32%, MHP (third party) 11.90% and HDP (fourth party) 10.76%.

Political Leader	Followers	Follows	Tweets	Videos	Pic-tures	Sym-bols	Re-tweets	Hash-tags
Devlet Bahçeli	2,430,000	0	346	0	12	0	0	0
Ahmet Davutoğlu	4,830,000	87	150	3	28	0	8	34
Selahattin Demirtaş	1,470,000	1.149	59	1	5	4	11	2
Figen Yüksekdağ	438,000	361	56	1	9	0	13	22
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	3,930,000	9,438	99	5	6	0	4	8
R. Tayyip Erdoğan	8,560,000	2	154	0	28	0	14	4

Table 1: Party leaders of Turkey on Twitter

The number of leaders' followers was significantly larger than the number of persons or institutions they themselves followed on Twitter. In regard to the number of accounts they followed on Twitter, Kılıçdaroğlu is in first place as he followed 9,438 persons or institutions, while he was followed by 3,930,000 accounts. The number of his followers was 416 times greater than the number of the accounts he followed. The other leaders followed overwhelmingly fewer accounts on Twitter. For instance, Erdoğan, President of the Republic of Turkey, followed only two accounts on Twitter. At this point, one might postulate that the leaders prefer to use Twitter in delivering messages instead of following others' opinions. Thus, their behaviors on Twitter appear to be predominantly a form of one-sided communication instead of interactive dialogue.

In regard to the total number of tweets in the period analyzed by this paper, Bahçeli, the nationalist-conservative leader and the eldest amongst the six, is in the first place. The number of messages posted by Bahçeli was 3-4 times greater than the amount of messages posted by the other leaders. It could therefore be said that the fact that an elder, nationalist and conservative leader used the social media networks so frequently, is particularly important. However, this research did not reach the conclusion that there is a direct correlation between the number of tweets posted by the leaders and their electoral success.

It has been observed that the leaders preferred to use more pictures when compared to videos, symbols and hashtags. The amount of images they shared is followed by the number of hashtags they used; however, it should be emphasized that they did not prefer to share videos and symbols frequently. In the period analyzed by this research, the six leaders shared ten videos in total and they only used four symbols (emoticons). Likewise, the number of messages retweeted by the leaders was relatively small (less than 15 in total). The leaders preferred to deliver their own messages instead of sharing other's ideas.

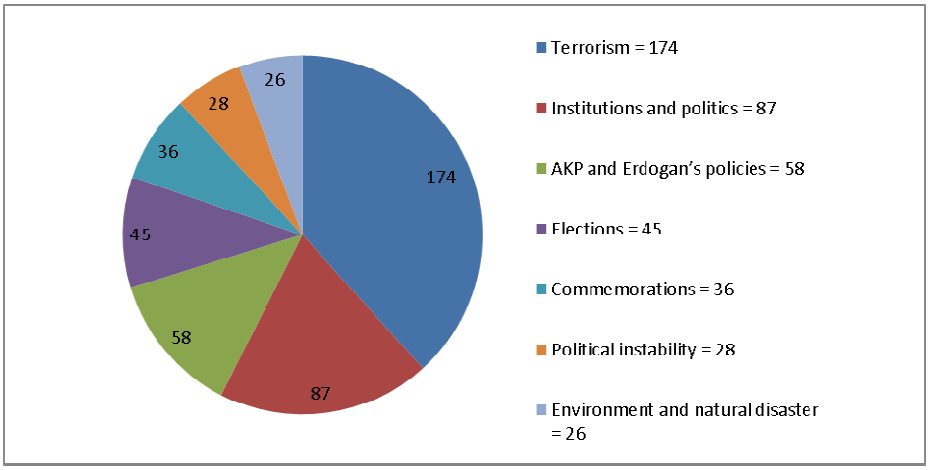

Chart 1: Frequency of various themes in Turkish leaders' Twitter messages

Chart 1 illustrates the thematic content analysis designed by the authors of this paper, which was focused on the agendas of the political leaders in their Twitter activity. It has been detected that, in their Twitter messages, terrorism was amongst the priorities of the six leaders.

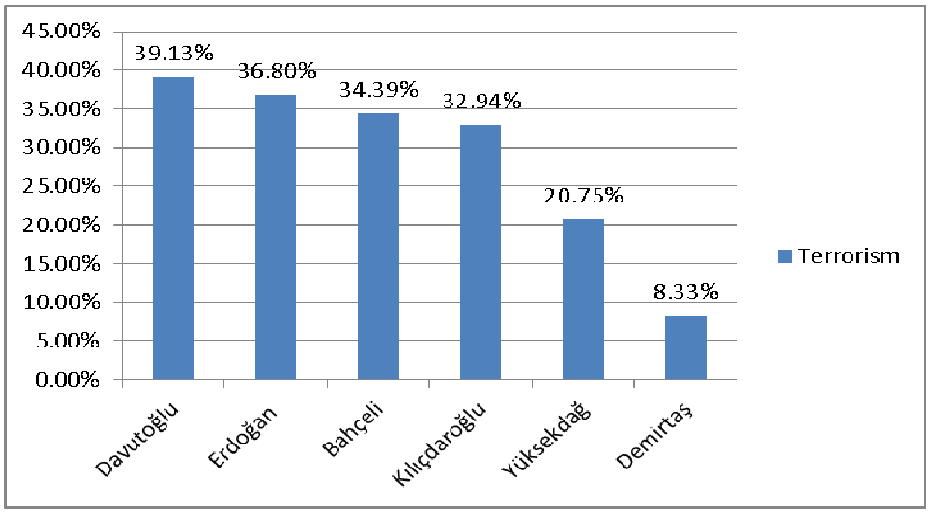

Chart 2: Percentage of the theme "terrorism" in leaders' Twitter messages

Based on Chart 2 above, one can see that messages related to terrorism constituted over one-third (34.8%) of the total messages posted by the six leaders. Once the Twitter messages of the leaders are observed separately, it can be seen that 34.39% of Bahçeli's messages, 39.13% of Davutoğlu's messages, 8.33% of Demirtaş's messages, 20.75% of Yüksekdağ's messages, 32.94% of Kılıçdaroğlu's

messages and 36.08% of Erdoğan's messages were related to terrorism. With the HDP leaders (Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ) as exceptions, approximately one-third of each leader's messages were related to terrorism. Additionally, it is apparent that each leader had their own personal perception and discourse on the subject of terrorism.

In regard to institutions and politics, the leaders' messages generally focused on the security forces (army, police and intelligence), education and the constitution. It has been observed that, while Erdoğan and Davutoğlu tended to praise the Turkish institutions, the opposition leaders sometimes criticized the way the institutions were operated. Furthermore, Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş were the only two leaders to criticize the Turkish Armed Forces[8]. The following messages are amongst the relevant examples:

"I am proud of our brave soldiers who are safeguarding the mountains under difficult geographical conditions" [Davutoğlu, 34]. *"I do not care what the pro-AKP intelligence thinks; however, I had not planned to attend the meeting" [Yüsekdağ, 32]. "The system is the order. The legitimacy of the system is based on the constitution and the national will. Was the constitutional order broken and we do not know it?" [Bahçeli, 278]. "All the campaigns operated by the land and air forces, as well as the media, aim to damage HDP's electoral power" [Demirtaş, 40]. "I wish a successful, peaceful and happy academic year to all students and teachers" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 44].*

In regard to the politics of the AKP and Erdoğan, all the leaders of the opposition tended to accuse the government and the President of violating democracy. In addition to this, Bahçeli labelled the AKP's peace policies as "treason". On the other hand, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu defended themselves by making references to the politics and traditions of the AKP. The following examples are amongst the relevant messages:

"We have struggled for 12 years for development, democracy and liberties" [Erdoğan, 94]. "AKP is a movement of wisdom and youth, a movement of the past and the future. May Allah secure our unity" [Davutoğlu, 146]. "On 12 September, our democracy was severely wounded by a military seizure of power. Today, we have to prevent the civil seizure of power that will open the same wound" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 51]. "Based on the instructions of the Prime Minister, our co-chairman, candidates and party members were attacked and taken into custody. You will lose again!" [Yüksekdağ, 7]. "We ask you to terminate the peace process that supplied weaponry to PKK and prepared our national dissolution and devastation. Do you [Davutoğlu] *understand?" [Bahçeli, 228].*

[8] Traditionally, for the majority of Kurdish politicians, the Turkish Armed Forces are perceived as an instrument of suppression, targeting Kurds. On the other hand, even though the AKP government made reforms in 2007-2011, provided further demilitarization in Turkish politics and found itself in a significant political confrontation with high-ranking officers, in nationalist and conservative circles, the Turkish soldiers are traditionally perceived as the modern extensions of Prophet Mohammad's soldiers. Likewise, since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic and CHP, was himself a General, the Kemalist circles have sympathy towards the Armed Forces.

In regard to the messages of commemoration by the six leaders; political leaders, politicians, victims of massacres and victims of natural disasters were amongst the most frequently commemorated persons. Nevertheless, while Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ were the only two leaders who commemorated the 33 leftist intellectuals who were victims of the Madımak Massacre in 1993, Davutoğlu was the only leader who commemorated ex-Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, the Centre-Right leader who was executed after the 1960 *coup d'état.* On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu was the only leader who commemorated Ahmet Taner Kışlalı, the ex-Minister of Culture in a CHP government who was murdered in 1999. Therefore, it could be argued that the six leaders reflected their ideological differences from each other by commemorating different political figures. The following examples are amongst the relevant messages:

"22 years have passed and still no apologies for the Madımak Massacre. We commemorate the victims with respect" [Demirtaş, 52]. "I express my deepest sympathy to all my compatriots who lost their lives in the earthquake that occurred on 17 August 1999" [Erdoğan, 96]. "I express my deepest sympathy to the 8,372 Bosnians, our brothers and sisters, who were massacred in the #SrebrenitsaSoykırımı [Srebrenitsa Genocide]. #SrebrenitsayıUnutma [Do not forget Srebrenitsa]" [Erdoğan, 113]. "I commemorate with respect Ahmet Taner Kışlalı, the respectful academic, politician and journalist, on the 16th anniversary of his murder" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 18]. "Adnan Menderes, executed on 17 September 1961 by the judiciary that totally ignored justice, was an agonist for democracy, sympathized by our nation" [Davutoğlu, 56].

In relation to natural disasters and the environment, the leaders generally focused on the flood in Hopa. Additionally, leaders of the left-wing parties tended to deliver messages as a form of environmentalist protest against industrialization projects affecting rural areas. The following examples are amongst the relevant messages:

"I strongly support the struggle of all citizens not withstanding those who allow, for political interests, the destruction of the environment in Cerattepe" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 85]. "The people of Hopa need immediate help. The government should send helicopters to help the people in evacuating the region" [Demirtaş, 32]. "I express my deepest sympathy to the victims of the natural disaster that occurred in Hopa, and my solidarity to our citizens" [Erdoğan, 88].

In regard to the political instability, the leaders generally tended to accuse the other political parties for the unsuccessful attempts to establish a coalition government. The following examples were amongst the relevant messages:

"Those who egoistically left Turkey without a government will not be able to account for what they did" [Erdoğan, 154]. "The temporary war cabinet launched military campaigns to prevent the establishment of peace and coalition. However, it is a temporary government. As temporary as many other war governments…" [Yüksekdağ, 25]. "Finally, I would like to repeat once more that, to understand the Turk, first you have to listen to him. They did not listen to anyone, they did not hear us" [Bahçeli, 221].

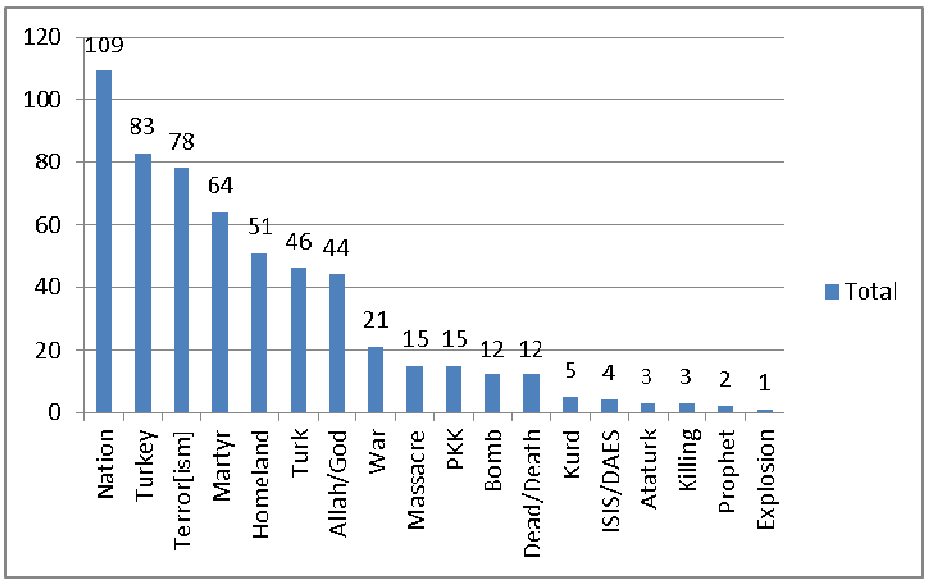

Chart 3: The words used by the leaders in their Twitter messages

Based on Chart 3, in terms of the words used by the six leaders, "nation" was the most frequently used word. Once the tweets of the six leaders are observed separately, it can be seen that Davutoğlu was the only leader whose most frequently used word was "nation". Erdoğan used the word "terror", Kılıçdaroğlu the word "martyr", Bahçeli the word "homeland", Demirtaş the word "massacre" and Yüksekdağ the words "war" and "dead-death" more frequently than other words. The words used by the six leaders reflect that the November elections were held under extraordinary conditions.

According to the data indicated by Chart 3, it could be argued that the discourses of the political leaders were shaped, on their divergent ideologies. The word "nation" was repeatedly used by conservative leaders Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, as well as the nationalist MHP's leader Bahçeli. However, the Social Democrat CHP's leader Kılıçdaroğlu did not use the word "nation" as often as Erdogan, Davutoğlu and Bahçeli. Moreover, the leaders of the pluralist left-wing party HDP, Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ, did not employ the word "nation" in their tweets. The collated data indicates that Bahçeli used the words "Turk", "Turkey" and "homeland" more frequently than the other leaders. Even though the words used by the political leaders generally corresponded to the ideologies of their parties. It interesting to note that the secular CHP's leader Kılıçdaroğlu was the politician who used the word "Allah" more frequently than all the other leaders. The HDP is the party that has more Kurdish members than the others in Turkey and it demands the enlargement of Kurdish political rights. Nevertheless, its leaders Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ made virtually no references to the term "Kurd" in their tweets (Demirtaş used the term only once). In the light of these results, it could be assumed that, in using the social media networks,

the leaders attempted to deliver messages to the voters who traditionally voted for other parties as well.

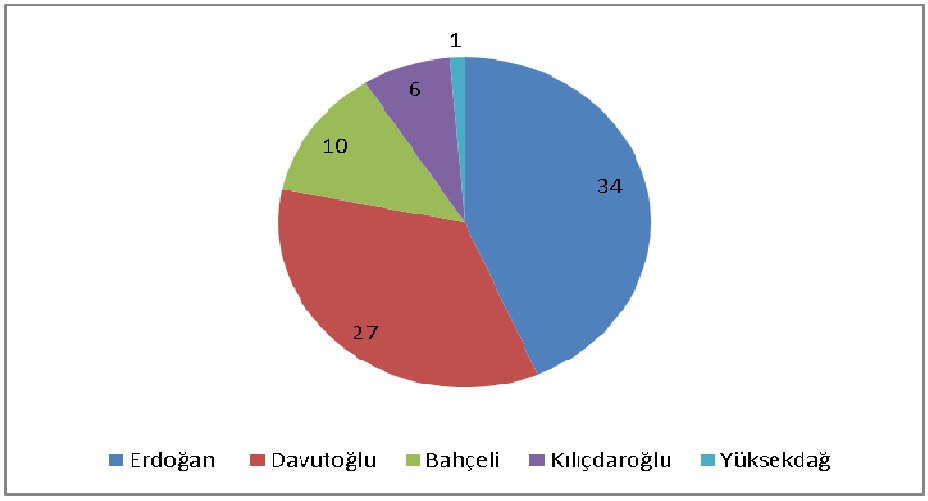

Chart 4: The frequency of the word "terrorism" used by the leaders in their Twitter messages

As shown in Chart 4, the leader who used the word "terrorism" more frequently than the others was President Erdoğan. Additionally, the words "martyr", "war", "massacre", "bombing", "killing" and "explosion" were used by the leaders. The analysis on the word selections by the leaders in their Twitter messages indicates that they frequently refrained from actually using the names of terrorist organizations. The name "ISIS" was used only four times in total by Erdoğan, Davutoğlu and Demirtaş, whereas Bahçeli, Yüksekdağ and Kılıçdaroğlu made no references to it whatsoever. Likewise, the term "PKK" was only used by the right-wing leaders and its usage frequency was relatively low. The tendency to avoid using the names of terrorist organizations in Twitter messages was a common feature of the six leaders. In the relevant period, Turkey was threatened by terrorism and social conflict. Thus, one could claim that the leaders aimed to balance the socio-political conflicts and they therefore were inclined to avoid making references to the terrorist organizations. It is also noteworthy that the HDP leaders manifestly refrained from using the word "terrorism", as Yüksekdağ used the term "terrorism" only once and Demirtaş made no references to the term.

Table 2 provides an in-depth analysis of the leaders' messages on terrorism, posted between June and November 2016. Based on the quantitative analysis of these messages, the following results have been obtained:

i) The leader with the largest number of messages on terrorism was Bahçeli, and the leader with the lowest number of messages on terrorism was Demirtaş.

ii) The message on terrorism with the largest number of retweets and likes belongs to Kılıçdaroğlu. Based on the average of all the messages on terrorism, the largest "like" average belongs to Erdoğan's messages and the largest retweet average

belongs to Demirtaş's messages. Based on Table 1, the number of Erdoğan's followers is six times larger than the number of Demirtaş's followers. This result is important since it reflects that Demirtaş's messages enjoy significant popularity in social media networks.

iii) Based on the number of words and sentences in the messages on terrorism, it has been observed that Yüksekdağ, the only female leader, frequently used longer sentences. Additionally, while she wrote messages composed of four sentences, the other leaders' messages had a maximum of two to three sentences. It has also been observed that the longest messages on terrorism were composed of 19-21 words, while the shortest messages on terrorism were composed of 6-14 words.

	Bahçeli	**Davutoğlu**	**Demirtaş**	**Yüksekdağ**	**Kılıçdaroğlu**	**Erdoğan**
Total number of messages on terrorism	65	36	4	11	23	35
The average number of retweets of the messages on terrorism	1,394.25	2,522.97	5,692.50	992.40	3,303.61	5,604.49
The average number of likes of the messages on terrorism	1,639.50	2,061.36	6,426.50	1,307.60	4,132.39	8,933
The average number of words in messages on terrorism	17.50	14.27	17	13.80	15	14.37
The average number of sentences in messages on terrorism	1.73	1.06	1.50	2.20	1.57	1.03

Table 2: The analysis of the leaders' messages on terrorism

The qualitative content analysis of the leaders' messages on terrorism is evaluated below:

1. It has been observed that Bahçeli used the term "martyr" relatively frequently. In his messages, the term "martyr" generally referred to soldiers and police officers killed by terrorists. In his messages, the leader of the MHP tended to offer condolences to the security force members who lost their lives. He strongly accused the PKK for the terrorism in Turkey and indicated that he strongly opposed the AKP's peace-building policies. Additionally, he claimed that the AKP had dangerous relations with the PKK. In his messages, Bahçeli asserted that the HDP and several

NGOs were in cooperation with the PKK. The leader of the MHP asserted that national unity was essential in terminating terrorism. Bahçeli's most liked and retweeted message on terrorism was as follows:

"Those who set traps in the East and act naive in the West should know that, one day, they will be unmasked and the skirts they wear[9] *will not save them" [Bahçeli, 297]*.

The following examples were amongst the other revelatory messages posted by Bahçeli:

"The gentlemen who are ruling the country; Turkey is under terrorist rule, what is keeping you busy? Creating opportunities for early elections by utilizing surveys is treason as well" [Bahçeli, 290].

"The so-called 'peace' and 'solution' are feeding terrorism and evil. This food does not give life to children, it kills fathers" [Bahçeli, 298].

2. Davutoğlu also frequently used the term "martyr" in reference to the individuals (particularly soldiers and police officers) killed by terrorists. In his messages, Davutoğlu shared images and demonstrated to social media users that he physically attended the funerals of soldiers and police officers killed by terrorists. He made references, not only to the PKK, but also to ISIS and, from this perspective, he differed from Bahçeli. The Turkish Prime Minister tended to express sympathy to the people (soldiers, police officers and unarmed citizens) killed by terrorists. In his messages, Davutoğlu often accused the opposition parties of hindering political stability and peace by not supporting the AKP's solution policies. In his opinion, national unity and peace could defeat terrorism. Davutoğlu's most liked message on terrorism was as follows:

"Our struggle remains, and shall remain, within the legal framework. We shall not tolerate bloodshed amongst brothers" [Davutoğlu, 58].

On the other hand, the Turkish Prime Minister's most retweeted message on terrorism was as follows:

"I shall be a part of another historical moment with the demonstration #TerörreKarşıTekSes [A United Voice against Terrorism], which will be held in Yenikapı" [Davutoğlu, 44].

The following examples were amongst the other powerful messages posted by Davutoğlu:

"The terrorist circles should know that we will never step back in our struggle" [Davutoğlu, 66].

"I emphasize once more: those mountains will be free of terrorists, at whatever cost" [Davutoğlu, 68].

3. The Twitter messages posted by the HDP co-chairs (Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ) were relatively lower in terms of quantity, when compared to the other leaders. Additionally, the two leaders' approaches towards terrorism were different from those of the political leaders. It has been observed that the two leaders refrained from using the words "terrorism" and "PKK"; however, they occasionally used the term "ISIS". They tended to refer to terrorist attacks by using the term "massacre" and they did not use the term "martyr". The two leaders were seen to regularly offer condolences to the

[9] In Turkish, the term "wearing a skirt", if used for a man, has a humiliating meaning, describing that the relevant person is not trustworthy.

people killed by terrorists. The co-chairs used the term "state-terrorism", and this fundamentally separated them from the other leaders. They used the relevant term in criticizing relevant actions taken by the government and the security forces. The two leaders expressed that terrorism could be terminated through the establishment of peace. Although the two leaders were the co-chairs of the same political party, it is important to emphasize that the amount of likes and retweets received by Demirtaş's messages was five times larger than the retweets and likes Yüksekdağ's messages received. This fact becomes even more thought-provoking when considering that Yüksekdağ is a female leader defending women rights. It is also noteworthy that, while Demirtaş had the tendency to criticize PKK's violent actions, Yüksekdağ did not have this inclination.

Demirtaş's most liked message on terrorism was as follows:

"I express my deep sympathy towards our brothers that we lost in Dağlıca, and the children we lost in Cizre" [Demirtaş, 24].

Demirtaş's most retweeted message was as follows:

"There is no conflict in Yüksekova, there is a massacre there. The weapons that you directed against the people will one day be pointed at you" [Demirtaş, 30].

Yüksekdağ's most liked and most retweeted message was as follows:

"We cannot think. That is our weakness. I wish I were there! And I wish I died in their place, not with them" [Yüksekdağ, 29].

The following messages were amongst the other powerful messages of the two leaders:

"Police forces are attacking the massacre square[10] in Ankara with pepper gas. They did the same in Diyarbakır as well. But why?" [Demirtaş, 14].

"I was in Suruç[11] one night before the explosion. Some people thought that I would stay there. But I did not, I could not" [Yüksekdağ, 31].

4. Kılıçdaroğlu was another leader who accused Erdoğan and the AKP for the growth of terrorism, bloodshed and chaos in Turkey. However, the leader of the CHP did not go so far as to claim that there was cooperation between the AKP and terrorist organizations; he did not label the HDP as a terrorism supporter and made no reference to "state-terror". Kılıçdaroğlu referred to the police officers and soldiers killed by terrorist as "martyrs". In his Twitter messages, the leader of the CHP also offered condolences to the families of those killed by terrorists. His message with the largest number of likes and retweets was as follows:

"For 400 MPs[12] you transformed the country into a battlefield. Mothers lost their children, children lost their mothers and you have no guilty conscience at all" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 54].

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[10] On 10 October 2015, suicide bombers killed over 100 protestors in a pro-peace demonstration in Ankara. The attack was carried out by ISIS.

[11] On 20 July 2015, a suicide bomber killed over 30 people in Suruç. ISIS was behind the massacre.

[12] Several times in his public speeches during the electoral campaign Erdoğan invited the people to send 400 "national" and "local" candidates to the Parliament. With this amount of MPs, AKP would have obtained the essential majority to achieve the constitutional amendments and transform Turkey into a Presidential regime.

The following message was also amongst the powerful tweets posted by Kılıçdaroğlu:

"While we suffer from the news about the martyrs, the President of the Republic is still making calculations for 400 MPs. Shame on him" [Kılıçdaroğlu, 55].

5. Once Erdoğan's messages on terrorism are investigated, it can be observed that he frequently defended the government's policies. He strongly opposed the accusations directed against himself and the government. He tended to deny that the AKP government was supporting ISIS and he claimed that ISIS was a terrorist organization killing innocent people, and therefore could not be identified with Islam. On the other hand, he accused the HDP of supporting the PKK. Erdoğan also applied the term "martyr" for the soldiers and police officers killed by terrorists. In his Twitter posts, the Turkish President also had the tendency to express his sympathy to the people killed by terrorists. In his messages, Erdoğan asserted that the method to defeat terrorism was through peace and national unity.

Erdoğan's most liked message on terrorism was as follows:

"I invite all my compatriots to the Yenikapı demonstration, to unite and to become a single voice against terrorism" [Erdoğan, 62].

The Turkish President's most retweeted message was as follows:

"It is not the time for conflict, fight or fragmentation. It is the time for unity, and the #TeröreKarşıTekSes [united voice against terrorism]" [Erdoğan, 61].

The following examples were also amongst the most powerful messages on terrorism posted by Erdoğan:

"We shall continue to struggle against terrorism until no single terrorist remains within the borders of our state and our country is free of terror" [Erdoğan, 101].

"Claiming that Turkey supports ISIS is vileness" [Erdoğan, 129].

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Developed by French software developer Franck Ernewein, Tweetping enables the complete visualization and real-time traffic representation of Twitter. Tweetping shows the global activity on Twitter on a live microblog site [by dividing data into continents and viewing the amount, number of words, characters and hash tags in the tweets]. The most active regions on the Twitter map are the US West Coast, Western Europe, Turkey, Indonesia and Japan [Tweetping, 16]. According to these results, Twitter is extensively used in Turkey (in particular to political communication). Bahçeli, one of the leaders whose tweets have been analyzed under this study, shared around 350 tweets over a four-month period (July-October 2015). In contrast, as Solop [Solop 10] researched, US President Obama sent only 262 tweets during an election period that lasted one and a half years (from April 29, 2007, to November 5, 2008, the day after the election). Such a difference may be explained by the increasing use and effect of Twitter in the contemporary political arena; however, Twitter use in Turkey can compete with the United States. Furthermore, Arıcı's study [Arıcı 13] was conducted three years previously and Bahçeli only shared 18 tweets in the first quarter of 2013. It can be observed from the Bahçeli case that Twitter use in political communication has significantly increased, compared with three years ago. The difference may arise from the fact that this study focused on an election period and Arıcı's study [Arıcı 13] was conducted in a relatively normal political period;

therefore, we should consider that leaders are more frequently active on the social networks during election periods. Finally, in another study Bostancı [Bostancı 15], the daily tweet average of the leaders was calculated and the averages for each leader were Erdoğan with 2.34, Kılıçdaroğlu with 1.60, Demirtaş with 0.97 and Bahçeli with 0.87. As one can see, starting from the bottom of the list, Bahçeli progressed to first place only one year later.

Another important research result is that the tweets of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were related to Turkish foreign relations and written in different languages (Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish). In fact, Bekci's study [Bekci 13] supports this. In his research, conducted with ten experts on media and foreign policy (academic, journalist and bureaucrat), Bekci [Bekci 13] concluded that social media is the most effective media instrument to form public opinion on foreign policies. As one can see, social media in Turkey is utilized, not only for domestic matters (election, education, history, national days etc.), but also for foreign affairs.

In literature, it is thought that the leaders who use social networks for political communication purposes target young people in particular. Young people are more inclined to follow the news online and express their opinions through the same media [Stieglitz et al., 12]. Today, many politicians accept that social networks are the most effective way to reach young people. Consequently, a politician who is active on social media is more visible to younger generations. Furthermore, politicians express that it is hard to reach young people through conventional means. The results of this study support the said opinion. Most of the tweets (around 60) sent by Bahçeli, one of the analyzed candidates in the research, are aimed at young people. Such activity by Bahçeli is considered to be a strategic preference and is significant.

As Vergeer and Hermans [Vergeer and Hermans 13] noted, this paper also concluded that the assumption that the smaller parties tend to use Twitter more extensively is largely inaccurate. Bahçeli was the most active leader on Twitter, and his party is not as “large” (in terms of votes) as the AKP and CHP. Nevertheless, the HDP leaders (the smallest party amongst the four), were the least active actors on Twitter. The AKP’s leader Davutoğlu and CHP’s leader Kılıçdaroğlu, the leaders of the first and second parties, used Twitter more often than the HDP leaders.

Vaccari and his colleagues [Vaccari et al. 15] argued that the Twitter messages posted by the leaders could increase public participation in offline demonstrations. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had invited the people to the “United Voice against Terrorism” demonstration by posting messages on Twitter. Based on this fact, one might argue that the two leaders were aware that their posts on Twitter were likely to increase the awareness of the people regarding the Yenikapı demonstration, which was transformed into the AKP’s showdown.

In this study, it can be clearly seen that terrorism was of the primary subjects in the tweets that were analyzed. Even though Turkey was in an election period, terrorism was the most discussed and the election was only the fourth. While the number of the total terrorism-related tweets by the leaders was 174, tweets related to elections totaled 45. As one can see, terrorism-related tweets were quadruple the number of election-related tweets. However, in his study conducted two years previously, Özgün [Özgün 14] identified the election agenda of the AKP and CHP as foreign policy-defence, democracy-state of law, employment, education, national solidarity, criticizing the opponent parties and projects. One can see that terrorism did

not constitute a priority in the political agenda. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the change in the Turkish agenda may have had an influence on the media [social media]. In this context, it is believed to be important to conduct scientific studies in Turkey to define the "agenda-setting" approach in political communication and how the public agenda influences the social media agenda. Recent studies have put emphasis on the determinative influence of social media on the public agenda; however, it is thought that it is significantly important to research the reverse relations (that is to say the determinative effect of public agenda on social media) by taking such studies into account [Kılıç, 15; Korkmaz, 15].

This study has researched which words were more preferred by the leaders in their tweets. Accordingly, it has been shown that the two most important words were "nation" and "Turkey". In his study conducted one year prior to this study, Bostancı [Bostancı 15] showed that "Turkey" was amongst the first three words that were frequently used by Recep T. Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu. The word "nation" was among the first ten words frequently used by Erdoğan. These results are considerably significant to demonstrate that leaders follow a stable path for some words that they use in their tweets. Furthermore, in his research where he analyzed the speeches made by the leaders to their own political parties in Turkey in February 2014, Güngör [Güngör 14] revealed that the leaders have a rich vocabulary in their political discourses.

Arıcı [Arıcı 13] underlined that Turkish politics uses the social media for influential purposes and does not pursue interaction. It can be stated that this study supports this finding. In fact, there is a significant difference between the number of followers and the number of people following the leaders [the number of followers of Kılıçdaroğlu, who has the most followers, was 416 times more than those that follow him]. The leaders do not appear to find it necessary to follow other people or institutions. Furthermore, the rate of sharing and retweeting by the leaders is considerably low (for example, Kılıçdaroğlu has retweeted four tweets and Bahçeli zero over a five month period). These results indicate that the leaders use Twitter for one-way communication rather than for interaction. Furthermore, it is revealed that they do not prefer to use Twitter in different ways (video, audio, symbol, hash tag etc.). Bostancı's research [Bostancı 2015] shows similar results where 45.8% of the Members of Parliament used only text and 26.3% used text and images. According to this study, images rank second in terms of sharing. It is thought that using only text has a limited effect and diversity is more significant (for influencing people).

In this section, the positive effects of social media associated with the research findings have been expressed. However, a study about the presidential election on August 10, 2014, in Turkey Korkmaz [Korkmaz, 15] presented negative opinions about the influence of the social media. For example, the low credibility of the messages in the social media, social media's ineffectiveness to change the preference of the people on elections, lack of trust in the words of the leaders in social media and the fact that each candidate is not as effective in social media at the same rate, which leads to non-equal competition.

This research concludes that, the leaders' twitter messages reflected the political agenda of Turkey. Each leader posted messages aimed at the manipulation of public opinion. Since terrorism was amongst the most important issues in the Turkish political agenda, the political leaders attached significant importance to terrorism in

their Twitter messages. Additionally, the leaders differed from each other in their approaches towards terrorism.

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