

Political Projections of the February 6 Earthquake in Türkiye in the Context of Political Competition and Political Polarization

Politik Rekabet-Politik Kutuplaşma Geriliminde Türkiye'deki 6 Şubat Depremin Politik İzdüşümleri

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Abstract

The healthy functioning of democracy relies on the healthy functioning of political competition. In Türkiye, one of the most significant challenges faced by democracy is that political competition has deviated from its normal democratic boundaries. Due to the increase in political polarization, political competition has become harsh and confrontational. This confrontational and harsh characteristic also manifested itself in the political debates in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in February 2023.

On February 6, 2023, Türkiye was shaken by a dramatic earthquake that struck several large settlements. Naturally, an event that caused such widespread damage and suffering swiftly became a prominent topic on the political agenda. The objective of this article is to analyze the post-earthquake attitudes of political actors, certain social media developments, and the ongoing election process, through their interrelationships and the fine line between political competition and political polarization. The main motivation of the study is to uncover the appearance and consequences of political polarization during extreme events, focusing on the context of the February 6 earthquake.

Key Words: Political competition, political polarization, political rent, February 6, 2023 earthquake in Türkiye.

Öz

Demokrasinin sağlıklı işleyişi politik rekabetin de sağlıklı bir zeminde işlemesine bağlıdır. Türkiye'de demokrasinin karşı karşıya kaldığı en önemli sorunlardan birisi politik rekabetin demokrasinin olağan sınırları içerisinde gerçekleşmiyor olmasıdır. Politik kutuplaşmanın artışına bağlı olarak politik rekabet de sert ve çatışmacı bir nitelik göstermektedir. Bu çatışmacı ve sert nitelik kendisini Şubat 2023'de gerçekleşen ve çok büyük bir yıkıma neden olan depremin sonrasındaki politik tartışmalarda da göstermiştir.

Türkiye, 6 Şubat 2023 tarihinde birden fazla büyük yerleşim yerini vuran dramatik bir depremle sarsıldı. Doğal olarak bu kadar geniş ölçekli bir hasara ve acıya neden olan bir olay politik gündemin de en can alıcı konusu haline geldi. Bu makale, deprem sonrası politik aktörlerin tutumlarını, sosyal medyadaki bazı gelişmeleri ve çoktandır girilmiş olan seçim sürecini birbirleri ile ilişkileri; politik rekabet ile politik kutuplaşma arasındaki ince çizgi üzerinden analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın temel motivasyonu, extrem olaylar sırasındaki politik kutuplaşmanın görünümü ve sonuçlarını 6 Şubat depremi bağlamında ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Politik rekabet, politik kutuplaşma, politik rant, 6 Şubat 2023 Türkiye depremi.

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Introduction

Political competition, which is an important indicator of a democratic system, differs from other types of relations such as conflict, negotiation or co-operation in a number of ways. Competition assumes the existence of a common goal, an objective value desired by all competing parties. The main actor in political competition, each political party has the basic and ultimate goal of seizing political power through democratic means. To this end, they engage in a series of efforts and activities. The main characteristic of these activities is that they remain within the limits set by democratic procedures and principles. In Bartolli's words, the objective value aimed by opposing individuals and groups in the political sphere is political power¹. The limits of democratic political competition are therefore determined by its objectives and means.

Competition presupposes the existence of a set of norms and rules that provide at least a minimum regulatory framework. Without them, it can degenerate into a totally unregulated conflict. Democracy as a set of fundamental rights and respected procedures is a necessary condition for political competition. At the same time, it is also clear that the creation of the regulatory, normative, and legal framework for political competition is not achieved through political competition. Instead, it is achieved through cooperation and negotiation between political actors². This negotiation is directly related to political parties reaching a minimum consensus on the structure, functioning, and elements that give the political system its ideological color. When a minimum consensus is not reached in such cases, the foundation for negotiation becomes unstable or weak. As a result, the atmosphere of negotiation and mutual understanding are substituted by conflict and intense political rhetoric.

Political polarization is one of the theoretical explanations used to describe and express just such a situation. Political polarization is defined as the existence of a tense partisanship between the parties to political competition, in which the us-them divide becomes sharply apparent. Political polarization divides society into two poles on the basis of 'us' and 'them'; it also hinders democratic functioning by preventing political communication and cooperation. With political polarization, an ideological distance emerges between all political actors, especially political parties³. In this case, societies begin to experience a pronounced polarization in which each group begins to divide into strong and intense political opinions; people acquire certain social identities;

- 1 Stephano Bartolini, "Collusion, Competition and Democracy: Part I", *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1999, Vol: 11, No: 4, p. 445.
- 2 Joseph Wright, "Political Competition and Democratic Stability in New Democracies", *British Journal of Political Science*, 2008, Vol: 38, No: 2, s. 230, 231.
- 3 Fatih Ertugay, "Türkiye'de Politik Kutuplaşmanın Tarihse Kökenleri/Kolektif Hafıza", *Anme İdaresi Dergisi*, 2022, Vol: 55, No: 2, p. 30.

social distance and social exclusion increase due to the distinction between “us” and “them”; and political tolerance decreases⁴. Depending on the us-versus-them distinction, the parties’ evaluations of current political debates are based on the presupposition that each other is malicious. Everyone justifies their own position and claim. “Agreeing to disagree” becomes a common characteristic of polarized parties. Many current situations, such as policies on education, health, economy, military, diplomatic, etc. often lead to opposing reactions from different segments of citizens⁵. In the presence of political polarization, both political actors and voters do not perceive and evaluate political competition within democratic boundaries. In particular, voters attribute largely positive meaning and value to the actor, situation, and development that corresponds to their group and position, while they attribute negative meaning and value to the socio-political actor, situation, and development in the opposite pole.

In this respect, political polarization entails significant risks. Firstly, political debates become more entrenched, and it poses a potential threat to the existence of civil society. A wide range of political issues and national security concerns become the focus of pointless and acrimonious debates, and a political climate that generates constant risk emerges⁶. This situation reflects negatively both in political discourse and in everyday language. Political actors and ordinary individuals begin to characterize each other in very bad and derogatory terms. As morally and politically good and bad are displaced, it becomes difficult for these parties to come together in a common interest and in pursuit of public good. As political polarization deepens, the relationship between groups can go far beyond a relationship of political competition and turn into a relationship of enmity.

Considering the political processes and functioning in Türkiye, there is almost a consensus in the literature on the existence of a political polarization that dominates the political sphere⁷. This high level of polarization not

- 4 Donald R. and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion*, Chicago, 2010, The University of Chicago Press, p. 182.
- 5 Ertugay, op. cit., p. 31.
- 6 Avinash Dixit and Jörgen Weibull, “Political Polarization”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2007, Vol: 104, No: 18, p. 7355.
- 7 Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Evren Balta, (2019) When Elites Polarize Over Polarization: Framing The Polarization Debate in Turkey”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 2019, Vol: 60, pp. 153–176; KONDA, “Türkiye’de Kutuplaşma Ocak 2019”, 2019, İstanbul. Available at: <https://konda.com.tr/tr/rapor/turkiyede-kutuplasma/>, ET: 11.10.2023; Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer, “Polarization And The Global Crisis Of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, And Pernicious Consequences For Democratic Polities”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, Vol: 62, No: 1; Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, “Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, Vol: 62, No: 1; Turkuzlab, “Türkiye’de Kutuplaşmanın Boyutları 2020”, 2020, İstanbul.

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only leads to democratic erosion but also threatens social life and negatively affects daily life practices. It is clear that a lasting and institutionalized democracy primarily requires a stable democratic culture and a common socio-political ground based on the development and preservation of a pluralistic political culture⁸. Considering this situation, it will be better understood what kind of a crisis Turkish democracy is facing.

This study does not extensively examine the relationship between political competition and political polarization in Türkiye. It will only examine a very specific case in the context of this relationship and try to analyze the political climate that oscillated from political competition to political polarization in this specific case⁹. This analysis will be done through a content analysis of the statements and evaluations made by political actors throughout the process. It is possible to say that political competition in Türkiye has reached a dimension that will cause democratic erosion by exceeding democratic boundaries with the effect of political polarization. In this case, it is possible to speak of a two-sided effect. In T Türkiye, which experienced a dramatic earthquake during the election period, it is an important topic of discussion how issues that would be subject to criticism in a well-functioning democracy have evolved to a destructive level in socio-political terms with the effect of political polarization.

In this process, due to the over-politicization of the civilian sphere, lies, manipulation and disinformation have enslaved the political sphere; making functioning and healthy democratic criticism almost impossible. Intermediate voices outside the civil and political actors on both sides of the polarization have been muted, and an intolerant political rhetoric has developed within the framework of us-other, good-bad dichotomies. For this reason, this study will first try to answer the following basic questions: First, it will try to analyze where the statements made during the earthquake can be placed in the

- 8 Yannis Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes Of Polarization: Democracy's Inherent Division And The Anti-Populist Challenge", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, Vol: 62, No: 1, p. 2.
- 9 One of the main points to be mentioned here is that the article does not deal with the issue of who is responsible for the earthquake and the destruction it caused, the reasons for the heavy scene that emerged, and how the responsibility should be shared among whom. The article focuses on the relationship between the 6 February Earthquake, political competition and political polarisation with reference to the procedures, principles, ways, attitudes and behaviours that should be followed socially and politically during such major disasters. McLean and Ewart underlined that the desire of politicians to capitalise on a disaster can create a weakness in creating the space and resources necessary to respond and manage its aftermath. Hamish McLean and Jacqui Ewart, *Political Leadership in Disaster and Crisis Communication and Management : International Perspectives and Practices*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 4. In another study have shown that a deeper, more humane and strategic communication and relationship/rhetoric during natural disasters and similar crises will reduce risk and better establish public safety. Kathryn E. Anthony and Timothy L. Sellnow, "Information Acquisition, Perception, Preference, and Convergence by Gulf Coast Residents in the Aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina Crisis", *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 2011, Vol: 48.

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context of an ordinary-democratic political competition and whether they are directly related to the solution of existing problems. In this context, it will be tried to determine whether a “strategy and concern to increase votes” was effective, in other words, whether the earthquake was transformed into a political rent issue. As a continuation of this issue, the relationship between the statements made and the attitudes developed throughout the entire process and the election process will be discussed. Finally, it will be evaluated whether the process was carried forward within the framework of a democratic political competition for the parties or whether it progressed on a ground where all parties and the socio-political system emerged damaged due to the effect of political polarization.

For this purpose, by focusing on the statements made by the parties throughout the process, the relationship between these statements and the solution of the earthquake problem or their relationship with the election process and political polarization will be tried to be determined. Secondly, a partial evaluation of some statements made by non-political actors on social media in terms of the process will be associated with the debates. In both analyses, discourses and explanations will be discussed by considering the relevant literature. In the study, press releases and statements made by both the People’s Alliance and the National Alliance constituted the main analysis material of the study. In particular, the speeches made by the party leaders in the parliamentary groups and the statements they made to the press during their regional visits were analyzed by content analysis method. Speeches and press releases were subject to the study to the extent that they were directly related to the content of the article. In terms of duration, the time frame chosen for the study started from the immediate aftermath of the earthquake to the period when the discussions turned to the presidential election - the period when the Presidential election process began, and the National Alliance’s candidate announcement meetings resumed - were taken as a basis. It is expected that social and political solidarity would be at the highest level in a period of great disaster, both in comparison to previous natural disasters in the country and in terms of the history of earthquakes in the world¹⁰. On the other hand, determining whether the process is progressing in this way will be insightful both in terms of social solidarity and the culture of living together, as well as the existence and future of democracy and a healthy political system. It should also be noted that when the relevant literature is examined, the political effects and consequences of such major and shocking events in societies where political polarization is observed are almost never addressed¹¹. In Türkiye, a country that frequently experiences major natural disasters, studies on the

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10 Luca Dal Zilio and Jean-Paul Ampuero, “Earthquake Doublet in Turkey and Syria”, *Communications Earth & Environment*, 2023, Vol: 4, No:1.

11 Ertan et al.’s study on the mining disaster in Soma and its political consequences in the context of social media and political polarization is one of the rare and noteworthy studies in this field in Turkey. See (2023).

developments in political discourse and practice arising from these natural disasters are also extremely scarce. Considering this situation, it is clear that this study will make a remarkable contribution to the literature and fill a gap.

Democratic erosion: from political competition to political polarization

Competing to be the first choice of voters through democratic procedures, principles, and methods is the most defining characteristic of political competition. Competition is a set of simultaneous, parallel, and independent efforts to achieve the same and single prize/goal. Competition assumes the existence of a common goal, an objective value desired by all competing parties. This value may be profit, fame, scientific prestige, or power. In the case of political competition, this goal is political power. The most defining feature of competition is that it is a relationship characterized by a system of reciprocal action between consciously rival-autonomous actors.

In order to better understand political competition, a very brief comparison with other types of political relations would be appropriate. In this context, four types of political relations/interactions can be distinguished: Conflict, negotiation, cooperation, and competition. In conflict and negotiation, actors have different goals, whereas in competition and cooperation these goals are similar. What is important in competition and cooperation is that there is a consensus on the value to be pursued, which is normally absent in conflict and negotiation situations. In other words, all parties want the same objective value. Competition assumes that each rival pursues his or her own interest, uses energy accordingly, and evaluates outcomes in terms of objective achievements¹². Consequently, parties in a competitive relationship may not care about each other's priorities and expectations. As a result, a competitive relationship may eventually evolve into a conflictual one.

When political competition is recognized as a defining feature of democracy¹³, it requires the existence of a set of regulatory standards and norms that distinguish it from any other kind of competition. In this respect, political competition presupposes the existence of a set of norms and rules that provide at least a minimal regulatory framework, without which it can become a completely unregulated conflict. Democracy as a set of fundamental rights and respected procedures is a necessary condition for political and electoral competition to take place. This relationship between democracy and competition requires the existence of one more fundamental intermediate phenomenon: Pluralism. The existence of a range of autonomous actors, groups, etc. is essential for the democratic content of political competition. Pluralism is a necessary condition of democracy. It is also a necessary condition of compe-

12 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 438, 439.

13 Wright, op. cit., p. 223.

tition¹⁴. Therefore, democratic political competition can be evaluated as the presence of widespread political participation, the acceptance of established and functioning rules and norms among parties, the establishment of institutional and legal structures to safeguard these principles, and, finally, the ability of various groups to engage in political competition to pursue their own interests.

Although pluralism and contestation are indispensable principles for political competition, they are not sufficient on their own. Political competition takes place by opposing individuals and groups with the aim of seizing political power¹⁵. However, what distinguishes this struggle from others is that it is conducted through a set of decisive and non-violent means: Programs, policies, propaganda, and ultimately votes¹⁶. Taking all this into account, it is possible to define political competition as a “game” between parties¹⁷, each of which has different preferences on policies and each of which aims to maximize its own preferences or utility¹⁸ through non-violent means. Political competition implies a series of actions through programs, policies, campaigns, and propaganda. All these are ultimately weighed before the electorate and rewarded or punished by their votes. Elections therefore become both the most important instrument and the most important indicator of political competition within the democratic system.

Another significant aspect of political competition is the possibility for voters to change their party/candidate allegiances. The existence of this possibility is not a sine qua non-condition, but it is one of the determinants of democratic quality. Competition theory and democratic theory emphasize the importance of large masses or critical minorities of voters being open to potential *political defection*¹⁹. In other words, it is crucial for voters to be able

- 14 Anna Laura Baraldi, “Political Competition”, In: Backhaus, J. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics*. Springer, New York, 2015, p. 1; Bartolini op. cit., p. 445.
- 15 Pranab Bardhan and Tsung-Tao Yang, “Political Competition in Economic Perspective”, *UC Berkeley: Department of Economics*. 2004, Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1907c39n>: 1–36. D.A.: 11.09.2023.
- 16 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 445.
- 17 However, it remains unclear whether the number of parties is a measure of competitiveness or an explanatory variable. One argument focuses on the net volatility between parties. Accordingly, an electoral system is considered competitive if vote or seat shares vary sufficiently between two parties (or parties). Scott Mainwaring and Edurne Zoco, “Political Sequences And The Stabilization Of Interparty Competition: Electoral Volatility In Old And New Democracies”, *Party Politics*, 2007, Vol: 13, No: 2.
- 18 John E. Roemer, “Political Competition: Theory And Applications”, *Choice Reviews Online*, 2022, Vol: 39, No: 05, p: 39.
- 19 Bardhan and Yang, op. cit., p. 2; Bartolini, op. cit., p. 463: It can be said that there is a clear relationship between political defection and the level of democracy or healthy democratic functioning. For studies on this subject, see Bo Ekehammar et al., “Political Defection And Psychosocial Factors In The Home”, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1984, Vol: 123, No: 2; Kis-

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to change their party allegiance. However, in a situation where voters remain rigidly, firmly, and long-term loyal to their parties, this important quality is undermined. To reiterate, even if voter mobility is not significant, it is still assumed that all voters are part of the target electorate for other parties in terms of political competition²⁰. As such, the possibility of potential political defections can lead to a highly competitive situation between parties.

On the other hand, the situation is entirely different when the probability is low or the flexibility is zero. The rational orientation towards the policy packages offered by the parties makes the voter a flexible consumer who is ready to change his partisan preference if he is offered a better deal²¹. The presence and rate of this flexibility makes it possible for political competition to proceed along democratic lines, subject to the procedures initially established. Flexibility also becomes a parameter that determines the tone of political competition, i.e. the degree of rigor.

The main idea in political competition is that parties act to win the votes of the general electorate. Therefore, voter flexibility and the possibility of political refugees will affect the form of political competition. At this point, two critical issues should be pointed out. The first is that close parties compete directly for similar voters. In the second case, distant parties are trying to increase votes from a non-common pool of voters. The critical development in the second case is that parties have to determine their position vis-à-vis their rivals and appeal to new voters without alienating their loyal supporters²². This will force parties to constantly readjust their positions. The level of competition is closely related to the proximity of parties and, indirectly, to the availability of viable options for voters. In both cases, political competition -depending on the presence of flexibility in the first case and its absence in the second- will move away from the initial procedures.

This point can be considered a critical threshold in political competition. The evolution of the process and functioning from political competition to political polarization is directly related to the decrease in flexibility and the move away from these initial procedures. The possibility of more than one party receiving the votes of existing voters in the next elections may sharpen the competition based on this possibility, even though the competition based on this possibility should remain within democratic boundaries²³. Conflict of

han Jai, "Political Defection: Issues and Analysis of Structural Imperatives", *Indian Journals*, 2020, Vol: 6, No: 2.

20 Aiko Wagner, "A Micro Perspective On Political Competition: Electoral Availability in The European Electorates", *Acta Politica*, 2017, Vol: 52, No: 4), p. 506.

21 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 463.

22 Wagner, op. cit., p. 505.

23 For example, a recent US study concluded that most Americans value partisanship more than democratic principles. Matthew Graham and Milan Svobik, "Democracy in America? Par-

interest in this context affects the nature of the inter-party relationship and the tone of political debate; at the same time, it both accelerates and is affected by ideological polarization²⁴. In other words, political competition within democratic procedures means that political actors compete for voter attention, whereas when procedures are weakened and democratic parameters become unclear, competing political actors can become adversaries who challenge each other²⁵.

From the perspective of voters, as the level of partisanship increases, the probability of political defection, which is one of the defining features of political competition, will decrease²⁶. Considering that partisanship should be a long-term stable and strong affinity for a party, a partisan voter is less likely to vote for another party than voters in the middle of the ideological spectrum²⁷. The potential for vote switching at the individual level, which constitutes the democratic essence of political competition, is limited by the impact of political polarization. Political polarization causes political competition to give way to political conflict and the political system moves away from producing meaningful political outcomes. In Baraldi's terms, political actors engage in a damaging conflict with each other. Actors become open to using all kinds of indirect or direct means against each other, including the use of force, in order to maximize their own interests and minimize potential harm²⁸.

tisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States", *American Political Science Review*. 2020, Vol: 114, No: 2. On political polarisation in the US, see also Morris Paul Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2008, Vol. 11; Hahrie Han, "The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2011, Vol: 75, No: 4. Studies on European democracies also point to the existence of an increasing political polarisation on various issues. Moreover, the risk of this political polarisation leading to a loss of quality in democratic values is underlined. Victor Ginsburgh, Sergio Perelman and Pierre Pestieau, "Populism and Social Polarization in European Democracies", *CESifo Economic Studies*, 2021, Vol: 67, No: 4.

- 24 Kaare Strom, "Inter-Party Competition in Advanced Democracies", *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1989, Vol: 1, No: 3.
- 25 An example of this can be seen in Hungary. In addition to the mechanical effect of the electoral system, the political activism and populist strategies of party leaders also played an important role in increasing polarisation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The literature emphasises that the main political division in Hungary is cultural. Ekim Arbatli and Dina Rosenberg, "United We Stand, Divided We Rule: How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy", *Democratization*, 2021, Vol: 28, No: 2. In the final analysis, therefore, political actors in Hungary have transformed from competing contestants into adversaries challenging each other.
- 26 This situation is also clearly demonstrated by studies on various country examples. See, Arbatli and Rosenberg, op. cit.; Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization", *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 2024, Vol: 106, No: 2; Markus Wagner, "Affective Polarization in Europe", *European Political Science Review*, 2024, Vol: 16, No: 3.
- 27 Wagner, op. cit., p. 512.
- 28 Baraldi, op. cit., p. 3: In a deeply polarised political environment with two hostile camps,

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In situations where voter loyalty and political polarization are high, the actual content of policies, programs, and similar offerings by parties may not be insignificant, but it carries very little importance. Voters' preferences are exogenous, that is, they are outside the competitive interaction between parties and are fixed during this interaction²⁹. On the other hand, in such a situation, parties may be more sensitive to the priorities of their "constituencies" rather than the general public³⁰. As a result, bidirectional loyalty (parties' loyalty to their voters' priorities and voters' loyalty to their parties' discourse) becomes both the cause and the consequence of political polarization. The democratic character of political competition is thus obscured. Meaningful political competition is possible when voters remain open to a plurality of political parties, in other words, when there is the possibility of political defection. If there is a certain number of voters in the electoral market who are likely to change their preferences, then political competition can produce democratic value. Only then does the political competition have the capacity to strengthen democracy.

February 6, 2023 Earthquake and its political projections.

On February 6, 2023, Türkiye was shaken by two major earthquakes in the southern regions, affecting eleven provinces. The aftermath of the earthquakes caused massive destruction over a wide area and massive loss of life. The earthquake was a human tragedy that is difficult to comprehend for those who did not witness the events in the region and was beyond all expectations in terms of destruction and its consequences³¹. Efforts focused on rescuing people from under the rubble in the first moments and days of the earthquake, and then shifted the rehabilitation of survivors and their healthy reintegration into social life.

As a result of the natural disaster in which more than fifty thousand people lost their lives, many individuals were forced to migrate to different cities in Türkiye. Many houses, residences, and residential areas were destroyed or heavily damaged. People suffered loss of life and property, became unemployed and many businesses and production facilities were damaged. Immediately after the earthquake disaster, the Republic of Türkiye declared a state of emergency in the affected provinces. Tax exemptions and facilities

political competition becomes a 'winner takes all' game that simplifies voter choice: Either victory or failure; there is no mutually beneficial alternative. Increasing political and social hostility in society lowers democratic standards, leading voters to abandon democratic institutions and accept illiberal methods against the opposition. Arbatli and Rosenberg, op.cit, p. 288.

29 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 453.

30 Alper T. Bulut, "Measuring Political Agenda Setting And Representation in Turkey: Introducing A New Approach And Data Set", *Party Politics*, 2017, Vol: 23, No: 6, p. 10.

31 Dal Zilio and Ampuero, op. cit., p. 1

were provided to help society get back on its feet and revitalize economic life. Work was initiated for mass housing projects. Universities decided to offer distance education throughout Türkiye. Temporary settlements were established for citizens staying in the earthquake zone³².

Due to the dramatic effects of the earthquake, the political agenda and the social media environment³³ quickly became determined by this hot agenda. Politicians started to make statements one after the other and visited the region after the first day. However, simultaneously with these initial and intensive response efforts, an equally intense debate began to unfold, both on conventional media channels and on social media. Two sides of the issue quickly emerged due to the political polarization in the country. Because of chronic social and political problems, the agenda quickly shifted from how to

- 32 Erva Nur Çınar, Aula Abbara and Ebru Yılmaz, (2023) "Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria-Colaboration is Needed To Mitigate Longer Terms Risks To Health", *BMJ* (Clinical research ed.), 2023, Vol: 380, p 99; Samet Gürsoy et. al., "The Impact of 2023 Turkey Earthquake on İstanbul Stock Market : Evidence from Fourier Volatility Spillover Test 2023", *Social Sciences Research Journal (SSRJ)*, 2023, Vol: 12, p. 99.
- 33 The 6 February Earthquake and social media have constituted an important area of investigation in the literature in the following processes. In the studies carried out, especially a few issues come to the fore. The first of these is the effective and beneficial use of social media in search and rescue and relief efforts, gathering resources, organising and delivering them to the region, accurate dissemination of information or dissemination of accurate information to the public. Aziz Belli and Abdullah Aydın, "The Role of Local Governments in The Context of Disaster Communication and Social Media: The Example of 06 February 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquake", *Erciyes İletişim Dergisi*, 2024, Vol: 11, No: 2. Another prominent issue regarding the earthquake-social media relationship is the efforts of both the government and the opposition to use social media as an effective political tool in this process. The studies on this subject were seen as an important part of explaining the government's actions and an image repair strategy, while the opposition was seen as an important part of sharing the inadequacies and deficiencies in the process with the public. A. Fulya Şen, "Political Public Relations And Crisis Communication Of The Government: The Case Study Of The Earthquake Of 6 February 2023 in Türkiye", *Journal of Ekonomi*, 2023, Vol: 5, No: 2; Hayriye Nur Görkemli et. al., "Political Communication in Disaster: Analysis of Two Main Political Alliances' Tweets After 2023 Great Earthquakes in Türkiye", *Siyasal: Journal of Political Sciences*, 2024, Vol: 33, No: 1. One of the last and most important issues that stands out is the use of social media with disinformative content in the post-earthquake process. Ali Fikret Aydın, "Sosyal Medyada Dezenformasyon ve Manipülasyon: 2023 Kahramanmaraş Depremi Örneği", *İnsan Ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2023, Vol: 12, No: 5; Sibel Hoştut et. al., "Safeguarding Truth in Turmoil: A Study of the Turkish Government's Strategic Deployment of Twitter during the February 6, 2023 Earthquakes", *Bilgi*, 2024, Vol: 108; Emel Kuşku Özdemir, "Social Media in Crisis Communication: A Case Analysis of the 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes", *Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 2024, Vol: 44. Apart from these titles, in some studies, the social media area has been defined as a digital battlefield or digital rivalry area during the earthquake. See, Sertaç Timur Demir, "Afet Medyası ve Medya Afeti: 6 Şubat Kahramanmaraş Depreminin Anımsattıkları", *TRT Akademi*, 2023, Vol: 8, No: 18; Duygu Karataş and Mine Gencil Bek, "Digital Battlegrounds: The Interplay of Social Media, State Power, and Influencers in Türkiye's Earthquake Response", *Social Media and Society*, 2024, Vol: 10, No: 3.

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deal with this traumatic event and how to recover from it to who should be held responsible and blamed.

On the other hand, discussions that were not limited to who was to be held responsible and blamed quickly became associated with long-standing elements of political polarization. As the literature reveals, in such catastrophic situations, individuals rely on their existing belief systems, political ideologies, reactions of political elites and existing in-group/out-group identities to make sense of an emotionally overwhelming event. Therefore, the public's response to extraordinary events through various communication channels may develop depending on the existing political polarization fault lines in a society³⁴. In Türkiye, the political climate that emerged after the February 6 earthquake was shaped by the impact of all these dynamics. While the importance of communication, common sense and creating a common meaning during such shocking events is evident, a common approach and a *common meaning*³⁵ towards the earthquake could not be put forward.

As similar events have shown, the process of creating collective meaning in such events is based on the subjective interpretation of the available information about the event. At the same time, the language used in this collective meaning-making is of great importance³⁶. However, this process also depends on individuals' existing belief systems, partisan affiliations, echo chambers surrounding their social media presence, event-specific cues from trusted political elites, and the level of hostility towards out-group members³⁷. This is also influenced and exacerbated by other variables, especially during electoral processes and periods of sharp political competition. The tools used in these processes also differ. The electoral process and political competition

34 Güneş Ertan, Louise Comfort and Özgür Martin, "Political Polarization During Extreme Events", *Natural Hazards Review*, 2023, Vol: 24, No: 1, p. 1.

35 Louise Comfort, "Crisis Management in Hindsight: Cognition, Communication, Coordination, And Control", *Public Administration Review*, 2023, Vol: 67, No: (SUPPL. 1): It has been found that politicians often lack situational awareness when it comes to disasters and crises. Therefore, when lives and property are at stake during natural disasters, it is extremely important to develop healthy and effective relationships between political actors, emergency managers, civil societies and society, and in this sense, to put forward a common-pragmatic approach. McLean and Ewart, op. cit. p. 4. In addition, some studies reveal that disasters bring together political enemies and that interventions have the potential to cross both national and international borders, that politics are sometimes put aside to respond to disasters, and that, in the final analysis, a common meaning can be produced. Terry Cole and Kelli Fellows, "Risk Communication Failure: A Case Study of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina", *Southern Communication Journal*, 2008, Vol: 73, No: 3; p. 8; McLean and Ewart, op. cit. p. 6

36 Jörgen Sandberg and Haridimos Tsoukas, "Sensemaking Reconsidered: Towards A Broader Understanding Through Phenomenology", *Organization Theory*, 2020, Vol: 1, No: 1.

37 James Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, et al., "How Affective Polarization Shapes Americans' Political Beliefs: A Study Of Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 2021, Vol: 8, No: 3.

can evolve into a confrontational and divisive direction with the effect of political polarization, depending on the sides being at a balance point. At this point, during conflicts, actors enter into a social relationship where they harm each other. In such a political competition process, actors use promises of potential advantages or the elimination of disadvantages as leverage, as well as threats of potential harm or the elimination of advantages³⁸.

When the double earthquake struck Türkiye on February 6, the country was already in the process of an election. Moreover, this election process was already under the shadow of a polarized socio-political environment. Therefore, this double earthquake, which caused massive destruction and loss, also caused an earthquake on the political fault lines that were already in motion. In such an environment, where the wounds of the earthquake were or should have been healed, a struggle emerged that turned into a struggle between adversaries and transcended the boundaries of political competition. Instead of engaging in a complementary relationship towards a common goal that requires cooperation, the sides preferred to use tools, information, resources, etc. exclusively for fear that this cooperation would be misused and instrumentalized this use to make the other side look problematic³⁹.

One of the most important problems encountered in coping with the consequences of the earthquake was that, also due to political competition and polarization, success or failure had the potential to be transformed into a political discourse immediately and very quickly. In the electoral process, it can be said that the smallest success or failure is seen as a convenient tool to make oneself look better and advantageous and to make the opponent look worse and disadvantageous. As Bartolini puts it, in conflictual interactions - as in our case - the prize is normally in the hands of an adversary and has to be taken directly from him because he is unwilling to share it. Once again, competition takes place under different conditions: When the match starts, the prize is not in the hands of any player; that is, it is really "at stake"⁴⁰. Considering that Türkiye has already entered the election process, it can be stated that the match has already started. In this respect, what is "at stake" is the political power - the governing power itself. Therefore, although humanitarian concerns might also be evident, it is possible to observe the influence of

38 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 439.

39 As McLean and Ewart point out, disasters are inherently political events, but not all information provided during a disaster is political. For example, emergency management organisations are primarily focused on providing information to prevent loss of life and help recovery after the initial phase of the disaster. Information provided to the news media by those who witness or directly respond to disasters or crises is not driven by political considerations. McLean and Ewart, op. cit. Therefore, politically competitive behaviour during disasters should be of a content and quality that does not harm disaster response.

40 Bartolini, op. cit., p. 440.

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political competition in the attitudes and statements of political actors in the ensuing processes⁴¹. However, it would not be wrong to say that this effect is not like the effect in a democratic and moderate political environment, but is determined by the divisive nature of political polarization.

Both the nature and level of political polarization and the election process that has already begun have affected the attitudes of all political actors as well as civil actors and the general electorate. Polarization and the electoral process have greatly influenced their attitudes toward the consequences of the earthquake and the efforts of state institutions to cope with the earthquake. Although in the first days of the earthquake, there was a partial common sense regarding the political aspects of the earthquake and mutually moderate statements were made⁴², it was observed that the statements became increasingly harsh in almost the same days⁴³. In other words, since the first day of the

- 41 "Those who go to the earthquake region to start an election campaign cannot understand the affection, love and trust between us and our people there." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "We need to eradicate the way of thinking that has left this country in ruins, we need to reweave our values, we need to change our approach to the state..." Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "CHP Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", 22.02.2023, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-genel-baskani-kemal-kilicdaroglu-tbmm-chp-grup-toplantisinde-konustu-21-subat-2023>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023).
- 42 "Now is the time for unity and solidarity. We must join forces. We must organize all the power of the country according to the needs of our citizens in this region" Engin Özkoç, "CHP Grup Başkanvekili Sıfatı ile 07.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Basın Açıklaması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=d0bd1042-46a9-4fe1-95e8-01862be59817>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "Today is our day to hear the voice of the state. I wish ease to the teams that have set out from various parts of Turkey. I wish ease to our state officials. We are constantly receiving information from our provincial and district presidents. Today is the day to hear the voice of the state. Today is the day we all silence." "İYİ Parti Genel Başkanı Meral Akşener'den Depreme İlişkin Açıklama", Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 06.02.2023, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/iyi-parti-genel-baskani-meral-aksenerden-depreme-iliskin-aciklama-2048692#:~:text=Ak%C5%9Fener%20yapt%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1%20a%C3%A7%C4%B1klamada%2C%20%221999',Bug%C3%BCn%20devletin%20sesini%20duyma%20%C3%BCn%C3%BCm%C3%BCz.,> (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).
- 43 Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition party and later the presidential candidate, took a tough stance and used a sharp political language from the first days of the earthquake. For example, in a joint press statement with Pervin Buldan, another co-chair of the opposition party, they essentially stated that "the government was buried under the rubble of the earthquake". For the statement see. <https://www.haberturk.com/kilicdaroglu-ve-buldan-dan-birlikte-aciklama-3564867>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023). Kılıçdaroğlu continued his harsh statements in the following days by increasing the level of his statements. "This government, this government that was buried under the rubble, was wrong in its predictions about the earthquake... If you cut the columns of the state, you will be condemned to a situation like the one in Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, Hatay... You have caused the deaths of nearly 50 thousand of our citizens... Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "CHP TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", 28.02.2023, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=15eb4009-6d42-4ccb-933b-01869840737b>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

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earthquake, it has been witnessed that a harsh political discourse has been produced both through classical media tools and social media simultaneously with the efforts to respond to the earthquake. While the earthquake and the efforts to heal its wounds were initially handled from a supra-political perspective by the government and the opposition⁴⁴, they were quickly turned into a tool of political competition, with the harsh statements of the main opposition leader⁴⁵. In the same period, in some statements made by the government, the efforts to combat the earthquake were transformed into a political argument in the context of political competition⁴⁶.

As can be seen, at a time when elections were underway and political competition was taking place in a polarized environment, the statements made and steps taken regarding the earthquake were influenced by this political competition. In this situation, it can be said that the following questions and debates came to the fore: "Who helped more" and "Is there a failure in the earthquake response, and if so, who is responsible for it?". It seems possible to say that the discussions and explanations primarily centered on these two main lines. Starting with the second question, the following can be said: First of all, from the government's point of view, although it is stated that there was a partial failure in the response to the earthquake, it is also stated that this was mainly a situation that arose due to reasons such as the magnitude, prevalence⁴⁷ and climatic conditions of the earthquake. In addition, some institu-

44 See footnote 5.

45 "I refuse to look at the events above politics, I refuse to align with the government. This collapse is precisely the result of systematic rent politics. I will not meet Erdoğan, his palace and rent gangs on any ground..." Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, <https://twitter.com/kilicdaroglu/status/1623100338910769156>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023).

46 "As the People's Alliance, we are all in the field. Both the AK Party Headquarters and the MHP Headquarters have sent our deputies and MKYK members to the regions. We are all trying to do our part in these works. The organizations of the People's Alliance are on the field, all our friends are trying to help the work in a way to help if requested." "Earthquake Statement from Çelik: We are all in the field as the People's Alliance". *Gazete Duvar*, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/celikten-deprem-aciklamasi-cumhur-ittifaki-olarak-hepimiz-sahadayiz-haber-1601976>, 06.02.2023, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

47 Even on this issue, there was no consensus between the government and the opposition. While the government emphasized the magnitude of the earthquake as in the "disaster of the century" discourse, the opposition stated that this discourse was a political discourse and propaganda used to cover up the weakness in the fight against the earthquake. See: "Turkey woke up on the morning of February 6 with the biggest disaster of the last century..." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "On February 6, our country was shaken by two major earthquakes of unprecedented magnitude and intensity. Unfortunately, the fact that two disasters of unprecedented magnitude occurred one after the other, even in the history of earthquakes in the world, made the picture before us even more severe..." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kabinesi Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptığı Açıklama", 14.02.2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/142946/-hicbir>

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tional failures and inadequacies were underlined. However, it is not accepted that there was a general failure in the response⁴⁸. From the opposition's point of view, there is undoubtedly a clear failure. This failure can be attributed to two main reasons. The first one is the government and its governing institutions⁴⁹. The second is a failure that stems directly from the "one man regime"⁵⁰.

vatandasimizi-maddi-manevi-acidan-sahipsiz-birakmayacagiz-, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); "They want to make a big deal out of it with a perception operation and get rid of the responsibility. No sir! Those in power have a serious responsibility and they have to realize their responsibilities... When they fail at one thing, they set another target. The disaster of the century means: 'We are helpless in the face of the disaster of the century, we cannot solve the problem...' Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "13.02.2023 Tarihli Basın Açıklaması", <https://noktakibris.com/2023/02/13/kemal-kilicdaroglu-asrin-felaketi-diyecek-sorumluluktan-siyirilmaya-calisiyorlar/>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); "On the other hand, it can be said that some statements from the opposition regarding the magnitude of the disaster at the beginning of the earthquake had a similar discourse with the government. See: "Turkey has experienced an unprecedented earthquake..." Engin Özkoç, "CHP Grup Başkanvekili Sıfatı ile 07.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Basın Açıklaması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=d0bd1042-46a9-4fe1-95e8-01862be59817>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "This huge earthquake..." Meral Akşener, "22.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=45752bb2-98ba-45ed-951f-018678de4be9>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

48 "In this earthquake, Turkey has brought together the largest search and rescue team the world has ever seen. Nevertheless, our citizens trapped under the rubble and their relatives are right in their complaints..." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı ile Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "In addition to the magnitude of the damage in the earthquake zone, harsh winter conditions and the destruction of infrastructure, especially transportation and energy, made our work very difficult. All these problems caused serious disruptions in both search and rescue and relief efforts in the first place. Nevertheless, we immediately mobilized the surviving capacities of our cities in the region and the public resources of our entire country, starting with nearby cities..." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kabinesi Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptığı Açıklama", 14.02.2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/142946/-hicbir-vatandasimizi-maddi-manevi-acidan-sahipsiz-birakmayacagiz->, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023).

49 "Am I going to show solidarity with the Directorate of Communications, which has been making disgusting advertisements by calling them above politics? Minute one; the Directorate of Communications had already started to engage in a lot of immoral efforts." Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "Tarihli CHP Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", 22.02.2023, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-genel-baskani-kemal-kilicdaroglu-tbmm-chp-grup-toplantisinde-konustu-21-subat-2023>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023).

50 "We will start the change from this brutal neoliberal one-man regime, but the change will not stop here..." Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "CHP Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", 22.02.2023, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-genel-baskani-kemal-kilicdaroglu-tbmm-chp-grup-toplantisinde-konustu-21-subat-2023>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); "If there is one main person responsible for this process, it is Erdoğan. For 20 years this government has not prepared the country for an earthquake." Engin Altay, "CHP Grup Başkanvekili Sıfatı ile 14.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Basın Açıklaması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=71553e71-6119-4203-ae30-018650e5e871>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "Erdoğan is one person, the state is his, as the president of all municipalities, he should unite these resources and ensure that problems are solved without wasting them. The main problem of this chaos today is the one-man system." "Meral Akşener: Bu Keşmekeşin Temel Problemi Tek Adam Sistemidir", Evrensel

At this point, the opposition, especially the main opposition, has directly linked the failure during the earthquake and the new government system introduced through the 2017 referendum to what they claim as the establishment of a "one-man regime." In the election process, the opposition, which brought up the return to the parliamentary system as the main promise of its electoral policies and program⁵¹, established a negative relationship between the earthquake and its consequences and the current form of government. Considering the intensity of the evaluations on this issue⁵², it can be said that the system debates sometimes took precedence over the fight against the earthquake.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the first question-issue mentioned above, during the process, a situation emerged in which there was a rapid move away from a common aid and solidarity effort and discourse, a competition between aid efforts, and the formation of two sides in aid efforts due to political competition and political polarization. In their statements, the sides have tried to highlight their own relief efforts and the organizations providing aid⁵³, while emphasizing the inadequacy of the other side's relief efforts or claiming that these efforts have hindered the process⁵⁴.

Gazetesi, 09.02.2023, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/481643/meral-aksener-bu-kesmekesin-temel-problemi-tek-adam-sistemidir>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

51 See Millet Alliance Common Policies Memorandum of Understanding (Millet İttifakı Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni), <https://chp.org.tr/yayin/ortak-politikalar-mutabakat-metni/Open>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023).

52 "...we see that the government has no serious preparations, that disaster management has collapsed and that Mr. Erdoğan and his team are incapable... We have been telling for years that state institutions are dying because of the 'one man' system in which Turkey is imprisoned... The one man system that only produces crises and disasters is responsible for this..." Meral Akşener, "22.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=45752bb2-98ba-45ed-951f-018678de4be9>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

53 "Our state, with all its institutions, organizations, personnel, tools, equipment and means, has started to work in the disaster areas with the spirit of mobilization from the first moment of the earthquake." Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "07.02.2023 Tarihli Basın Açıklaması" <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-deprem-yasanan-10-ilimizi-kapsayan-ve-3-ay-surecek-ohal-ilan-etme-karari-aldik/2809618>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); "CHP mayors have achieved extraordinary successes at every point." Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, "CHP TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", 28.02.2023, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=15eb4009-6d42-4ccb-933b-01869840737b>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

54 "Let's leave aside the political shamelessness, political ambition, political impudence of this person by launching his election campaign in front of the ruins of the earthquake; what about his shameless slandering of our ministers, governors and public officials who have been working there day and night since the first hours of the earthquake?" Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); "This means that no matter which ministry, no matter which institution, including the Presidency, no matter which non-governmental organization, no matter which security unit, domestic or foreign, everyone can participate in this work, but it is important that it is all done in coordination... It has to be coordinated by AFAD. Otherwise

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Similarly, with the effect of political competition, in which each party and leader aims to gain more voter attention during the election process, it is seen that what has been done and what has not been done in this process is voiced strongly and loudly. For both parties, the fight against the earthquake and the relief efforts for earthquake victims have also become a part of political competition. Therefore, the question of “who provided more aid” and related statements have frequently been on the public agenda. At this point, two points should be underlined: First, as the literature shows, a sharp political competition process can weaken the fight against such natural disasters. As a matter of fact, it can be said that this is partly the case in Türkiye⁵⁵. Second, due to political polarization, the statements made during the earthquake cyclically produce an effect that deepens political polarization. Depending on these

it will lead to complete anarchy.” Fuat Oktay, “07.02.2023 Tarihli Basın Açıklaması”, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/kahramanmaras-merkezli-depremlerde-6-bin-234-kisi-hayatini-kaybetti-8-bin-kisi-sag-kurtarildi/2809316>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); “What the government could not do, CHP municipalities did. In this earthquake, let us all sit up and thank CHP municipalities.” Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, “CHP TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması”, 28.02.2023, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=15eb4009-6d42-4ccb-933b-01869840737b>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

- 55 “News reports and posts that can be read and evaluated in such a context, such as “there will be high intensity earthquakes in different provinces during the process, airports in the provinces in the region have been completely destroyed, some important hospitals in the region are being evacuated due to damage, cracks have appeared in Atatürk Dam, aid trucks going to the disaster area are being blocked, there is a tsunami in the region or a nuclear power plant in the region has exploded” have made it difficult to advance relief efforts and manage the process. For an evaluation of such news reports and posts, see. İletişim Başkanlığı Deprem Dezenformasyon Bültenleri (6-22 Şubat), https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/dosyalar/Deprem_Dezenformasyon_B%C3%BCltenleri_%286-22_%C5%9Eubat%29.pdf, (Date of Access: 10.05.2023); “Depremle Yüzleşen Türkiye’nin Dezenformasyonla Mücadelesi”, Independent Türkçe, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/609826/ya%C5%9Fam/depremle-y%C3%BCzle%C5%9Fen-t%C3%BCrkiyenindezenformasyonla-m%C3%BCcadelesi>, (Date of Access: 10.05.2023): The claim that a Syrian man’s cell phone was stolen during Vice President Fuat Oktay’s speech was similarly a post that touched political fault lines in Turkey. Moreover, this post was made by a political party leader. Even after it became clear that the incident was not real, the leader of the political party refused to apologize. For related news, see. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/hirsiz-suriyeli-iddiasi-gercek-cikmayan-umit-ozdag-niye-ozur-dileyeyim-kendisi-ozur-dilesin-2050639>, (Date of Access: 10.05.2023): In this context, the efforts of some civil society organizations to come to the forefront and compete for aid can be evaluated in this context. For example, Haluk Levent, the founder and president of the AHBAP Association, drew attention to this situation, and upon being shown as if his association was more successful than the state and almost the only non-governmental organization in the region, he had to make statements that such posts were both damaging to aid efforts and that it would be wrong to put a non-governmental organization in competition with the state. For an example of AHBAP overtaking the state and becoming more successful, see. <https://serbestiyet.com/haberler/ahbap-hedef-gosterildi-haluk-levent-afad-da-bizim-ahbap-da-dedi-unluler-destek-verdi-118286/>; For Haluk Levent’s statement on these issues, see. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBUVUGY0aBs>; https://twitter.com/b_ysabri/status/1630112378288316417, (Date of Access: 10.05.2023).

statements, both sides think that their political and civilian representatives fought the earthquake better, while the other side failed, and share intensive posts about it.

In the final analysis, it is possible to say that in the attitudes, behaviors, actions, and statements of political actors throughout the whole process, elements related to the political competition were shared with the public with a harsh political rhetoric as much as the fight against the earthquake. It would not be wrong to say that both sides fought against each other as much as they fought against the earthquake. Both sides mutually accused each other of abusing the process, using the earthquake as a tool for political competition and political gain, and of incompetence⁵⁶. In addition to statements that went beyond political rivalry and included heavy-handed and defiant statements, statements that would prevent the process from functioning in a prudent manner and increase tension⁵⁷ were shared both through press releases and on social media.

56 “...this person’s political shamelessness, political ambition, political impudence by starting his election campaign in front of the earthquake ruins...” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması”, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); “...we were embarrassed on behalf of humanity, on behalf of the oppressed and victimized people there, by the winds of passion they were carried away by, by the arrogance they displayed, by the selfish attitude they adopted. No one has the right to lower the political institution, to which our nation entrusts its future, to this level.” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması”, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); “Do you want to take revenge on the Republic? Do you want to destroy the institutions of the Republic?” Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, “CHP TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması”, 28.02.2023, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=15eb4009-6d42-4ccb-933b-01869840737b>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

57 “Such a person does not care about this country, this nation or the earthquake victims there...” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “AK Parti Genel Başkanı Sıfatı İle Yaptığı 15.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Toplantısı Konuşması”, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=ca400250-5461-4849-9ed0-0186e4dc9cbb>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); “All your life you have never spoken with such documents, your life is a lie, you have always acted with lies.” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kabinesi Toplantısı’nın Ardından Yaptığı Açıklama”, 14.02.2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/142946/-hicbirvatandasimizi-maddi-manevi-acidan-sahipsiz-birakmayacagiz->, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); “We are with our people with thousands of trucks of aid. Let them come and arrest us.” Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, <https://twitter.com/kilicdarogluk/status/1623265915042246657>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); “We are repairing the closed Hatay Airport. Let them come and arrest us.” Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, <https://twitter.com/kilicdarogluk/status/1623264793019686915>, (Date of Access: 18.05.2023); “The People’s Alliance shows the coordination it fails to show in search and rescue operations in insulting and swearing.” Özgür Özel, “CHP Grup Başkanvekili Sıfatı ile 22.02.2023 Tarihli TBMM Basın Açıklaması”, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=267ec3b5-b3b6-4018-a522-01867957ec5e>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023); “Mr. Crisis, who brought this monstrous system upon us and caused this mess, is the main responsible. Those who feel responsible should resign and be held accountable.” Meral Akşener, “01.03.2023 Tarihli TBMM Grup Konuşması”, <https://iyiparti.org.tr/kazanan-mutlaka-turkiye-olacaktır>, (Date of Access: 17.05.2023).

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At this point, it is possible to say that social media is also involved in the issue by producing a negative impact. At the beginning, both sides witnessed a competition between the intensive aid efforts of civil society organizations that are considered to be close to them. During this period, a series of posts dominated the agenda, ranging from portraying civil society organizations as being in competition with each other and even with state institutions, to the dissemination of negative, false, or misleading news that directly undermined the relief efforts. The literature suggests that the use of social media during and after extreme events can assist response and recovery operations through a variety of functions⁵⁸. However, the intensely polarized meaning-making process can distort the quality of information shared among citizens and lead to the spread of rumors and misinformation⁵⁹. In the case of the February 6 earthquake in Türkiye, it can be said that the use of social media not only helped with the process but also produced consequences such as damaging the creation of shared meaning, disrupting communication, and encountering some problems in the fight against the earthquake. Social media functioned as a space where political discourses were produced, especially through the earthquake phenomenon in a reciprocal manner and in relation to political polarization. A similar situation was observed in previous major disasters⁶⁰. Considering that the recent political competition has taken place in a politically polarized environment, the emergence of such a situation is a predictable result. In political competition in a polarized system, the main motivation of individuals to share news is to mobilize their politically like-minded groups and vilify their opponents⁶¹. Therefore, news and information sharing on social media after the February 6 earthquake and its aftermath have been realized accordingly to a considerable extent.

The evaluation of the entire process, from the statements of political actors to their practices in the field to the news and information content on

- 58 J. Biran Houston, Jashua Hawthorne, Mildres F. Perreault, et al., "Social Media And Disasters: A Functional Framework For Social Media Use in Disaster Planning, Response, And Research", *Disasters*, 2015, Vol: 39, No: 1: 1–22.
- 59 Dhiraj Murthy and Alexander J. Gross, "Social Media Processes In Disasters: Implications Of Emergent Technology Use" *Social Science Research*, 2017, Vol: 63: In this process, around three hundred lies were disseminated on social media and media outlets in February, the month of the earthquake alone. For these news and posts, see the Earthquake Disinformation Bulletins of the Directorate of Communication, (February 6-22), https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/dosyalar/Deprem_Dezenformasyon_B%C3%BClt enleri_%286-22_%C5%9Eubat%29.pdf, (Date of Access: 10.05.2023).
- 60 An analysis of social media behavior following the Soma mine disaster in Turkey in 2014 shows a strikingly polarized process of signification among the majority of social media users (Ertan et al., 2023: 4).
- 61 Mathias Osmundsen, Alexander Bor, Peter B. Vahlstrup, et al., "Partisan Polarization Is The Primary Psychological Motivation Behind Political Fake News Sharing On Twitter", *American Political Science Review*, 2021, Vol: 115, No: 3.

social media, reveals the problematic dimensions of the process and its management from various angles. First of all, it is possible to say that the process has been affected by the electoral context and political competition. On the other hand, it is clear that the deepening and visible political polarization has also affected both the statements of political actors and the sharing of news and information on social media. Political competition, which is carried out in a confrontational context, has shifted towards a harsher quality and content with the impact of the election process. In this process, political actors competed with each other to heal the wounds of the earthquake on the one hand and to gain more voter attention on the other. In political competition, political actors are constantly guided by the reactions and expectations of the electorate, and their actions are shaped by the concern to seize power⁶². While one of the priorities of political actors in the earthquake process was the fight against the earthquake, another priority was the issue of whether or not to seize power, which was subject to competition in the election process. Therefore, the process quickly evolved from anti-earthquake management to a polarized political competition environment.

It has often been mentioned above that one of the possible reasons for the emergence of such a political situation is political polarization. A corollary of this - which can also be considered a cause - is that each political actor is confident of the loyalty of its fixed voter base. As voter loyalty increases, direct and indirect consequences such as accountability and responsiveness are less likely to occur. This is because political actors are confident that their loyal voters will remain interested and committed (Bartolini, 1999: 442). In this case, political actors act in the comfort of being sure that they will not lose the interest and support of their loyal voters in the harsh statements they make considering the upcoming elections rather than fighting the earthquake. Considering that the flexibility of the general electorate in political competition and its openness to political refuge will also affect the form of political competition, it is clear that this flexibility and the absence of the possibility of asylum will affect all kinds of political actions. In conclusion, it can be said that the management of a natural disaster that has caused extremely large and dramatic losses, and despite the great importance of issues such as communication, solidarity, morale and motivation in combating it, the fact that political actors have embarked on the opposite process management has not only weakened the fight against the disaster but has also produced an effect that deepens political polarization.

62 Walter D. Burnham and Giovanni Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis, Volume I. In *Political Science Quarterly*. ECPR Press, 2005.

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Conclusion

In democratic political systems, political competition between different political actors operates according to certain initial principles and procedures. However, in politically polarized societies, political competition is also affected by polarization. In political competition in politically polarized societies, political parties and leaders run more fierce and aggressive campaigns to compete with each other. In many cases, this can deepen political polarization, as each party or leader seeks to differentiate itself by emphasizing its own views even more strongly. The harsh and polarizing rhetoric used during political campaigns can lead to deeper and deeper divisions among citizens and increase polarization.

From this perspective, the February 6 earthquake, which occurred at a time of intense political competition, has further intensified the subsequent political debates, heightened the already tense political atmosphere, and ultimately increased political polarization. The post-earthquake debates exacerbated the deep divisions between different political views and led to the use of extremely harsh political language.

In the first moments of the earthquake, a common language and a common meaning seemed to be constructed. Statements from both sides emphasized the need for a joint effort to combat the earthquake and heal the wounds and underlined the importance of solidarity. No harsh political language was used. However, this common language, the will and rhetoric of creating a common meaning and solidarity was quickly replaced by an extremely harsh political language and a climate of mutual heavy accusations. It can easily be said that the accusations and harsh approach-explanations that came to the agenda in addition to the struggle against the earthquake, and even beyond it, are directly related to the election process and the political polarization affecting it. The political polarization that deepened as a result of sharply differentiated evaluations, statements, and discussions under various headings further increased political tension.

In this context, in terms of the questions stated in the introduction of this study, the following can be said: First of all, it is clear that the statements made and the attitudes taken do not present a healthy outlook in terms of democratic political competition. A language and practice that do not align with democratic processes, characterized by harshness, polemics, and the lack of constructive solutions have emerged. Secondly, it would not be wrong to say that the management and functioning of the process has turned into a form of political rent-seeking and that the process has progressed in a way that emphasizes strategies to increase votes. Thirdly, the process related to the earthquake was very quickly associated with the upcoming election process

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and the management of the process turned into a race of electoral strategies. Finally, the process deepened the existing political tension and fed political polarization.

A more close look at the earthquake process in terms of political polarization suggests that the earthquake deepened the division of two different segments of society around two completely opposite views. Political polarization in Türkiye is not a phenomenon that emerged with the earthquake. The process that accompanied the earthquake has led to sharp political debates that recur again and again in every election period. Political competition in politically polarized societies does not function as it does in normally functioning institutionalized democracies. As seen in the case of Türkiye, political polarization causes political competition to move away from the initial democratic procedures and boundaries, and political polarization deepens depending on the continuity of political competition. Therefore, healthy political competition and political functioning do not emerge in polarized societies. As a result, these societies face democratic erosion due to the tension between political competition and political polarization. This democratic erosion generates negative effects in a wide range of areas, ranging from the weakening of the will and culture of coexistence to the loss of the power of legal principles and norms.

In political competition processes, political actors can make almost everything a subject of this competition. In politically polarized societies, this situation manifests itself even in matters and issues that cannot be subject to competition or that, even if they are, a certain sensitivity must be observed. Earthquakes and other extraordinary events are events that require this care. However, polarization prevents the emergence of such sensitivity and careful language. Another important negative effect of this situation is that it leads to a general loss of trust. Not only is there a loss of trust between political actors, but also a widespread loss of trust in the other side among voters who support these actors. The developments during the February 6 earthquake exposed this large-scale loss of trust.

One dimension of this loss of trust is the sharp political polarization in which one or both sides consider the discrediting of institutions as a strategy for political competition. The literature suggests that one of the major detrimental effects of a highly polarized process of meaning-making in the aftermath of an extraordinary event is the erosion of trust in public officials and crisis response organizations. Studies on trust and emergencies show that public trust is a critical factor in enabling communities to respond collaboratively to disaster communication⁶³. In highly polarized contexts, trust in public institu-

63 Ertan et al., op. cit.; Brooke F. Liu and Amisha M. Mehta, "From The Periphery And Toward A Centralized Model For Trust in Government Risk And Disaster Communication", *Journal of Risk Research*, 2021, Vol: 24, No: 7.

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tions also tends to polarize, and perceptions of government performance may be biased along fault lines of polarization⁶⁴. The February 6 earthquake was precisely such a loss of trust in political terms. The reasons for this situation include concrete inadequacies stemming directly from institutions⁶⁵, as well as the use of these partial concrete inadequacies as part of a conscious strategy by political actors in the process of political competition. From this point of view, the earthquake process revealed communication deficiencies, impacting the accurate and reliable sharing of information with the public. The ability of institutions to maintain credibility and effectively combat the disaster was compromised. Additionally, the capacity to create a common meaning from all these aspects was interrupted and damaged due to the spread of rumors, erosion of public trust, and the process being exploited as a subject and tool of political competition. As a result, the earthquake and the related process management have once again painfully demonstrated the existence of a deep political polarization in Türkiye and the risks this poses both for democratic political competition and for effective response to extraordinary events and disasters such as earthquakes.

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64 Marc J. Rudolph and Thomas J. Hetherington, *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis*. The University of Chicago Press Chicago, 2016.

65 The Kızılay's selling tents and AFAD's inability to respond to the debris were two examples. The level of effectiveness and success in the rescue efforts immediately after the earthquake and the efforts to provide treatment, shelter, food and other needs that started after a while were realized at different levels. Institutions displayed a more unsuccessful image in the former and a more successful image in the latter.

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