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Polarization on National Images in Türkiye

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Abstract

Political polarization, which has become an increasingly serious issue in many countries, is permeating almost every aspect of social attitudes and practices. One of these areas is the national image. As a representation of collective identity, national images consist of symbols and elements that reflect the nation's consensus. However, polarization shakes the consensus in these symbols and elements, and leads to the emergence of a division. In this context, the study aims to address the reflection of political polarization on national images and related debates, which has intensified in Türkiye in recent years. In this context, the study focuses on social media platforms and selected debates as a medium of public visibility. The study analyzes four examples of social media discussions on the secular-conservative axis, which currently constitutes the main axis of political polarization in Türkiye. This analysis attempts to reveal the level and form of reflection of political polarization in Türkiye on assumptions and debates regarding national images.

Keywords: National image, polarization, secularization, Türkiye

Introduction

Research on political polarization has shown in recent years that this phenomenon is common in many countries (Reiljan, 2020; Harteveld, 2021; Rekker, 2022; Conti et al., 2020). Moreover, people polarize on non-political issues, both in relation to this political polarization and sometimes independently of it (Harteveld, 2021: 1). Political and non-political polarization lead to profound negative consequences, such as increased social distancing, marginalization, dehumanization, sharpening of dividing lines, and other effects among the citizens of a country. One dimension of these consequences is the emergence of growing and deepening antipathy and even hatred between citizens with opposing opinions. This so-called emotional polarization (Strickler, 2018) erodes citizens' willingness and capacity to interact with those with opposing views and destroys their sensitivity to the democratic demands of others.

In situations of polarization, citizens differ not only in their attitudes and feelings towards each other, but also in the way they make sense of and perceive social and factual reality, and situations (Rekker, 2022: 225). The rise of opposing sides and deep disagreements, driven by the gap between “what is” and “what ought to be,” is linked to the third dimension of polarization. Here, both the definition of what is different and the assumptions about what ought to be are differentiated. In the context of polarization, questions such as 'who dislikes whom' or 'who dislikes what' become more apparent and intensified. At this very point, the question of what defines and symbolize “us” becomes one of the determinants that form the framework of the polarization in question.

This situation, which is captured by the concept of national image, is basically related to whether people have a consensus on what represents the collective identity. At this point,

polarization, which means the division of society into distinct parts with distant and negative perceptions and feelings, can lead to the emergence of extremes in terms of what represents the nation, in other words, national images. Historical and social events, along with ideologies, cognitive structures, and belief systems (such as political, philosophical, or religious beliefs), can shape how national images differ and contribute to the emergence of polarization. Moreover, regardless of the social forces or processes involved, social media can further facilitate and exacerbate the contribution of social forces and processes to polarization[1] (Baumgaertner & Justwan, 2022: 2; Lorenzo-Rodriguez & Torcal, 2022: 99).

There are numerous studies on the effect of media, especially social media, on increasing political polarization (Valenzuela et al., 2019; Kubin & Skorski, 2021; Bavel et al. 2021). Social media has a direct impact on deepening polarization among those who are exposed to it, especially since it causes an indirect and tense encounter with those who are defined as "the other" and who are at the other end of polarization. Social media is a space where people reinforce their existing assumptions and beliefs, update themselves constantly in line with the values and information they believe in (asymmetric updating), and are more willing to share politically relevant information online (Bavel et al. 2021: 914). In this context, debates about what represents and will represent the nation are also an important part of polarization on social media. Shaped by socio-political belief systems, national images are the stories people tell themselves about how the representations they present define their personal understanding of reality (Usó-Doménech & Nescolarde-Selva, 2016: 148). At the macro level, national images are the mechanisms people use to make sense of the world and signaling systems for perceiving reality.

In line with the diversity of belief systems, national images often include representations of alternative worlds, essentially distinguishing between two different worlds. These are the world as it is, and the ideal world as it should be. In this respect, national images provide a perspective, a cognitive map, and a framework for both what is and what ought to be (just like ideologies). Central to most perspectives are some statements about where the national image, based on a particular belief system, and (or) the social group that carries it, stands in relation to other things, especially nature, social events, or other social groups. Are we equal? Are we enemies? Are we friends? In this context, the perception of the national image as a depiction of the social environment reflects the place of the social group itself (Usó-Doménech & Nescolarde-Selva, 2016: 151).

As is the case in many countries in different geographies of the world, the polarization in Türkiye has become increasingly prominent and a topic that has been addressed more and

[1] For other studies showing the impact of social media on polarization, see: Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics. Oxford University Press. Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. F. B., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 115(37), 9216–9221. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115. Van Bavel, J. J., Rathje, S., Harris, E., Robertson, C., & Sternisko, A. (2021). How social media shapes polarization. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 25(11), 913–916. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.07.013. Park, C. S. (2024). Exposure to cross-cutting information on social media and perceived political polarization. Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research, 12(4), 243–266. https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2024.12.4.243. Georgia Institute of Technology. (2024). Impact of social media usage on political polarization in the United States. American Journal of Communication. https://doi.org/10.47672/ajc.1932.

more in the literature (Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2019; Erdoğan, 2020; Kutlu et al., 2021; Ertugay, 2022). From various social issues (women's rights, gender issues, housing and zoning problems, natural disasters and their mitigation, etc.) to political issues (presidential government system, civil servant appointments, university exams, education curriculum, etc.), it is observed that Turkish society is divided into at least two poles: social and political. One of the elements of this divergence is the issue of national images. It can be argued that an increasing polarization has become evident in Türkiye, especially, around the issues and topics that arise both in conventional media and social media platforms, in terms of what represents, who represents, and the symbols that represent, will represent the country; in short, national images. In this context, the study focuses on polarization on national images, which is considered a sub-dimension of polarization.

In this article, a framework for the concept of national image will be presented. Subsequently, an assessment of the current polarization phenomenon in Türkiye will discuss polarization over national images, which constitutes a sub-dimension of this political polarization, and evaluate some empirical examples of this situation. The evidence for these findings will be presented on various social media platforms and in discussions around some main themes and phenomena. Thus, the phenomenon of polarization surrounding national images—closely linked to the historical roots of polarization in Türkiye—will be brought to light. This study will address an important yet violent dimension of polarization that has never been addressed in the literature. The unique aspect of this study is the establishment of the relationship between the concept of national image, which is sparsely covered in the political literature, and political polarization in Türkiye and its analysis in this context.

At this point, attention will be drawn to an important point of divergence that leads to the crystallization of ideological and emotional evaluations, as well as fault lines leading to the deepening and continuity of polarization. This phenomenon is also emphasized in the international literature (Rogowski &Sutherland, 2016; Buttice & Stone, 2012). Our study will analyze an issue that is both a cause and a consequence of polarization in Türkiye, uniting different socio-political circles into a single comprehensive divide and dividing society into two opposing blocs on either side of this divide.

This study, which will enable a better understanding of the basic characteristics of polarization and the political belief systems behind it, and provide information about people's reactions to political events and their attitudes towards national images (Brandt et al., 2019: 1152), will focus on the posts and evaluations made on social media and their content on four specific topics that were on the agenda in Türkiye during the relevant time period. These are Olympic runner-up Yusuf Dikeç's social media post titled “My Most Precious...” second, Real Madrid and Turkish National Football Team player Arda Güler's goal celebration gesture and related posts; Turkish Women's National Volleyball Team player Ebrar Karakurt and some related posts. Fourth, a popular Turkish artist, Tarkan's song “Geççek” and the social media post of its music video are discussed. These four examples illustrate the sub-dimension of the

polarization phenomenon in Türkiye, in terms of "what represents or should represent the nation". The analysis of these examples will shed some light on the Turkish view that building basic socio-political commons is necessary for social cohesion and a stable political system.

This study is also extremely important in that it sheds light on one dimension of the problems faced by countries that are trying to integrate into modernity and are thus caught between secularization and traditional values, or experiencing conflict between them, compared to Western countries that have built a relatively homogeneous democratic culture and way of life. At this point, the study also has the potential to contribute to understanding the dilemmas of non-Western countries in the process of modernization.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design within the tradition of critical discourse and qualitative content analysis. To capture how political polarization is articulated and contested through symbolic representations, the research examines public digital discourse on social media platforms (X and YouTube) between 2022 and 2024.

Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Given the vast and fluid nature of social media data, this study employs purposive theoretical sampling to select four salient controversies. These cases were not chosen for statistical representativeness, but as critical case studies that vividly expose the fault lines along the secular-conservative axis in Türkiye. The dataset comprises:

Original posts, accompanying visual/video content, and associated user comments.

Publicly accessible threads retrieved through platform search parameters during the respective peak periods of public debate.

Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis followed an inductive thematic coding approach, executed in three iterative stages:

Data Immersion and Contextualization: Familiarizing with the multimedia context, including the socio-political timing and public status of the figures involved.

Inductive Coding: Systematic reading of user comments to identify recurring discursive patterns regarding national representation, inclusion/exclusion mechanisms, and moral boundary-drawing. Codes were iteratively refined until thematic saturation was achieved.

Interpretative Synthesis: Grouping codes into overarching thematic clusters, interpreted through the theoretical lenses of political polarization, collective identity, and national image theory.

Methodological Limitations

As with all digital footprint research, the dataset reflects highly vocal and visible online actors rather than a randomly sampled cross-section of the entire Turkish population. Consequently, the findings map the discursive boundaries and symbolic repertoire of polarization rather than its macro-statistical distribution.

1. The National Image: The Picture or Narrative of "Us"

From international relations to social identity formation, national image is a concept and phenomenon that has been systematically analyzed since the mid-twentieth century. National image, which is basically related to the representation of a country abroad and how it is portrayed, is also affected by the social dynamics within the country. National image refers to how a country's cultural, economic, political, and social characteristics are perceived outside the country and among its own citizens. Boulding, one of the first to use this concept, defined national image as "the sum total of perceptions about oneself and others in the collective mind of a nation" (1959: 120). National image is a multidimensional concept that expresses how a country is perceived by other countries and its own citizens. National image is often influenced by factors such as historical events, cultural achievements, economic performance and political stability. According to Anholt, who defines national image as "the overall impression of how a country is perceived by citizens of other countries" (2007: 23, 26), national image also plays a critical role in a country's branding process and directly influences its success in the international arena. Therefore, in a world of intensified interaction and communication, this intensified interaction and communication has become one of the main factors determining the position of countries in the international arena.

National image, shaped by the interaction between a nation's perception of itself and other nations' perceptions of that nation (Kunczik, 2016: 12), national image is about how a nation sees itself and how it is seen and evaluated by other nations (Davison, 1997: 45). In other words, national image is a representation and source of a country's perception of "us-less". This representation has a three-dimensional/stage functioning: Cognitive dimension (knowledge about the country); affective dimension (feelings towards the country); and finally, behavioral dimension (behavioral tendencies towards the country). In this sense, both citizens' and foreigners' knowledge about a country determines emotion and emotion determines behavior (Wang, 2006: 91-96). In other words, a positively constructed national image can lead to internal consensus and external reputation, whereas negatively constructed national images can lead to polarization and loss of reputation.

National images, which are determined and formed by various factors such as historical experiences, cultural heritage, economic performance, technological development, political

system, international relations, media representations and cultural productions (Dinnie, 2015: 67), can also turn into the soft power of countries if they are widely accepted. In this sense, a country with a positive national image may receive more support and cooperation in the international arena, and increase its influence in international relations (Nye, 2004: 32). In other words, agreed-upon national images will first ensure social unity, and, with the impact and soft power potential generated, states will have strong images and brand values in the international arena.

This brand equity also has an inward-looking effect. In this context, it shapes national identity and is affected by it. As nations unite around a common identity and sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983: 49), they make it possible to live together and share a common destiny in a horizontal relationship, characterized by a collective "we" who belong to each other (Nash, 2016: 81). At this point, the unifying power of national images emerges in the area where the "we" is visible. A positive national image makes individuals proud of their country and strengthens their national identity (Kim, 2011: 78). On the contrary, polarization occurs, values fragment, and as a result, either the "we" phenomenon does not exist or separate "we"s emerge in the same society. From this perspective, national image plays a catalytic role in the formation of collective identity and contributes to the crystallization of social values. Moreover, the national image is an element that will fulfill important functions: shaping social values, forming collective memory, determining cultural codes, and standardizing social norms (Castells, 2010: 89). Thanks to the impact of the national image in these areas, social identity can be constructed, and social solidarity can be ensured by narrowing areas of polarization[2].

National image contributes to national unity in various ways. These contributions include creating a common identity, increasing social solidarity, and building bridges between different groups. A positive national image can create a sense of common identity and solidarity among citizens from different ethnic, religious and cultural groups (Kymlicka, 1995: 67). National image also plays an important role in ensuring social trust and stability. A positive national image can increase citizens' trust in their country and promote social peace (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 45; Berger, 1997: 62). A national image that increases social trust and is accepted by society, is very important in the construction of national identity. national identity is one of the most important elements affecting the shaping of national images.

National identity is a type of social identity in which an individual associates themselves with a nation and defines themselves in the context of the identity formed by such belonging. People can develop a common sense of belonging even if they are not in direct communication with other individuals belonging to the same nation (Anderson, 1983: 6). This makes it possible to be united in mind and imagination, to adopt the same identity, and to develop a behavior. This is because national identity is a collective sense of belonging based

[2] While discussing the relationship between polarization and national images, it may be understood that the existence of a nationalist ideology is implicitly indicated, but this is not the case. This is because the distinction between "us" and "them" here refers to the definition of individuals based on any identity.

on a common cultural heritage, historical past, and shared values. This identity acts as a catalyst in the formation and sustainability of nations (Smith, 1991: 14). Societies with a strong national identity constantly reproduce their religious and moral norms through collective memory (Smith, 2009: 124). National identities help shape collective memory and organize individuals' belief systems through this memory. For example, nations' emphasis on common historical events reinforces a particular value system among citizens. National symbols and collective memory form the moral values of nations and guide the actions of individuals (Anderson, 1983: 45). This fosters social unity and promotes the development of social cohesion. However, without it, there is a risk of it becoming a tool for polarization.

Agreed national images can enable the construction of an inclusive national identity and reduce polarization. However, national images and identity can also trigger social polarization. Especially in cases where nationalist discourses are used in a harsh and exclusionary manner, national identity and images can become a means for creating divisions and conflicts between different groups. It is crucial to determine whether national images and identity have the same connotations in a society and express the same perceptions of “us”. Otherwise, national images have the potential to become a tool of polarization rather than unity. For example, Nelson Mandela's construction of an image of “unity and reconciliation” in South Africa was effective in reducing social polarization in the post-apartheid period (Sparks, 1994: 89). However, inaccurate or one-sided construction of the national image can increase polarization. For example, an overly nationalistic image can lead to tensions between different groups. This can be particularly pronounced in societies with significant ethnic or religious differences (Gellner, 1983: 56). In the final analysis, national image is a critical concept that affects both a country's international reputation and its domestic social dynamics. A positive and inclusive national image can strengthen social unity, reinforce individuals' national identities and reduce polarization. However, misconstruction or manipulation of the national image can lead to social tensions and polarization.

2. The Meaning of Polarization: The Tension of “We”

The most basic definition of polarization is the division of a society or group into two or more segments with opposing views. Polarization generally refers to the formation of clear distinctions between social, political, or economic groups. The foregrounding and deepening of differences in society and the widening of the distance between social segments are the main source of polarization. In this context, Hegre defines polarization as the separation of individuals into two distinct groups in a society, where intergroup differences are significantly larger than intragroup differences (2008: 261). The existence of two distinct groups with a significant distance between them is fundamentally due to the presence and aggregation of interpersonal antagonisms. These antagonisms are measured and shaped by the distance between individuals' ideal points (Esteban & Ray, 2008: 166). In other words, polarization is the distance between opposing forces in society. In every society, there are certain groups with power and influence. Their number and the distance between them, show the polarization

tendency of that society. Depending on the increase in this distance, people may shift towards parties or ideologies at the extremes of the political spectrum (Dixit &Weibull, 2007: 7351; Levin et al., 2021: 1). Additionally, simultaneously or independently, geographical (Johnston et al., 2023: 127) and ethnic, religious (Klašnja & Novta, 2016: 928) polarization may also emerge.

Polarization negatively affects the problem-solving capacities of societies and countries due to widening distances between groups and reduced interaction and tolerance. At the same time, political crises and dysfunction often result from the ideological gap and the resulting lack of consensus. In the final analysis, polarization can even turn into a political apparatus in the hands of some leaders (Levin et al., 2021: 2). Although the definition of polarization differs in terms of the subject matter and the way it is addressed, the common emphasis in these definitions is on harsh social distinctions and divisions. Looking at the literature, essentially four types of polarization come to the fore. The factors are: political, economic, social, and ethnic polarization. This distinction is made according to the phenomenon from which the basis of social polarization emerges. In other words, polarization is named according to the area from which it originates. If a polarization arises from political parties, ideologies, or their populist approaches, it is defined as political polarization (Dixit & Weibull, 2007, p. 7351; Levin et al., 2021, p. 2). If polarization triggers class inequalities through economy and income distribution, it is referred to as economic polarization (Hegre, 2008, p. 261; Esteban & Ray, 2008, p. 166). The type of polarization in which distance between social groups increases, identities come to the fore, communication decreases, and one ethnic or social identity perceives the “other” as a threat is called social and ethnic polarization (Cardenas, 2013, pp. 789-791; Klašnja & Novta, 2016, p. 930).

As a result, polarization occurs when the multiple ways of understanding and explaining life, interests, and identities that normally exist in a society begin to group into a single competing dimension and divide into two opposing camps. This implies a socio-political situation in which the group identity of individuals determines and guides any policy debate, a particular division of identities rather than specific points of contact, and a mutual alignment of multiple identities and interests (McCoy & Rahman, 2016: 13; Garcîa-Guadilla & Ma, 2019: 63-64). One of the most prominent features of polarization is the concentration and reinforcement of differences within society, and the country into two main groups. At this point, a sharp distinction of 'us' and 'them-other' emerges between these groups (Somer & McCoy, 2018: 2). For this reason, societies begin to experience a pronounced polarization in which each group starts to divide within itself by taking strong and intense political ideas. People gain certain social identities, social distance and social exclusion increase due to the distinction between “us” and “them,” and political tolerance decreases (Kinder & Kam, 2010: 182, 229). We define polarization, then, as a situation in which the normal differences and diversity of a society are increasingly aligned along a single dimension, where intersecting differences are reinforced, where “agreeing to disagree” becomes one of the main characteristics, and where citizens become antagonistic about policies on various military, economic, diplomatic issues.

It should be evaluated as a process in which different segments of society almost always make sense of socio-political developments through dichotomies such as right-wrong, success-failure, positive-negative, and increasingly perceive and define both politics and society through the distinction between "us" and "them".

Polarization is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon. It can be defined in various ways in different contexts. Various factors such as income inequality, differences in political views, and ethnic or religious divisions can lead to polarization. Defined and analyzed in different ways by different disciplines, polarization has significant impacts on social, political, and economic systems. Understanding the causes, consequences, and different dimensions of polarization is critical to finding solutions to the problems of today's world and analyzing the dynamics of social conflict and political instability.

3. Polarization over National Images in Türkiye: Who is "We" or What Represents "We"?

There is considerable research and almost an academic consensus that polarization in Türkiye has reached serious and dangerous levels. Field research on polarization also indicates significant polarization[3] (Cor. Social Responsibility Association of Türkiye, 2016; Ağırdır, 2010; Erdoğan, 2018; KONDA, 2019; Erdoğan, 2020; Kutlu et al., 2021). Although studies on polarization in Türkiye reveal that the polarization in question is a sharp, current or factual phenomenon, they are far from addressing polarization as a whole with its historical, cultural, economic, social and political dimensions. In this respect, it is accurate to say that polarization studies in Türkiye do not sufficiently address the causes of polarization; they mostly focus on its results and form. In this respect, important qualitative issues such as "what is the subject of disagreements" or "what lies at the root of disagreements" cannot be addressed properly, partly due to the influence of current political developments (Ertugay, 2022: 38). In this part of the study, polarization in Türkiye will be evaluated as a factual situation considering the relevant literature and focusing on the relationship between polarization and national images. Therefore, issues such as polarization in Türkiye, its causes, consequences, and dimensions will not be discussed in detail.

Political elites in a country, intentionally and unintentionally, exploit pre-existing divisions and mechanisms or intensify their consequences, which is crucial for polarization. In politics, polarization as a discourse-driven process emphasizes differences between groups to activate specific identity markers and oppositions. The rhetoric and symbols used in the politics of polarization inevitably create a sense of conflict between "us" and "them" with mutually exclusive identities (Ertugay, 2022: 40). In this context, it is evident that the foundations of

[3] For other studies on polarization in Turkey, see: Bozdağ, Ç., & Koçer, S. (2022). Skeptical inertia in the face of polarization: News consumption and misinformation in Turkey. Media and Communication, 10(2), 169–179. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i2.5057. Hazar, Ç. M., Cengiz, M. F., & Avcı, Ö. (2023). Sosyal medyada ideolojik ve siyasi kutuplaşma üzerine nicel bir araştırma. Middle Black Sea Journal of Communication Studies, 8(2), 121–144. https://doi.org/10.56202/mbsjcs.1320468. Dogu, B., & Mat, H. O. (2019). Who sets the agenda? Polarization and issue ownership in Turkey's political Twittersphere. International Journal of Communication, 13, 1234–1256. Avcı, İ. S. (2024). Echoes of division: Social media, disinformation, and emotional politics in Turkey's 2023 presidential elections. Social Review of Technology and Change, 2(2), 27–52.

polarization in Türkiye have a historical depth. Both the last periods of the Ottoman Empire and the founding years of the Republic, as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire, were periods that constituted a triangulation point in terms of identity construction, the production of national images and the revision of existing ones, as well as polarization.

Especially with the proclamation of the Republic, the multiple identity structure of the Ottoman Empire and the world of socio-political symbols constructed accordingly gave way to the construction of a homogenous national identity and the shaping of the national image of the new Türkiye in line with the principles of secularism, modernization, and Westernization[4] (Zürcher, 2004: 213). In this process, the state's mobilization of the entire system in line with a certain ideology, and the effort to create a "new human" model, form the basis of the social fault lines formed in today's polarization. The "authoritarian modernization" (Zürcher and Atabaki, 2012) of the period in question attempted to produce and socialize new national images while implementing the new human model. In this context, the founding episteme/paradigm of the Republic prioritized the construction of a discourse that would make it possible to leave the old symbolic universe/world of images behind, and to realize actions to be performed in line with this discourse (Ertugay, 2020: 34). Therefore, polarization in Türkiye has been constantly reshaped by this historical accumulation and by the new fractures of pre-existing long-term divisions in society. The relationship between polarization and national images has also been reshaped due to these new situations as old distinctions are regrouped and shaped differently and new ones are invented in the process (Somer, 2022: 296; Ertugay, 2022: 40).

National images in Türkiye have generally been shaped along two main axes: "Eastern-Western"; "secular-traditional/conservative". While secularism and Westernization efforts have been identified with concepts such as modernization , Eastern identity has emphasized traditional, conservative and religious values (Göle, 1997: 48; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008: 155-157; Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2009: 82-85). These two images were adopted in varied ways by different segments of society and deepened polarization over time. For example, while pro-Westernization segments saw modernization and secularism as fundamental elements of national identity, conservative segments perceived this approach as a threat to their values. This situation has become more evident in the political arena, especially since the 2000s, and has increased social polarization (Keyman, 2010: 124; Uzun & Lüküslü, 2023: 158). In addition to this main axis of "Western/secular vs. Eastern/traditional" dichotomy, it can also be said that national images in Türkiye are mostly shaped around the Turkish and Sunni Muslim identity, reflecting both identities. In other words, while the Turkish-Sunni notion is intensely present in "Eastern/traditional" identities, it is also present in "Western/secular" identities and images, albeit in a diluted form.

[4] It should not be forgotten that in this process, the identities of different ethnic and religious groups were ignored or suppressed. It should be underlined that various religious and ethnic structures and other minority groups felt excluded from the construction of national identity (Yeğen, 1999, p. 561). This situation constituted one of the different dimensions of social polarization in the following years.

In the nearly century-long historical course of the Republic, the state and the political apparatus/mechanisms were the main determinants of what would represent the nation what would be accepted as the national image. The state apparatus, which controls almost all socio-political processes and to a great extent penetrates what it cannot control, has tried to produce new national images in a wide range of areas, from the education curriculum to all elements of educational processes and from cultural and artistic products to architectural structures. An intense effort has been made to popularize and socialize what has been produced. Naturally, this has led to the emergence of a dichotomy between the rejection of the "old" and the creation of the "new". In this context, different national images were formed in two clusters depending on these two different epistemes or paradigms. From the nation's leaders, heroes and faces to architectural structures and monuments, from music styles, anthems and instruments to clothes, personal appearances and styles, a polarization has also manifested itself in what constitutes a national image and what becomes a symbol of the nation. For example, when Hagia Sophia's status as a museum was terminated and it was converted into a mosque, a divergence, and ultimately a polarization, between "Hagia Sophia as a museum and Hagia Sophia as a mosque" became visible (Smith, 2021: 92; Oztig & Adisonmez, 2023: 794,795). Similarly, on the one hand, a certain national image is emphasized through discourse of "local and national" (Çınar, 2011: 78), on the other hand, through discourse of "contemporary children, contemporary youth, contemporary girls" (Kandiyoti, 2021: 45), another national image element is put into competition with the previous one[5].

Although this situation, the examples of which can be multiplied, can be encountered partially in some other countries, it is a phenomenon unique to Türkiye, unlike other countries[6]. It would not be wrong to say that this situation has become more pronounced, especially in post-2000s Türkiye, although the reasons for this situation are not specifically discussed. Without going into other general and fundamental reasons, it is possible to underline the impact of social media on the existence and sharpening of polarization, in the last decade (Malkawi, 2025: 2; Türkoğlu et al., 2023: 224). In terms of society and politics in Türkiye, social media has turned into a platform where national images are not unifying but divisive and polarizing, where each segment tries to make its own national image visible and claims that pose a threat to others. One of the most important dimensions of this visibility is that the posts of people who are on different sides of the polarization, and have social representation, enter a polarizing cycle. This cycle includes issues that can be described as national images and operates independent of the intentions of the people who make the posts or is directly related to their intentions.

In this context, as emphasized in the introduction, the study analyzed four different situations and posts that correspond to different extremes of polarization in Türkiye, regardless of where the individuals concerned position themselves. Two of these are posts or situations at one

[5] It is also possible to read this as the cultural dimension of polarization in the context of national images. For a discussion in this direction, see (Göle, 1997: 52).
[6] There are serious debates in American society about whether Donald Trump represents American values. See (Henderson, M., & Smith, J., 2023: 127).

extreme, while the other two are at the other extreme. The first post is by Yusuf Dikeç, one of the duo who came second in the mixed 10-meter air pistol at the 2024 Summer Olympics, winning Türkiye its first Olympic silver medal in this branch.

Yusuf Dikeç gained domestic and international popularity and quickly became a prominent figure in Türkiye with his unique characteristics. After the Olympics, he was welcomed as a national hero in Türkiye. Dikeç's post, which is the subject of our study, is an image he shared on his X account on August 24, 2024, with the title "My Most Precious...." In this image, Dikeç is seen hugging her mother, who is standing right next to her in a white headscarf. This picture-sharing, which reveals the image of a traditional-conservative woman, was reposted more than 23 thousand times, received nearly 500 thousand likes, was seen by more than 38 million people, and received more than 12 thousand comments. When these comments are analyzed, the majority of them are found to be supportive and positive in nature. However, a certain number of comments were made on the grounds of "not being Western", "looking reactionary", "incompatible with secularism", "not representing Türkiye"[7]. It is seen that comments in this direction quickly turned into opposing comments and a discussion about what represents/does not represent Türkiye, in this case, whether an old woman wearing a turban is among the images of Türkiye.

The second example is Real Madrid footballer Arda Güler, who represents Türkiye abroad and is one of Türkiye's most popular figures both at home and abroad. Güler is one of the most important young talents that the country has produced, and he is highly appreciated by the whole country. At the height of his popularity after his transfer to Real Madrid, Güler was a guest on KAFA Sports, a YouTube channel hosted by Candaş Tolga Işık, one of Türkiye's best-known journalists, on 29 Apr. 2024. This interview was published on the relevant YouTube channel under the title "I want to win the Champions League!/Special Interview with Arda Güler"[8]. As of 16.01.2025, this interview has been watched by approximately 4 million people, received over 174 thousand likes, and 8,782 comments. The content of this video, which is the subject of our article, includes Arda Güler's answer to the question about his own goal celebration, and the comments made about it. When Güler scores a goal, he puts his right hand on his left chest and raises his left hand into a fist with his index finger open. In the context of the related question, Güler stated that he "believes that everything comes from God and that he trusts in Him. Upon Güler's statement, he was accused of being "unscientific", "reactionary", and "disgracing the country in the eyes of Westerners". Those who make such comments find religious-based references "outdated and irrational." On the other hand, Güler's goal-loving gesture was supported and those who made negative comments were evaluated as "alienated from their country and people" and "hostile to Islam and Muslims". Those who oppose secular criticisms think that Arda's goal celebration means that he is "a child of this land" and that he "continues to live its values".

[7] The relevant post and related comments were taken from the link https://x.com/yusufdikec/status/1827416924604543426 (Accessed: 02. 02. 2025). The link in question can be consulted regarding these posts.
[8] The relevant post and related comments were taken from the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSo2KdOb2bI&t=1278s (Accessed: 06. 02. 2025). The link in question can be consulted regarding these posts.

In these two examples, namely Dikeç and Güler, the focus and subject of the discussions is the elements, representations, and images that can be considered within the "Eastern/traditional" identity, which is one of the main axes of polarization in Türkiye. In this context, it is emphasized that these representations, elements, and images are exactly the things that can represent this country and reflect its values and characteristics. From this point of view, one can see that what is inferred from national images is a situation and attitude related to the polarity in which people are located.

The third example consists of a post or a stream about "Western-secular" representations and images that represent the other end of the polarization in Türkiye. Similar to the previous two examples, an X post[9] directed at Ebrar Karakurt, one of the players of the Turkish Women's National Volleyball team, and the comments made on her response[10] to this post provides insight into the polarization regarding which values should represent Türkiye and the nation. In the related post, Ebrar Karakurt shared a banner with the words "Don't be idle, Abdulhamid" on her X account on September 1, 2023, which she held at chest level, in response to the comment "As the Muslim Turkish nation, we tolerate you," made by a user named "Abdulhamid Denge" in reference to her being gay. This post received 19 million views, more than 327 thousand likes, more than 25 thousand reposts and more than 11 thousand comments. In the comments and evaluations made under this post, it is clear that there is a sharp polarization about who and how they represent the country and the nation, as well as what is to be seen and accepted as a national image. Many negative comments were made, ranging from Karakurt having no right to represent the country; that is, "us", because his sexual preference did not fit the Turkish-Muslim family structure, to his being accused of being an enemy of the state and the nation because the name Abdülhamid evoked Abdülhamit II, one of the last sultans of the Ottoman Empire. The majority of the supportive comments concentrated on the affirmation of the other side of the polarization in the context of expressions such as the emphasis on Atatürk, modernization, Westernization, progressive, and "Republican woman" and "the last bigoted bender".

Our fourth example centers on Tarkan, one of Türkiye's popular musicians considered to represent the "Western/secular" side of the polarization, as he shared his song "Geççek" and its music video on his YouTube page, where he has nearly 3 million followers, on 17 Feb 2022, and the comments on this post[11]. The clip was watched by more than 87 million people, received more than 1.1 million likes, and garnered over 100,000 comments. The song was quickly embraced by segments of society that consider themselves secular, Western, and progressive. The intense emphasis on the idea that the bad situation in the lyrics of the song is temporary, that "good" days are near, and that it is directed against the conservative government, which is characterized as the other, led to an intense polarization in the

[9] The relevant post was taken from the link https://x.com/wipsoo/status/1696102602134483286?t=gSbOq9_FUwMl3ZpVyy1pyw&s=19 (Access Date: 07. 02. 2025). The link in question can be consulted regarding these posts.
[10] The relevant post and comments on it were taken from the link https://x.com/karakurtebrar18/status/1697696948822712330 (Accessed: 07. 02. 2025). The link in question can be consulted regarding these posts.
[11] The relevant post and comments on it were taken from the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6gSMSYKhKU (Access Date: 09. 02. 2025). The link in question can be consulted regarding these posts.

comments. The comments reveal that the counter-argument, claiming conservative values are in danger and that this song represents this, is intensely challenged by the emphasis on conservative policies. These policies, perceived to be implemented in an intense and authoritarian manner, have come and/or should come to an end.

When these four examples are analyzed individually or as a whole, it is noteworthy that there is a divergence on social media that is manifested along the secular-conservative axis, which constitutes one of the main axes of political polarization in Türkiye. This divergence is based on "what represents the nation" or "what does not represent the nation". there is significant polarization in society regarding symbols, representations, and people that will or will not be accepted as national images.

Conclusion

National images in Türkiye have been shaped in the historical process, and have played an important role in social polarization. The divergence and tension between "Eastern/traditional/conservative" and "Western/secular" identities has turned into a permanent polarization with the influence of other components, and this polarization has deepened. This polarization is reflected in almost every aspect of life. Political developments, debates, and language are especially affected by this polarization more deeply and negatively. One of the areas where polarization is reflected is inevitably the issue of what represents or will represent the nation, and in this context, what will be determined as the national image. From political and social figures to buildings or objects, polarization renders debates and confrontations in the country increasingly unresolvable. It should be noted immediately that it is possible to reduce this polarization through the construction of a pluralistic national image and the use of a unifying language. Türkiye's rich cultural and historical heritage offers an important opportunity to create a social structure where differences can coexist.

It should not be forgotten that the concept of national image, beyond expressing how a nation is perceived by other nations; has a complex structure that also affects internal dynamics. Which values or who represents/should represent the country not only determines the brand and image of the country externally, but also contains meanings and messages for the country itself, internally. Therefore, in polarized societies, it is inevitable that polarization will also emerge in terms of national images. This polarization will be parallel to the depth and sharpness of the general socio-political divide. When the examples we have considered, the harshness and marginalizing nature of the language used here suggests both the distance between social segments and the horizontal width and vertical depth of polarization.

As far as Türkiye is concerned, there are two options in terms of national images: The first is "both this and that" and the second is "either this or that". In other words, will Türkiye build an accepting and negotiating culture of compromise that reduces socio-political distances, or will it maintain a confrontational and tense climate based on the existence of segments of society that are closed to the other and insist on their demands in a maximalist manner? The

former points to reconciliation and partial agreement, while the latter points to tension and conflict.

Another important dimension of the issue is that the choice of the first option will also directly determine the outward reflection of the national image. This is because a strong “we” in internal perception will create a strong national image in external perception.

Finally, it is necessary to make a few suggestions to reduce the polarization that is constructed through national images in Turkey. The first of these is the construction of a pluralistic national image. This image should encompass different ethnic, religious, and cultural identities and make everyone feel a part of it. Second, it is important to avoid divisive rhetoric. Political leaders and the media should avoid divisive rhetoric and use language that unites society. This would be an important step to reduce social polarization. Lastly, education and awareness-raising activities are necessary. The education system should promote an understanding that different identities can live together. In addition, projects and activities that will raise awareness in society can be effective in reducing polarization.

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