When elites polarize over polarization: Framing the polarization debate in Turkey

Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Evren Balta

Abstract

This article aims to explore the views of the Turkish elite on the state of polarization in Turkey. By identifying four political frames—namely, harmony, continuity/decline, conspiracy, and conflict—that selected Turkish political and civil society elites use in discussing the phenomenon of polarization in the country through their contributions to a workshop and in-depth qualitative interviews, the article finds that there is a considerable degree of polarization among the Turkish elite regarding their views on the presence of polarization in Turkey. Moreover, this overlaps with the divide between the government and the opposition in the country. An analysis of the justificatory arguments employed in constituting the aforementioned frames shows that, while those elites who deny the existence of polarization seek its absence in essentialist characteristics of society, in reductionist comparisons with history, or in internal/external enemies, those who acknowledge polarization's presence look for its roots in political and institutional factors and processes. The article highlights how, given the denial of polarization by the pro-government elite and the substantial gap between the two camps' justificatory narratives, the currently reported high rates of polarization in Turkey can, at best, be expected to remain as is in the near future, barring a radical change in political constellations.

Keywords: *polarization*; *Turkey*; *populism*; *democracy*; *elite conflict*

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Introduction

In both advanced and developing democracies across the globe, there is a burgeoning debate concerning the rise of polarization and its relationship to democracy. Existing studies point to rising levels of polarization at a cross-regional level, encompassing the United States and the European Union as well as key rising international actors like Brazil, India, and Indonesia. Defined broadly as the ideological/policy-based and/or social distance between groups in society,[1] polarization levels are deemed central to the fate of democracy, mainly due to the ways in which high levels of polarization divide countries into two competing groups—"us" and "them"—where political communication and cooperation are impeded and where the policy content and questioning that are central to the articulation of public preferences in functioning democracies are increasingly abandoned at the expense of partisan and often populist biases that come to inform citizens' opinions.[2]

Turkey has emerged as one of the key countries in discussions over polarization, due to recent accounts that point to the presence of extreme levels of political and societal polarization in the country.[3] Existing research on Turkish political parties highlights the currently polarized state of the Turkish political elite,[4] thus hinting at the presence of a political polarization that entails a growing ideological and policy-based distance between political leaders and parties. It is also now being convincingly argued that Turkish society is deeply and consistently polarized on the grounds of both ideology and social distance,[5] which may preclude any meaningful steps toward democratic consolidation in the country.

Despite the growing number of works attempting to capture the extent and the axes of Turkey's political and societal polarization, as of yet we possess no

1 Marc J. Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 619–631; Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect Not Ideology: A Social Identity Based Perspective on Polarisation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–431.

2 Emilia Palonen, "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary," *Parliamentary Affairs* 62, no. 2 (2009), 332.

3 See, for instance, Emre Erdoğan, "Türkiye'de Kutuplaşmanın Boyutları Araştırması," February 1, 2016, https://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2016/02/19/kutuplasma-arast-rmas-sonuclar/preview/page/1/; Emre Erdoğan, "Turkey: Divided We Stand," GMF: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 12, 2016, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-divided-we-stand; Emre Erdoğan, "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey," GMF: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 20, 2018, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/dimensions-polarization-turkey; Ayşe Betül Çelik, Bilali Rezarta, and Yeshim Ikbal, "Patterns of 'Othering' in Turkey: A Study of Ethnic, Ideological and Sectarian Polarisation," *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 217–238.

4 Fuat Keyman, "The AK Party: Dominant Party, New Turkey and Polarization," *Insight Turkey* 16, no. 2 (2014): 19–31; Sabri Sayarı, "Back to a Predominant Party System: November 2015 Snap Election in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 2 (2016): 263–280.

5 Erdoğan, "Turkey: Divided We Stand" and Erdoğan, "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey."

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substantive insight into elite views on the presence of polarization in the country. In terms of the future of societal conciliation and democratic consolidation, elite views on the relevance and reality of polarization matter to a great extent. Unless the elites of political and civil society can reach at least a minimal degree of agreement as to whether polarization exists, little can be done in the way of dialogue and measures pursuant to combating polarization at both the political and the societal level. While differences of opinion may of course be expected concerning the degree of polarization and/or the driving factors behind it, it is crucial that the elites from the two poles of the polarized divide *publicly acknowledge* the existence of polarization so that "solutions, compromises, [and] accommodations to polarizing conflicts" can be "publicly argued, defended, and accepted."[6] A persistence of denial can even lead in time to the "refurbishment, or institutionalization, of a *denying culture*" that would make it impossible to regulate societal polarization, even in cases where this polarization reaches extreme levels and is translated into violence.[7] Acknowledgement matters not only for the purposes of negotiating and regulating societal divides, but also so as to ensure that polarization is not fostered even further. This is because the denial of polarization by one camp of the polarized divide entails the risk of alienating the other group; heightening the sense of mistrust, fear, and insecurity; and in turn fueling further polarization between the two camps.[8] Being faced with competing narratives of one's own "truth" from the denial camp, especially in cases where the denying party holds substantial political power, makes those who are concerned about polarization more attentive to negative events and information from the other camp, thereby bolstering both their in-group cohesiveness and their hostility toward the other group.[9]

In this article, we aim to remedy this gap in the study of elite perceptions on the state of polarization in Turkey by analyzing the political frames that Turkish political and civil society elites use in their public discussion of the phenomenon of polarization in the country. Our study contributes to the growing literature on polarization, which shows that polarization works by combining different social cleavages into one meta-cleavage and by dividing society into two separate and opposing blocs situated on either side of that meta-cleavage.[10] We show that this meta-cleavage is also salient in elite

6 Joseph L.P. Thompson, "Denial, Polarisation and Massacre: A Comparative Analysis of Northern Ireland and Zanzibar," *The Economic and Social Review* 17, no. 4, (1986), 308.

7 Ibid., 309.

8 Genevieve Parent, "Genocide Denial: Perpetuating Victimisation and the Cycle of Violence in Bosnia Herzegovina," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2016), 45.

9 Ibid., 50.

10 Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, "Déjà Vu? Polarisation and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 3–15.

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discourses over polarization, and that elites are in fact polarized over whether even polarization exists in Turkey.

The empirical data in this study draw from a closed workshop and in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with selected political and civil society elites on the issue of polarization in Turkey. In the data, we identify four political frames on polarization: the harmony frame, the continuity/decline frame, the conspiracy frame, and the conflict frame. Among these frames, only the conflict frame views polarization as an important political issue, whereas the other frames function as various strategies for the denial of the presence of polarization in the country. More importantly, we find that those who perceive polarization as a pressing issue in Turkey are, almost without exception, those who feel a considerable distance from the governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), whereas those who define themselves as AKP supporters and/or hold office within the government or are active in government circles deny that Turkish society is polarized. This leads us to conclude that there is considerable polarization across the spectrum of the Turkish elite concerning the existence of polarization in Turkey.

The article will first provide an overview of the findings of the existing work on polarization in Turkey. This will be followed by a discussion of the conceptual value of political frames such as those used in this study, together with a discussion of the methodology employed in identifying these frames. The article will then present the empirical analysis, followed by a concluding discussion of the potential implications of the findings for the management of societal peace and democratic consolidation in the Turkish context.

Polarization in Turkey

Polarization can take the form of political and/or societal polarization. Political polarization refers in general to large ideological and/or policy-based differences between "opposed camps or coalitions of political parties," with high similarities being present within these camps or coalitions.[11] Societal polarization, on the other hand, relates to the "existence of a few, large groups in society with opposing preferences (or opposing policy preferences)."[12] However, societal polarization may not only reveal itself through ideological and/or policy-based differences, but may also entail a high degree of social distance between citizens with different party loyalties. Social distance here refers to the

11 Annemarije Oosterwaal and Rene Torenvleid, "Politics Divided from Society? Three Explanations for Trends in Social and Political Polarisation in the Netherlands," *West European Politics* 33, no. 2 (2010), 261.

12 Ibid.

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"extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group."[13] While differences at both the political and societal levels are necessary in a healthy functioning democracy, political polarization can be deemed to exist insofar as these differences "become aligned within (normally two) camps with mutually exclusive identities and interests,"[14] which divides the political and social scene into a Manichean and antagonistic "us" vs. "them" dichotomy.

One recent study has argued that "the level of political polarization in Turkey has reached a level that should alarm even optimists."[15] This claim seems to also be acknowledged by a majority of the Turkish public, where 61.7 percent of the population are reported to believe that the country is deeply polarized.[16] There is wide agreement among academics that, in the Turkish context, political polarization is mainly government-led, being fostered by the polarizing populist rhetoric of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as well as by the AKP's dominant status in the political party system.[17] A key element of the polarizing populist rhetoric has been its use of an "us" vs. "them" divide, referring on the one hand to "the people" said to constitute the public will and represented at the political level by Erdoğan through his leadership of the AKP, and on the other hand the "Republican elite" who represent the "establishment" embodied in the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP). The populist view of "the people" vs. "the elite"—with the party and its leader represented as the "voice" of the genuine "will of the people" as opposed to that of the "elite" identified with the opposition—has helped to foster a binary worldview across Turkish society.

Research traces this discourse back to the 2007 general elections, where it proved beneficial to the AKP's election campaign and so came to be employed in subsequent general, local, and presidential elections, as well as two constitutional referendums.[18] It has also been argued that the polarizing effect of this

13 Iyengar et al., "Affect Not Ideology," 406.

14 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Politics," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 16–42.

15 Erdoğan, "Turkey: Divided We Stand," 1.

16 Özge Özdemir, "Muhafazakar Kesim Kutuplaşmaya Nasıl Bakıyor?" *BBC News: Türkçe*, January 27, 2017. http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-38667730.

17 Keyman, "The AK Party" and McCoy et al., "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy."

18 Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, "Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010," *South European Society and Politics* 17, no. 1 (2012): 1–22; E. Özlem Atikcan and Kerem Öge, "Referendum Campaigns in Polarized Societies: The Case of Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 3 (2012): 449–470; Senem Aydın-Düzgit, "No Crisis, No Change: The Third AKP Victory in the June 2011 Elections in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 329–346; ŞakirDinçşahin, "A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development Party's Populism in Turkey: The 2007 Electoral Crisis and After," *Government and Opposition* 47, no. 4 (2012): 618–640; Özge Kemahlıoğlu, "Winds of Change? The June 2015 Parliamentary Election in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 4

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discourse was enabled by institutional factors, such as the constant electioneering mode since the late 2000s; majoritarianism as a mode of governance, which restricts democratic space for the opposition;[19] and the erosion of democratic institutions alongside increased partisanship in the media landscape.[20] The research on polarization shows that political polarization is activated when there are fundamental changes in structures, institutions, and power relations.[21] Similarly, the increasing polarization in Turkey can be linked to deterioration in the rule of law and to changing power relations. In 2018, for the first time in a decade, the country has seen its Freedom House status switch from "Partly Free" to "Not Free."[22] As a country with an "unfree press," Turkey fell to 163rd place in the press freedom list in 2017.[23] World Bank governance indicators show that there has been a rapid decline in the rule of law in Turkey since 2014.[24] Hence, the rise of political polarization in Turkey cannot be considered independently of the rapid deterioration in Turkey of democracy, of the rule of law, and of fundamental freedoms. While the lack of democracy may help foster polarization, polarization *itself* may be boosted by political elites so as to further erode democracy.[25]

The increasing levels of political polarization imply that, in today's Turkey, political issues are evaluated by citizens largely with reference to their own partisan affiliations, which in turn leads to substantial policy-based divisions between those citizens who feel close to different political parties. For instance, while 82.9 percent of AKP supporters were found to believe that the Gezi protests of June 2013 were engineered by foreign powers intent on weakening the AKP, 72.8 percent of those supportive of the main opposition party CHP were of the opinion that they were peaceful protests undertaken in reaction to government policies.[26]

(2015): 445–464; Sayarı, "Back to a Predominant Party System"; Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "A Small Yes for Presidentialism: The Turkish Constitutional Referendum of April 2017," *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 303–326.

19 Ergun Özbudun, "AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift," *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 155–167.

20 Barçın Yinanç, "Turkish Media's Partisan Coverage Alarming for Democracy," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 20, 2015. http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-medias-partisan-coverage-alarming-for-democracy-81271.

21 McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy."

22 Freedom House, "Turkey Profile," Freedom in the World 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/turkey.

23 Freedom House, "Turkey Profile," Freedom of the Press 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/turkey.

24 World Bank, "Worldwide Governance Indicators," http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home.

25 Somer and McCoy, "Deja Vu?"

26 Erdoğan, "Türkiye'de Kutuplaşmanın Boyutları Araştırması."

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In cases where polarization is extreme, it "extends into other aspects of social relations," affecting interpersonal relationships all across society.[27] This is especially relevant in the Turkish case, where polarization is found to extend out from starkly opposing citizen views on policies framed by partisan affiliations to cover the high levels of social distance reflected in people's daily lives. In line with this claim, one study has found that 74 percent of the Turkish public reject the idea of doing business with someone who votes for the party from which they feel most distant, while 68 percent are against their children playing with peers from families supporting that party.[28] The same study also found "signs of perceived moral superiority," with 91 percent of the respondents expressing the view that supporters of the political party of their choice are "honorable" and 80 per cent claiming that supporters of the "distant political parties" are arrogant.[29]

Other works have delved into the question of the main axis over which polarization occurs in Turkish society, arguing that the polarized views are increasingly being structured by the divide between the government and the opposition; that is, whether an individual is an AKP supporter or not.[30] This has led to the consolidation of a bipolar societal bloc of AKP supporters and their opponents.[31] Ethnic and sectarian divides are also visible across Turkish society, most notably between the Turks and the Kurds, and, to a lesser extent, between Alevis and Sunnis.[32] Yet the government-opposition divide seems to have deepened to the extent that multiple cross-cutting cleavages are now being grouped and simplified under the rubric of the government-opposition divide, resulting in a substantively restricted political and societal space within which shared meanings can be sought. While there is thus a growing academic consensus concerning the rising degree of polarization in Turkey, as of yet there is little insight into how the Turkish elite perceive these claims regarding high polarization, particularly in connection with the matter of whether or not they publicly acknowledge the salience of polarization and the political frames through which they justify this polarization's absence or presence in Turkey. This is the matter to which we now turn.

27 McCoy et al., "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy," 5.

28 Emre Erdoğan and Pınar Uyan-Semerci, *Türkiye'de Kutuplaşmanın Boyutları Araştırması*, İstanbul Bilgi University and BST: The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/02/05/bilgi-goc-merkezi-kutuplasmanin-boyutlari-2017-sunum.pdf, 12.

29 Ibid., 14.

30 McCoy et al., "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy," 16–17.

31 KONDA, *April '17 Barometer*. http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/KONDA_16April2017_AnalysesoftheReferendumandtheElectorate.pdf, 36.

32 Çelik et al., "Patterns of 'Othering' in Turkey."

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Theory and method: Political framing, elites, and polarization

Social scientists have repeatedly shown that the majority of citizens are not well informed about decision-making processes; base their preferences on arbitrary information; and evidence instability in their views, holding fragmentary and conflicting attitudes toward the same policy issue.[33] Furthermore, societal interests do not fundamentally reflect the sociological position of actors.[34] It could thus be said that, rather than politics being about the response to already existing cleavage structures in societies, the appearance of a cleavage in a party system depends on political agency.[35] As such, politics can (re)create socio-political identities, polarize or diffuse political cleavages, and alter the nature of social conflicts.[36]

This brings us to the significance of elites in structuring the terms of political conflict in society. Political elites (leaders, government officials, members of parliament), as well as civil society elites active in various sectors (civil society organizations [CSOs], think tanks, academia, and the media sector), play a central role in the discussion, negotiation, and structuring of cleavages and conflict in society.[37] In so doing, they rely on political frames as their main weapons in battles over argumentation.[38] A political frame can be considered a cognitive map that is provided to citizens by elites as a compass that the former can use to situate themselves in an already complex political world. Political frames can thus be treated as "cognitive perceptions of reality."[39] They are a way of describing how "certain patterns of emphasis and exclusion can structure

33 Elmer Eric Schattschneider, *Party Government* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004); Elmer Eric Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (Hindsdale, IL: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Francis F. Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote — And Why Politicians Want It That Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009); J.N. Druckman, "The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence," *Political Behavior* 23, no. 3 (2001): 225–256; Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 103–126; Zsolt Enyedi, "Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (2016): 210–220.

34 Mariano Torcal and Scott Mainwaring, "The Political Recrafting of Social Bases of Party Competition: Chile, 1973–95," *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (2003), 57.

35 Ibid., 56.

36 Adrienne LeBas, "Polarization as Craft: Explaining Party Formation and State Violence in Zimbabwe," *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 4 (2006): 419–438; Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Torcal and Mainwaring, "Political Recrafting," 56.

37 McCoy and Rahman, "Polarised Democracies," 12–15.

38 Druckman, "Implications of Framing Effects," 235.

39 Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz, *The Politicization of Europe: Contesting the Constitution in the Mass Media* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 128.

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the thinking of people who encounter them."[40] According to Bock and Loebell, frames can be likened to the structures of buildings, which provide windows and doors as openings to the outside world.[41]

In his now classic *The Semisovereign People*, Schattschneider argues that democratic politics is about the competition over alternative frames.[42] For him, the supreme instrument of political power lies in the definition of alternative frames, since citizens base their preferences and interests precisely on how political issues are framed. As such, elites in various spheres of public life—including the political, cultural, and economic—have the ability to change the scope and salience of political issues, thereby dramatically altering the nature of political conflict.[43] However, as Chong and Druckman highlight, not all political frames include a rational/logistical explanation of the matter at hand.[44] Indeed, political frames can include exaggerations and/or outright distortions of reality, with these exaggerations or distortions resting on symbols, endorsements, and links to partisanship, ideology, and culture. This implies that they can also serve as tools of extensive elite manipulation.

The literature on the relationship between political frames and polarization highlights the fact that, while polarization creates a political space that is more open to elite manipulation, political elites can also utilize certain political frames in such a way as to become the main agents driving polarization.[45] Although voters may also have polarizing tendencies, in isolation this process is slow and imperfect. Polarization, in this view, is rather a self-imposed cleavage driven by elites in order to demarcate frontiers between "us" and "them," with consensus to be found only within the political camps themselves.[46]

There is now widespread agreement among scholars concerning the growing importance of polarization at the elite level and the mutually reinforcing

40 Douglas M. McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah, *News Frames and National Security: Covering Big Brother* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

41 Kathryn Bock and Helga Loebell, "Framing Sentences," *Cognition* 35, no. 1 (1990): 1–39.

42 Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*.

43 LeBas, "Polarization as Craft"; Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*; Stuart Soroka, "Agenda-Setting and Issue Definition," in *Critical Policy Studies*, ed. M. Orsini and M. Smith (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2011), 186.

44 Chong and Druckman, "Framing Theory," 111.

45 James Adams, Jane Green, and Caitlin Milazzo, "Has the British Public Depolarized Along with Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): 507–530; Enyedi, "Populist Polarization"; Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006); Torcal and Mainwarring, "Political Crafting."

46 Palonen, "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary," 321.

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effects of political and societal polarization.[47] Nonetheless, much of the research in the field of polarization, and the role of elites in the polarizing process, has focused on the causes and consequences of polarization through study of the policies of the political elite and the polarizing discourse of populist leaders;[48] only rarely has polarization been studied as an elite discourse in and of itself. In this article, we focus on the discourse of the elite—defined more broadly than the political elite so as to also encompass the civil society elite (CSOs, think tanks, academia, etc.)—over polarization, and we look at the ways in which elites frame the debate over polarization in Turkey. In doing so, the article takes the polarization debate as a reflexive issue, turning elite opinions toward polarization into a research subject in the context of a political climate where polarization is shown to be rife.

In particular, we focus on whether there is a consensus across the wider elite concerning the presence of polarization in Turkey, as well as on the frames that are used to justify polarization's presence and/or absence. This is necessary inasmuch as accommodation of any type of conflict in society requires that conflict to be publicly acknowledged by elites.[49] In cases, especially, where the ruling elites deny the presence of conflict and/or are incapable of recognizing the feelings of exclusion felt among both other elites and certain segments of society, the possibility of the conflict being effectively negotiated or regulated is lost. This moreover runs the risk of even further polarizing an already polarized society by fostering feelings of vulnerability and exclusion among the other camp of the polarized divide.[50] Since polarization can be considered a "real" perception, because "the experiences of ordinary people are often structured so as to lead them into homogeneous and polarized environments," then denying such perceptions only serves to intensify them, which in turn drives people into ever more homogenous camps.[51]

In cases of acknowledgement and denial, the types of argumentation used for justificatory purposes are also significant. Political frames provide insight into the broader justificatory narratives lying behind claims regarding the presence and/or absence of polarization. Political justification can thus be treated as "a model of discursive exchange by which citizens jointly *frame* the terms of

47 Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?" *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008), 543.

48 See, among others, Palonen, "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary" and Carlos de la Torre and Andres Ortiz Lemos, "Populist Polarization and the Slow Death of Democracy in Ecuador," *Democratization* 23, no. 2 (2016): 221–241.

49 Thompson, "Denial, Polarisation and Massacre."

50 Parent, "Genocide Denial."

51 Delia Baldassari and Peter Bearman, "Dynamics of Political Polarization," *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 5 (2007), 809.

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life in common and aspire to do so on the basis of reasons widely shared."[52] Identifying the contents of a frame of justification can therefore inform us of how a certain political and/or societal phenomenon, such as polarization, is publicly argued by the elites; of the ways in which the background assumptions behind their argumentation converge and diverge; and of the limits that are thereby imposed on any political proposals that could be put forward in an attempt to address the problem.

In this article, the political frames used by elites in discussing the phenomenon of polarization in the Turkish context are identified using two sources of data. One of these is the contributions of 24 participants (prominent representatives of the state bureaucracy, academia, think tanks, CSOs, and the media) to a workshop on polarization in Turkey that was held in İstanbul on January 17, 2017. The participants were selected via snowball sampling according to their expertise or experience in their particular sectors. Six participants from CSOs, six from think tanks, four from academia, four from the state bureaucracy, and four from the media attended the workshop. The workshop began with general discussions in which participants were asked to exchange their views regarding polarization in Turkey. Participants were then requested to identify the main hurdles and offer solutions for overcoming polarization in Turkey. This closed workshop provided a space in which actors could justify their views on polarization publicly and freely through in-depth debates held within an intersubjective context. The discussions were conducted by a professional consultant acting as moderator.

In addition to the workshop, semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Ankara in January 2017 with eight members of parliament (MPs) from those political parties that were represented in the Turkish parliament at the time: the AKP, the CHP, the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), and one former MP from the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP).[53] The interviewees were asked to express their general views on polarization in Turkey; whether they believed that the coup attempt of July 15, 2016 affected polarization levels; and what possible hurdles they could identify and measures they could propose to tackle polarization in the country. Both the workshop discussions and the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim as Word documents.[54]

52 Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 2 (2011), 381.

53 The MPs from the MHP who were contacted did not accept to be interviewed, with the exception of one former MP from the party. Among those who were interviewed, four MPs were from the AKP, two from the CHP, and two from the HDP.

54 On the request of most participants of the workshop, as well as all of the interviewed MPs, the contributions quoted in this study remain anonymous.

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The goal of the workshop and interviews was not to "reproduce in miniature" the totality of elite views on polarization, but rather "to guarantee a minimum representativeness of the participants […] in the qualitative sense of representing the diversity of opinions with regard to the topic of discussion."[55] Hence, this study attempts to display the structures of meaning within which individuals frame and justify their claims regarding the presence and/or absence of polarization in complex argumentation. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the claims reached through the analysis of the data cannot be extended beyond the individuals who participated in the workshop and interviews. Here, it would be useful to employ the distinction between "empirical generalizability" and "analytical generality."[56] Whereas the former entails making generalizations for the entire elite population via representative samples consisting of individual responses, the latter shifts the focus away from the individual to the context-based justificatory narratives that are used to discuss polarization.[57] In short, the framing distinctions we use here are context-specific, and are not meant to be presented as generalizable across a variety of situations.[58] Each identified frame encompasses a collection of distinctive metaphors, concepts, and values providing a degree of organization that helps actors to conceptualize different approaches to the causes and consequences of political polarization. The argumentative justifications for the frames were inductively identified from the data. Due to the relatively small scale of the data and the interpretivist nature of the study, this was done manually without the assistance of specialized computer software. Our research is interested in framing models, and as such our methodology did not include framing effects (i.e., a discussion of how frames are received by the broader population).

Framing polarization

We have identified four major frames that are used in discussing the presence and/or absence of polarization in the Turkish context. Three of these frames—which we refer to as the harmony frame, the continuity/decline frame, and the conspiracy frame—consist of justificatory arguments for the denial of polarization in the country. In this sense, these frames are strikingly similar to the

55 Sophie Duchesne, Elizabeth Frazer, Florence Haegel, and Virginie Van Ingelgom, Citizens' *Reactions to European Integration Compared: Overlooking Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 164.

56 Liam Stanley, "Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations," *Politics* 36, no. 3 (2016), 243.

57 Bente Halkier, "Focus Groups as Social Enactments: Integrating Interaction and Content in the Analysis of Focus Group Data," *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1 (2010), 79.

58 McLeod and Shah, *News Frames*, 18.

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denial strategies found to be employed in other conflict-ridden societies.[59] The fourth frame—namely, the conflict frame—focuses on the existence of societal polarization through justificatory arguments that rest primarily on perceptions of exclusion and intragroup conflict attributed to reasons that closely resemble those lying behind the polarizing dynamics identified in the existing literature.

Perhaps most importantly, the analysis below shows the partisan nature of the political frameworks utilized in the discussion of polarization in Turkey. In other words, while those elites who associate themselves more closely with the governing party (e.g., AKP MPs, representatives of the state bureaucracy, and those from CSOs, think tanks, and media outlets close to government networks) deny polarization's existence and/or salience, those who are critical of the government are unified in their perception of severe levels of polarization in Turkey. The justificatory arguments presented in the context of the frames identified below demonstrate the substantive gap that exists between the two camps of polarized elites not only concerning the existence of polarization, but also with respect to the camps' perceptions of the political and societal challenges of "living together" in Turkey.

Harmony frame

Some of the participants who deny that Turkey is polarized appeal to the image of a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural Turkey where individuals have historically lived together in peace. In so doing, they evoke a mythical past of the harmonious coexistence of different religions and ethnicities that has lasted to the present day. This is visible in the following remarks by a high-ranking state bureaucrat who claims that Turkey has always been a melting pot:

> Turkey is able to hold all of its colors together, including the pious and the infidel, the secular and the non-secular, the Christian and the Jew. We have to be able to explain this; we have to be able to pass this heritage on.

In a similar vein, one high-ranking government official completely denies that there is polarization in the country, particularly along secular-conservative lines. His justificatory arguments also draw from a mythic and imperial past characterized by a harmony that, he argues, forced the population to coexist peacefully for centuries. An additional source of justification that he emphasizes is the

59 For instance, in the Irish context, Darby finds four "myths" that serve to deny societal conflict: a nostalgia myth, an invasion myth, a conspiracy myth, and a vandalism myth. See John Darby, "Intimidation and the Control of Inter-group conflict in Northern Ireland" (Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, University of Ulster, 1985).

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AKP's broad electoral support base, which he perceives as an indicator of societal harmony and a lack of polarization, as in the following remarks:

> I don't think there is a deep level of polarization in society, as some people claim. I think it is basically a political difference […] The AKP receives a lot of support from across the political spectrum, which shows that polarization is not as salient as some people claim.

Another government official describes the current state of Turkish politics and society as being a period of transition in which secular elites are increasingly being replaced by conservative elites; this official views this process as a necessity in returning to "normalcy" that is often misinterpreted as polarization. Similarly, another official claims that what "others refer to as polarization" is simply "the process through which the state apparatus turns to conservative values." Both officials highlight how the discourse of "political polarization" is in fact a political reaction to a genuine transformation that is, in fact, helping to achieve and consolidate societal harmony.

The participants who utilize the harmony frame also tend to argue that whatever polarization may have existed before has declined since the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. According to one of the workshop participants, who works in a pro-government media outlet, one of the major reasons for this change is a newly found value ascribed to the Turkish flag. This participant puts forward the argument that, in the past, the Islamist worldview was not used to embrace the idea of the Turkish state as much as is the case now, with the idea of "belonging to the nation" becoming stronger than ever before following the coup attempt. As she puts it:

> July 15 was an important step in societal harmony. All different segments of society came together. We said that when it comes to our nation, our differences do not matter […] We should look at the polarization debate from this angle. We are now more united and more harmonious than ever.

A former MHP MP echoes this sentiment. In his view, there was an increase in polarization with the Gezi movement, but polarization has subsequently decreased since July 15 owing to the so-called "Yenikapı spirit,"[60] which

60 The "Yenikapı spirit" is a term used primarily by pro-government circles with reference to the gathering of the three political parties in parliament—the AKP, CHP, and MHP—at a public rally held at Yenikapı in İstanbul in the aftermath of the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. The term has frequently been utilized to denote "unity" against the coup plotters—a unity that has admittedly suffered under the government's sustained state of emergency and the subsequent onslaught on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms.

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brought together all political parties (with the exception of the HDP). Those who utilize the harmony frame also justify their claim regarding the non-salience of polarization with reference to the essentialist character trait of "Turkish hospitality," as evidenced by the high number of Syrian refugees admitted to the country. Many participants argue that no country but Turkey would be able to accommodate so many Syrians without experiencing major societal disputes, and they put this forward as a testimony to the "unpolarizable" nature of Turkish society.

Continuity/Decline frame

Another frame that is used to explain the lack of polarization relies on the claim that Turkey has always been polarized to some extent, and hence any problems relating to polarization are inherent features of the country's political and societal landscape. This framework somehow acknowledges the presence of deep divisions within the country while also, through an emphasis on continuity and at times decline, denying that this is a pressing matter, consequently externalizing any responsibility. The narrative of Turkey as a country that has always been polarized absolves the current government, in power for well over a decade now, of any responsibility for the current polarization in the country. Furthermore, treating polarization as an essentially structural component of the Turkish political landscape also implies that the current government can do little to resolve this issue, which is beyond its control.

In stressing continuity, participants overwhelmingly justify their claims by providing examples from Turkey's past presented in comparison with their perceptions of the present. For instance, an academic from Diyarbakır highlights that, though there may well be a certain degree of polarization in today's Turkey, this is less intense as compared to the 1960s and 1970s, when armed conflict between ideological groups was widespread, or to the 1990s, when there was an intense armed conflict in Turkey's southeast between the state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). Similarly, one state bureaucrat emphasizes how the current levels of polarization in the country should be assessed in relation to the degree of polarization that was present in the 1990s, as exemplified in the Sivas Massacre of July 2, 1993, which resulted in the killing of 35 people.[61] In his own words:

> Polarization increases from time to time. Such as in the Sivas massacre […] This happened in the past. But nothing of this magnitude happened again.

61 The victims, who had gathered for an Alevi cultural festival in Sivas, were killed when a religious mob set fire to the hotel where a group of intellectuals had assembled.

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For one young journalist from a pro-government media outlet, the comparison is based on her own experience of intense polarization in the 1990s. She argues that she was unable to pursue her lifestyle and religious beliefs in the 1990s owing to the high level of animosity held toward the religious people in Turkey. In her view, Turkey was also polarized in the 1990s—but this was because of the secular establishment's attitudes toward religious people at the time:

> Let me tell you what polarization is. In the 1990s, especially after February 28, everyone was using increasingly polarized language, especially against women with headscarves […] I spent the first fifteen years of my life scolded by government employees and intellectuals. They insulted women who wore headscarves, constantly […] This has changed tremendously. We have managed to get over this intense polarization.

Here, polarization is defined in terms of the participant's own personal experience of past exclusion, which is implied to have declined as a result of the shift of power constellations in the country. That is, the roots of polarization are sought in a single axis, thereby implicitly denying the possibility of exclusionary narratives built on multiple cleavages.

Conspiracy frame

Some participants who politically identify themselves with the AKP argue that claims of polarization are being spread by foreign powers intent on destabilizing the country. According to this view, not only is there substantial foreign provocation fueling the debate over polarization, but also foreign agents themselves are responsible for the key polarizing events in Turkish history, with the ultimate aim of shattering the harmony of Turkish society. The remarks below, taken from the contribution of a state bureaucrat to the workshop discussions, illustrate how a justificatory narrative of the actual absence of polarization draws from the alleged role of "foreign powers":

> For instance, we do not have negative attitudes toward blacks. Not as in Europe. We don't feel bothered by them. Yes, we have polarizing events in our history, such as the Sivas massacre. But they all happened because of foreign provocation, and they did not happen all that much. I mean external actors professionally encourage polarization. We are living together in harmony, and then suddenly there is a massacre. This is all because of our foreign enemies.

These comments demonstrate the intertextuality that exists between the harmony frame and the conspiracy frame. In other words, the conspiracy frame, in

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which the roots of polarization are externalized, only makes sense in the context of the argument put forward in the context of the harmony frame, according to which Turkish society, by its very nature, is not polarized. While this is a common justificatory argument among the deniers of polarization, the agency lying behind the bolstering of the "false" polarization discourse and the provoking of polarization can also be sought in the domestic sphere. Hence, conspiracy need not necessarily be externally based: it can also be linked to domestic enemies, primarily enemies of the AKP, who do not feel content with the ongoing political transition in the country. This can be observed in the following remarks made by two separate high-ranking bureaucrats:

> The polarization debate is a conscious provocation. It is especially encouraged by journalists. They pull the trigger every time. What they're doing is not useful to our country, to our nation, to humanity, or to anything. I don't understand why they are doing this to us. I don't even have the words to describe the harm that they've done.
>
> I'm not an academic; I'm only a state employee. I know that there is a perverse and covert organization that goes after elected officials. They are the ones who benefit from the polarization discourse.

There is wide agreement among academics that the conspiracy frame has been a key feature of Turkish politics in discussions over the root causes of the country's fundamental problems.[62] A key tenet of Turkish nationalist discourse—and one that has also been employed by the AKP—has been the focus on "external forces," often allying with "domestic enemies," all at the expense of the interests of the Turkish nation-state.[63] The justificatory narrative in this context draws from this key discursive element to account for the intensity of the polarization debate, or for the mere existence of polarization where it is present. In doing this, it also serves the key function of a polarizing discourse through "subdivision of the world of social actors into friends and enemies by Manichean division and the rhetorical construction of internal and external scapegoats."[64] Such externalization also absolves the government of any responsibility for the ongoing polarization.

62 See, among others, Michelangelo Guida, "The Sèvres Syndrome and 'Komplo' Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 37–52 and Türkay Salim Nefes, "The Impact of the Turkish Government's Conspiratorial Framing of the Gezi Park Protests," *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017): 610–622.

63 Jenny White, *Müslüman Milliyetçiliği ve Yeni Türkler*, trans. Fuat Güllüpınar and Coşkun Taştan (İstanbul: İletişim, 2013), 158.

64 Martin Reisigl, "Analysing Political Rhetoric," in *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michal Krzyzanowski (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 114.

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Conflict frame

Among the frames identified for this study, the conflict frame is the only one that highlights polarization as among Turkey's most urgent problems. Indeed, the justificatory arguments put forward within the conflict frame for the presence and high salience of polarization overlap to a significant extent with the claims advanced in the academic literature regarding why and how polarization exists and continues to deepen in Turkey. While this frame cites an intense perception of exclusion, othering, and, in the words of one participant, "living in parallel worlds" as the main proof for the presence of high levels of polarization, it grounds its causes mainly in the majoritarian and populist mode of political governance and discourse; in institutional decay; in the lack of democracy and of the rule of law; in the constant electioneering mode; in education policies; in the lack of transparency, meritocracy, and accountability in the state apparatus; and in media representations.

For this study, participants from a wide ideological range, but all united in terms of their considerable political distance from the AKP government, were found to resort to the conflict frame in their discussions of polarization in Turkey. The portrayal of polarization within the conflict frame is radically different from, and indeed almost irreconcilable with, the first three frames. In fact, one Alevi participant who is the head of an Alevi CSO emphasizes how he feels as if "the people who deny polarization are coming from a parallel world," since, after listening to their accounts, he could not believe that he was actually living in the same country as them. The feeling of belonging to a different world, together with a sense of special urgency, is widespread across all the workshop participants who utilize the conflict frame.

Those who employ the conflict frame also identify the main axes of polarization as societal divides in terms of Kurdish vs. Turkish, Alevi vs. Sunni, and secular vs. conservative. All converge in their view that the inclusion/exclusion nexus fostered through such cleavages creates a fertile ground for polarization to grow in the country. As one of the political scientists in the workshop succinctly points out, "when an individual is a part of a group that feels safe, she/he has the tendency not to empathize or even understand what happens to other individuals from groups that feel threatened," which he in turn argued to be fueling polarization for such individuals. This was echoed in the sentiments of another Alevi participant:

> I live with the feeling that someone will suddenly grab my neck. I think that we are reaching a level at which we could easily kill each other.

In this context, Kurdish participants focus on the ways in which they have historically been categorized as the dominant internal "other," as well as on how

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their identities have been completely securitized by government circles, especially after the elections of June 7, 2015. They underline how the framing of Kurdish identity as an existential threat to the Republic of Turkey significantly increases ethnic polarization in the country. Some participants also express their feeling of exclusion from the "Yenikapı spirit," despite the claim that this spirit is inclusive of all cleavages. For them, the measures taken in the aftermath of the coup attempt only served to further fuel polarization by deepening the inclusion/exclusion nexus rather than bringing the public together, as pro-AKP elites argue to be the case. According to one participant, a prominent Kurdish businessman living in Diyarbakır, this process is evident:

> Now we have a brand new spirit: the Yenikapı spirit. Not only was the HDP not invited, but Kurds were not invited, either. You can see the HDP as a political organization, but if you sincerely wanted to include the Kurds, you could have invited other Kurdish organizations. There are many of them. You could have invited some of them, at least symbolically, and claimed that you were inclusive of Kurds. But inclusion is not something that the government wants; nowadays politics is about polarization.

A final axis of polarization put forward within the conflict frame concerns the perceived societal and political divide across two value camps consisting of, on the one hand, cultural conservatives with a religious view of morality and, on the other hand, cultural progressives with a secular worldview. Since the workshop was held early in the new year, several workshop participants highlighted the debates over New Year's celebrations as one case in which polarization between the secular and conservative camps had become extremely visible in Turkey. In particular, they cited the criticism raised by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) toward New Year's celebrations as an example of the instruments that were being used to polarize society along cultural/religious lines.

However, such societal cleavages in Turkey are overwhelmingly perceived as being grouped into a pro-AKP and anti-AKP partisan divide, especially following the July 15 coup attempt. This is expressed in the following remarks made by an MP from the CHP:

> Public opinion polls show that the population is divided down the middle, 50-50; this is pretty similar in other contexts as well. Turkey is divided into two halves […] This has increased after the declaration of the state of emergency. We need to get back to normal politics quickly. The OHAL [the state of emergency] should not have been extended. A huge victimized

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> population has been created all over Turkey. This is alarming [...] The political climate is toxic. People call each other traitors every day.

The justificatory narratives of conflict within this frame also entail a debate regarding responsibility. While some of the participants attribute high polarization to a lack of empathy among governing circles, most claim polarization to be an instrumental and conscious strategy on the part of the government to manipulate and consolidate its voter base, as is argued in these comments by an MP from the HDP:

> I am convinced that the polarization in society is deepening and the government is systematically using polarization as a strategy to govern easily. I believe that polarization has helped the ruling party to consolidate its critical mass to win elections [...] But I think the level of polarization is getting very risky for the country's peace, because all segments of society are being radicalized: both the opponents of the government and those who are pro-government. I think this is a very serious handicap in terms of social communication.

Governmental responsibility for polarization is sought not only in the government's own democratic track record, governance style, and discourse, but also through its initiatives in various policy areas, most pertinently in the field of education. The conversion of regular public high schools to religious high schools, alongside other changes in school curricula, are expressed as being central agents of polarization employed by the government through the value axis alluded to above.

In the conflict frame, the media also bears responsibility for fueling polarization. In fact, the media is singled out as a polarizing agent even by those who employ the other three frames to deny the presence of polarization in Turkey. The proliferation of new media sources, violation of media ethics, biased information, and lack of media freedoms are all seen as primary reasons behind the media's polarizing effect. Nonetheless, whereas for the deniers of polarization the divide fostered by the media landscape is without much consequence, those who employ the conflict frame attribute responsibility for increasing levels of polarization in Turkey to the pro-government media as well as to government trolls working in social media.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine Turkish elite views on polarization in the country through the contributions of selected Turkish political and civil

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society elites to a workshop on polarization in Turkey as well as through in-depth interviews conducted with members of the political parties represented in Turkey's parliament at the time of research. In doing so, we focused firstly on the extent of agreement among the elites concerning the high levels of polarization in the country as identified in the literature, and secondly on the patterns of justification put forward by the elites in arguing either for or against the presence of polarization in the context of broader political frames.

On the first point, the study has found that there is a significant disparity among the Turkish elites concerning their views on the presence of polarization in the country, a disparity that overlaps with the bipolar partisan divide between the government and opposition in Turkey. In other words, while pro-governmental elites publicly deny the existence of polarization in the country, for those in the opposition polarization is a fundamental problem that needs to be urgently addressed. Both groups of elites resort to different political frames to justify their claims regarding the presence or absence of polarization in Turkey. The pro-government elites employ the harmony, continuity/decline, and conspiracy frames, which, respectively, claim that polarization has never existed in the country; that it has always been present and/or has declined, implying that there is no current cause for concern; and that the polarization debate is intentionally provoked by external enemies intent on harming Turkey and/or by domestic opponents of the AKP who wish to weaken the government. For those oppositional elites who publicly acknowledge the existence and salience of polarization in the country, it is their personal perceptions of exclusion, othering, and "living in parallel worlds" on cultural/religious, ethnic, and/or sectarian grounds that forms the basis of their justificatory narratives. Overwhelmingly, they perceive already existing societal divides as being forced into a bipartisan polarization that is driving the two camps of society ever further apart.

On the second point, concerning the justificatory narratives employed, the article has found that, for those in the pro-government camp who deny the existence of polarization, polarization's absence is presented as being due mainly to essentialist traits of Turkish society, such as its assumed hospitality; to an essentialist reading of Turkish history referencing a mythic Ottoman imperial past characterized by harmony; to a reductionist assumed continuity and comparison with the more recent past; to the assumed societal versatility lying behind the AKP's electoral support; and/or to external and domestic enemies who, by their very nature, want to destabilize the government and the country.

Seeking the roots of potential polarization in essentialist characteristics of society—whether these are derived from history or from underdefined and in

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any case uncontrollable internal and external enemies—prevents the possibility of meaningful dialogue based on political processes, instruments, and agency. In stark contrast with such accounts, those who publicly acknowledge the presence of polarization in Turkey underline the significance of the "political" in the fostering or easing of polarization by means of careful management of the country's key cleavages. This gap in itself implies that, in the absence of a radical change in political constellations, the currently reported high rates of polarization in Turkey can only be expected to remain as is, at best, in the near future. Yet the prevailing mode of denial in the pro-government camp also runs the risk of sustaining precisely the type of governance and the policies that contribute to polarization, as well as of increasing perceptions of vulnerability on the part of those who feel excluded and marginalized. This would only lead to even higher levels of polarization, which would in turn make it all the more difficult to attain just the minimal societal will to live together that is required for democratic consolidation in Turkey.

Our study contributes to the growing literature on polarization through a focus on elite frames of polarization, showing that the very presence of polarization is *itself* a political debate. While those elites who feel excluded from power relations perceive polarization as a pressing issue, governing elites deny the presence of conflict and/or dangerous levels of polarization. The study thus shows that there is a high level of polarization within elites' very framing of the issue of polarization. Nonetheless, our exclusive focus on (elite) perceptions of polarization in Turkey also bears an important limitation: while perceptions do matter, they should not be taken as concealing the fact that polarization in today's Turkey—though not exclusive to that country—is a multifaceted phenomenon closely related with perpetuated power asymmetries, with the erosion of checks and balances, and with the decline of democratic institutions. As such, further work is necessary to be able to more finely observe the ways in which democratic backsliding is intertwined with the process of polarization in such societies as Turkey where multiple cleavages are present.

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