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The construction of reconciliation and social cohesion  
by Turkey's Republican People's Party: A critical  
discourse analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's *Helalleşme* call

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### Abstract

In November 2021, Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Kılıçdaroğlu,<sup>1</sup> shared a video via Twitter in which he made a call for *helalleşme*<sup>2</sup> to Turkish society. While the repercussions of the call have been reflected differently within the political spectrum in Turkish society, this study investigates how social cohesion and reconciliation are envisaged and addressed by the main opposition party. It does this through a discursive analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches released since his *helalleşme* call that builds upon theoretical discussions about reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness. Research on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness literature associated with the Turkish case mainly revolves around the Turkish government's or Turkish nationalists' approach to ethnic minorities, such as the Kurdish question. However, studies investigating the stance of the main opposition party concerning the debate about fragmentation within Turkish society are very limited. Therefore, this study will aim to fill this gap. To thematically analyze the underlying messages of and motivation for the discourses, it will employ the discourse historical approach (DHA). In this way, the current study will contribute empirically to the relevant literature.

**Keywords:** *helalleşme*; Turkey; Republican People's Party (CHP); reconciliation; social cohesion; Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)

## 1 Introduction

Turkey has recently become a highly polarized nation, culminating in a defective social peace and cohesion associated with the past and ongoing traumas related to different political, religious, and ethnic groups. Existing cleavages include mainly the divisions

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this paper, Kılıçdaroğlu has been the chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP).

<sup>2</sup> This Islamic co-functional term refers to the mutual writing off of sins, thus forgiveness by multiple parties and reconciliation.

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between Islamists-secularists, Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, and Sunnis and Alevis (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). Such polarization has incrementally divided civil society and increased partisanship (ibid.). Moreover, it has also aggravated intergroup differentiation, discrimination, and tension along the lines of ethnic, sociopolitical, and sectarian identities.

To address this severe polarization, substantial efforts have been initiated by the main opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, since he became the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 2010. Following his leadership, CHP underwent a transformation process during his chairmanship that resulted in the elimination of the exclusive état-nationalist stance of the party and a move towards being more inclusive of previously excluded ethnic and socio-political groups. The political transformation, which appeared as 'social reconciliation,' was also reflected in the party's discourse and propaganda.

As the most groundbreaking element of this newly transformed inclusive political vision of the party, the helalleşme call was articulated by Kılıçdaroğlu in a video on Twitter. He emphasized the importance and prior condition of 'forgiving each other' to ensure peace in the country. This study investigates how the main opposition party envisages and addresses the social cohesion and reconciliation process among the different identity groups within Turkish society. To this end, it will discursively analyze Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches since his helalleşme call by considering the wider socio-historical and political background.

Research on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness literature associated with the Turkish case mainly revolves around the Turkish government's or Turkish nationalists' approach to ethnic minorities, such as the Kurdish question (Güneş & Zeydanlioglu, 2013; Baysu & Coşkan, 2018; Köse, 2017; Casier et al., 2011; Bakiner, 2013; Günay & Yörük, 2019). Although Keyman previously analyzed the reaction of the CHP to the democratic opening initiatives of the AKP (Keyman, 2010), we lack a novel approach that takes the opposition's point of view into account from the perspective of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness in a deeply polarized Turkish society due to different political, religious, and ethnic affiliations. The current study aims to fill this gap.

The paper first briefly elaborates on the conceptual framework of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness. Second, it discusses the discourse historical approach (DHA) strand of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological framework. Then, CHP's renewed strategy for assuring reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness under Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP leadership will be discussed. Finally, the study will illustrate the range of discursive constructions of the reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness process among diverse identity groups by Kılıçdaroğlu.

## 2 Reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness

Forgiving is difficult [...]. Nonetheless, forgiving is necessary and desirable. It paves the way for reconciliation and furthers healing, thereby making a better future possible. (Staub & Pearlman, 2001, p. 207)

Reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness are the prior conditions for lasting peace in deeply divided societies (Lederach, 1997). Without them, there is a risk of renewed resent-

ment, hatred, and violence between conflicting parties, which threaten the well-functioning of democracy (Nagy, 2002). Social and political psychology literature on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness adds value to research aiming to reveal attitudes and motivations related to social cohesion and peace. It also puts forward a critical framework for researching whether societies are liable to unite or divide (Liu et al., 2002). Therefore, this sub-chapter will provide a brief overview of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness as concepts that help define the definitional standpoint of the research within the analysis.

There are different definitions of the concept of reconciliation in the literature. It is often approached as a process, outcome, or both. Govier and Verwoerd (2002) argue that reconciliation is the process of establishing constructive relationships between former adversaries either at the interpersonal or intergroup level. They put forward that establishing such a relationship relies on rebuilding trust between 'othered' sides. In a parallel way, De Gruncky (2002) defines reconciliation as a process fed by love and hope that works towards building a shared, prosperous future. While it mainly appears to be a future-oriented process, reconciliation also embodies overcoming past enmity through a mutual commitment to preventing future atrocities (Du Toit, 2009). This necessitates putting memories aside and both parties accepting responsibility for wrongdoing for the sake of living together (Bhargava, 2012). Thus, reconciliation envisages building solidarity (Nagy, 2002) and social integration between the conflicting groups (James, 2008).

Some scholars also define reconciliation as an outcome. Bhargava (2012) explains it as the outcome of the collective efforts of former enemies, out of which shared collective values emerge. In this vein, reconciliation alters the psychological attitudes of hostile groups toward each other (Staub, 2005). This implies a restored and constructive relationship among the members of the hostile groups. In this respect, as Leiner states, reconciliation establishes normal, peaceful, and trusting relations as an outcome (Leiner, 2018). On the other hand, some scholars approach reconciliation as a process and an outcome (Harrowell, 2018; Kelman, 2008; Rouhana, 2011). While Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004) accept reconciliation as an outcome involving the emergence of peaceful relations, mutual commitment, and trust, they simultaneously highlight reconciliation as a daunting and multifaceted process of changing motivations, goals, and emotions for the purpose of building sustaining relations and future cooperation.

Considering all these important definitions of reconciliation, our conceptualization of reconciliation is closely aligned with Hayner's (2010) definition that proposes it involves societal healing through which a country restores damaged relationships 'between different ethnic, religious, regional, or political groups, between neighbors, and between political parties...' and '...undergoes a process of reconciling itself with its past, and groups reconciling with each other.'

The concept of reconciliation is inherently correlated with intergroup forgiveness on the grounds that forgiveness is the indispensable component of long-term stable reconciliation within inter-group/personal relations (Staub, 2001). Intergroup forgiveness is defined as an emotional process comprising the '...reduction of feelings of revenge, anger, and mistrust towards the perpetrator group and intentions to understand, approach, and engage with its members' (Cehajic et al., 2008, p. 352). Although the definitional standpoint of the term implies a one-sided process of the victimized group forgiving the offender group, in the present study, we will consider it a reciprocal process among different groups while examining the CHP's reconciliation endeavors.

### 3 Method

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a specific emphasis on Wodak's discourse historical approach (DHA). CDA is a unique discourse analytical research approach that focuses on language use beyond the sentence level and analyses relations between discourse and social/cultural developments in different social contexts. Its scope of analysis covers different forms of spoken and written discourse units, also known as 'genres,' including political statements, speeches, newspapers, public releases, spoken interactions, and different gestural forms (Reisigl, 2008). Since it mainly incorporates a critical perspective into the analysis of discursive actions, texts are approached as 'sites of struggle' (Wodak, 2009) in which covert discursive tactics and structural relationships present in the language, such as power, control, dominance, and discrimination can be revealed (Van Dijk, 2009). In doing this, it handles social problems and political issues that require a rigid emphasis on social and political contexts.

The reason for specifically employing the DHA strand of CDA in this research is twofold. One is the fact that the approach creates viable grounds for the compilation of an extensive amount of knowledge regarding the background of the social and political domains and historical sources in 'which discursive events are embedded' (Wodak, 2015a). In addition, the historical component of the discursive action is examined to see how/whether particular genres of discourse undergo diachronic change. The second reason is that DHA utilizes a novel triangulation approach, integrating knowledge on four levels of analysis, namely: the textual level (the detailed transcription of the talk/speech), the intertextual level (relationship between utterances/statements), the extralinguistic level (e.g., facial expressions, gestures), and the socio-political and historical context (Wodak, 2018, p.10). In this way, the approach assures multi-perspectivity through which the analysis is integrated into '...knowledge about historical, intertextual sources and the background of the social and political fields within which discursive events are embedded' (ibid.). DHA regards triangulation as crucial since it maintains that language as a social practice is a means of obtaining and maintaining the power of social actors belonging to different social groups in their search for legitimization or delegitimization (Wodak, 2015b). In revealing the hidden meaning of the discursive act, the different layers of the triangulation approach compile multimethodological, multi-theoretical, and self-reflective perspectives together (Wodak, 2015b).

Moreover, DHA offers two critical concepts, intertextuality and recontextualization, within the analysis of a discursive phenomenon (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002). Intertextuality refers to interconnecting all texts, including those produced both in the present and the past, as well as references to other texts. In contrast, recontextualization refers to taking discursive practice out of context and implementing it in a new context (ibid., p. 17). By doing so, DHA creates suitable ground for understanding and analyzing the complexities of the calls for reconciliation by Kılıçdaroğlu. In his references to the victim groups in society, Kılıçdaroğlu builds a firm connection with social, historical, and political events, when discrimination based on different political, ethnic, and religious group memberships is also addressed. In addition, the repercussions and reflections of the events/affairs he highlighted in his speeches remain influential within the socio-political realm of society to this day. Therefore, applying DHA is valuable in relation to the main motivations and premises of this research.

The total number of corpora of Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches that included specific references to his helalleşme call that was identified on the official website of the CHP (<https://chp.org.tr/>) is 102. The specific excerpts illustrated here include speeches from a video released on Twitter from the helalleşme meeting on 14 August 2022 and CHP's parliamentary group meeting on 16 November 2022. According to the representativeness criteria of DHA, these may be treated as typical discourse fragments that re-occur within the wide range of discursive strategies among the main body of the analyzed sources (Jäger & Maier, 2009). The former speech initiated the helalleşme call, while the latter, as a parliamentary group meeting speech, represents a prototype of political communication in which Kılıçdaroğlu directly addresses his constituency (Elçi, 2019).

#### 4 Background to polarization in Turkey and Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP leadership

Inter-group differentiation in the form of 'us versus them' within Turkish society has grown over the years. As Mardin (1973) points out, the economic and cultural enmity between the ruling center and the governed periphery of the Ottoman Empire persists in the current Turkish political structure. Following the establishment of the Republic, the center-periphery divide was between the Kemalist political elites and religious, rural, low-educated groups. While the former prioritized secularism, a unitary state, and Turkish nationalism, the latter represented pro-Islamism and conservatism (Elçi, 2019). Such a dichotomy led to the emergence of the politicized Islamic movement as a counter to the top-down project of secular national identity construction. Islamist politics in Turkey began in 1970 with the formation of the National Order Party (MNP: *Milli Nizam Partisi*), which was banned because of its anti-secular activities. While its successor, the National Salvation Party (MSP: *Milli Selamet Partisi*), was founded in 1972, it was also banned by the military regime following the 1980 coup d'état. During the following process, the viable ground created by the military and state elites led to the flourishing of an Islamic lifestyle and the election victory of the Welfare Party (RP: *Refah Partisi*), the major Islamist party of the 1990s. The increasing public appearance of the Islamic lifestyle through the political success of the Welfare Party alarmed the secular generals of the army, who intervened in politics in 1997 with the '28 February Measures'. These included harsh restrictions on religious life, including a strict headscarf ban in public institutions and shutting down many religious high schools, leading to the marginalization of the Islamic conservative groups.

Since the establishment of AKP and its election victory in 2002, Erdoğan has portrayed himself as a safeguard of the 'silent majority' against the secular civil-military elite's tutelage. The above-mentioned restrictions on Islamic lifestyle practices were lifted. While the Islamic conservative masses who had felt marginalized and disadvantaged were integrated into powerful political and economic positions, the strengthened tone of AKP's Islamist and conservative stance (Özbudun, 2006) culminated in a new type of polarization within society. Laws passed by the AKP removed checks and balances, consolidating its political power and Islamic cultural and economic hegemony, continuously limiting the space for opposition groups, journalists, academics, trade unions, and intellectuals (Aşık, 2022). Moreover, polarization was further reinforced through the political discourse that

juxtaposed 'Us' (the Islamic conservatives) versus 'Them' (the secular opposition). Semerci and Erdoğan (2018) claimed that Turkish citizens are reluctant to express their opinions in the public sphere. As a result, two basic problems arise: i) Opposition masses enter a 'spiral of silence' against the government's political hegemony, and in return, the government's hegemony is reinforced. ii) The masses become increasingly homogenous in their social environment, strengthening the sense of 'other' and creating further polarization. Therefore, overcoming polarization requires social dialogue that goes beyond the political identity-based drawn boundaries of the government. This objective was strongly intended by Kılıçdaroğlu in his call for *hellalleşme*.

Before Kılıçdaroğlu's chairmanship, the political program of the CHP was based on secularism and nationalism in the political arena (Uslu, 2008; Emre, 2015). However, Kılıçdaroğlu enacted unprecedented measures within the party organization and political discourse to revitalize the CHP as a representative and inclusive political party (Ciddi & Esen, 2014). He gradually liquidated the *état-nationalists* from the party. In order to position the party closer to the center, he attempted to open dialogue channels with Kurds and conservatives, those groups previously othered and excluded by the *état-nationalists* of the party. He invited some vital figures<sup>3</sup> from these groups to the party and designed a new political program based on the main motto of 'social reconciliation,' which is the secular synonym of the *hellalleşme* (Uysal, 2011). He also supported permitting headscarves in public institutions, in contrast to the adamantly oppositional stance of the preceding Baykal leadership (Gülmez, 2013). Dramatic transformation has also been observed in the party's discourse. The previous exclusionary rhetoric that was observed to strengthen the threat perception of CHP's *état-nationalist* base against the Kurdish movement and political Islam (Cumhuriyet, 2010) has been distanced.

The transformation of the party throughout the Kılıçdaroğlu era was clearly summarized by the Election Bulletin of 2011, which envisaged libertarian democracy, equality and social solidarity, and a foreign politics based on peace, democracy, and development (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011). The declaration also emphasized that the party is 'libertarian, egalitarian, solidarist and pluralist.' In this respect, the Election Bulletin of 2011 clearly stated:

We will overcome the obstacles in front of our Kurdish citizens preventing them from living their identities by establishing a pluralist and libertarian democracy. We will provide all citizens with the ability to use all their rights equally [...] regardless of their language, religion, ethnic identity, belief, communion, gender, sexual orientation and sexual identity, age, and political view. (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011, authors' own translation).

The CHP is pluralist: Deepening social democracy is the precondition of inner peace and development in our country where there are different social classes, beliefs, cultures and ethnic identities. (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011, authors' own translation).

<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Bekaroğlu (2014), Sabri Erbakan (2014), Cihangir İslam, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Sezgin Tanrıku were invited to join the party.



The recalibration of the party program implied defending pluralism to include Kurds, Alevis, Roma people, religious, non-Muslims, as well as all other marginalized ethnic, religious, and gender groups in the political arena. To this end, Kılıçdaroğlu particularly focused on the solution to the Kurdish question, which relied on the democratization paradigm and foresaw critical measures such as ending the military conflict with PKK, granting the Kurds cultural rights, and allowing Kurdish language classes (Aslan-Akman, 2012). In addition, Kılıçdaroğlu committed to eliminating the reservations of Turkey concerning the European Charter of Local Self-government in Hakkari, one of the mostly Kurdish-populated provinces of Turkey, in 2011 (Bila, 2011). While the CHP was previously one of the fierce critics of the Reconciliation Process (Keyman, 2010; Kayhan, 2014) that was launched through government talks with the imprisoned leader of the PKK by the AKP, Kılıçdaroğlu supported the process (Gunes, 2012).<sup>4</sup> In this way, Kılıçdaroğlu aspired to both appeal to a broader voter base and challenge AKP's political hegemony (Yeğen, 2015) concerning the Kurdish question.

According to the CHP, building an institutionalized and transparent peace process based on mutual parliamentary democratic control must commence along with four initiatives that would foster intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation. The first is equal citizenship based on a developed democracy. The second is establishing a Social Reconciliation Commission (*Toplumsal Mutabakat Komisyonu*) (Tanrıku, 2014) to include all political parties represented in parliament, thereby opening up intergroup dialogue among different social groups for the purpose of reconciliation. The third foresees the establishment of a Common-sense Committee (*Ortak Akıl Heyeti*) (ibid.) to include groups, political parties, NGOs, trade unions, and employers' organizations that are not represented in parliament. The committee, operating under parliament, would also follow the PKK's disarmament process. The last proposal was to establish a Reality Research Commission (*Gerçekleri Araştırma Komisyonu*), whose aim would be to examine the arguments for peace processes in the world on the one hand and to confront the historical-social dynamics that caused the alienation of the Kurds on the other. In this respect, CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership envisaged a pluralist, inclusive, and transparent peace process that would open dialogue channels between the opposition actors, the Kurdish movement, and Turkish nationalists.

The inclusive attitude of Kılıçdaroğlu was sustained during successive rounds of national elections. Kılıçdaroğlu concentrated on two objectives: first, making HDP a part of the opposition block, and second, criticizing the peace process to show CHP's vision and its divergence from the AKP peace process. In this vein, through its 2015 election manifesto entitled 'CHP's View on Turkey's Kurdish Question and Solution Framework' (CHP Election Declaration, 2015), CHP highlighted that although the peace process initiated by the AKP was important in terms of ending the armed conflict, it was not sustainable (ibid.). Its manifesto emphasized libertarian, pluralistic, and social solidarity elements by promising that 'politics will not be conveyed based on ethnic identity, belief, and lifestyle' (ibid.). These expressions implied a more liberal line of politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Kılıçdaroğlu supported the government's talk with Abdullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned PKK leader.

Kılıçdaroğlu also attempted to prevent the conflict between the Kurdish movement and Turkish nationalists from undermining the opposition's initiative. He noted: 'We cannot ignore any party or our citizens who voted for that party. It is the greatest danger to ignore someone or a party because of their ethnic identity, belief, or lifestyle' (ibid.). In this respect, he laid the foundations for intergroup dialogue channels among the different subordinate entities.

His attempts to generate social cohesion are referred to as the 'Kılıçdaroğlu doctrine' by Yunus Emre, İstanbul Deputy of CHP. According to him, this doctrine has successfully formed an opposition block against Erdoğan (Emre, 2021). In his perspective, the doctrine is designed to form a coalition of the opposition that would be as inclusive as possible. He argues that the main objective of this inclusive doctrine is to re-democratize Turkey by reasserting human rights and the rule of law (ibid.).

The most crucial development in terms of strengthening the doctrine happened following the arrest of Enis Berberoğlu, deputy of CHP. To protest Berberoğlu's arrest in particular and injustices in general (Cansu, 2017), Kılıçdaroğlu started a 'March for Justice' from Ankara to İstanbul on 15 June 2017. The march was supported by the intra-party opposition group of the MHP (Diken, 2017). HDP joined the march with their co-chair and six deputies (CNN Turk, 2017). In accordance with the slogan used for the march, which was 'Rights, Law, Justice,' Kılıçdaroğlu formed a rights-based political vision.

Kılıçdaroğlu's longstanding strategy of creating a united opposition block led to victory in the 2019 municipal elections. In the elections, CHP's candidates have been the mediated figures among the different sides of the political spectrum to collect the votes from both Turkish nationalist İYİ and the Kurdish movement's party, HDP. Officially, CHP's election alliance was with Turkish nationalist İYİ. However, HDP also decided to support CHP candidates by not nominating candidates in cities other than in the east and south-east. As a result of this alliance, CHP won four of Turkey's five largest cities, including İstanbul and Ankara (YSK, 2019). Although his strategy did not open up a comprehensive intergroup forgiveness process, Kılıçdaroğlu succeeded in supporting unification among different political groups based on a common purpose.

Following the opposition's election victory, intra-party opposition within the AKP emerged. During this process, two parties whose leaders are among the founders of the AKP emerged. First, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was both the Prime Minister of Turkey and Chair of the AKP, founded the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP) in December 2019 (BBC News, 2019). Second, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Economy, Chief Negotiator for the EU, and Deputy Prime Minister of AKP governments, Ali Babacan, established the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, Deva) in March 2020 (Deva, 2020). Both parties declared they were committed to establishing a transparent, just, and democratic parliamentary regime (BBC News, 2019; Deva, 2020). This development represented a new stage in the democratic bloc that Kılıçdaroğlu established against Turkey's polarization because his idea started to be endorsed by symbolic figures from AKP for the first time. The new conjuncture provided Kılıçdaroğlu with an important opportunity to establish an alliance for the upcoming elections of 2023. Through Kılıçdaroğlu's initiative, deputy chairs of all parties of the Nation Alliance (CHP, DP, İYİ, and SP) and the new parties (Deva and GP) came together on 21 September 2021 to discuss the prospective restoration of the parliamentary system and its principles that would be



established following the 2023 elections.<sup>5</sup> A consensus among these political parties was achieved. Their envisaged agenda foresaw embracing differences among them through opening up an inter-party dialogue that would launch a process of social peace, reconciliation, and intergroup forgiveness among different identity groups within the deeply fragmented society of Turkey. Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership in forming such an alliance with other parties from different ideological/sociological backgrounds also marked part of his reconciliation effort.

## 5 Findings and discussion

Kılıçdaroğlu shared a video via Twitter on November 13, 2021. In this video, he made a call to Turkish society through which he constructed himself as the 'national defender/ front' and 'man on a mission' and the *helalleşme* call as a norm-based responsibility. He also (underlying the message) highlighted the fact that pre-existing hostilities between different groups, which pose a risk of future/prospective conflict, remain:

In my life, I have seen both hate and love. I now want love to win. There is a need for our country to get better, to make amends. *Helalleşme* would not change the past but would save our future. Our party also made mistakes in the past, but I have taken a decision to set out on a journey of *Helalleşme* [...]. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021a)

In his call, the rationalization and justification of the need for the *helalleşme* process for Turkish society were maintained through his interpretation and definition of the word *helalleşme*:

We do not want a polarized Turkey, we do not want a conflicting Turkey. We want to live peacefully. If politics lead to polarization, that results in deep wounds within large masses. These wounds harm us and Turkey. *Helalleşme* is not an ordinary call, it also means sitting and thinking about why we are fighting, at least we should know how to make up. If we can do this, we will bring peace and unity to the country [...]. *Helalleşme* means reconciliation, reconciliation with the person we are separated from. *Helalleşme* means sitting and talking, it means sitting at the same table, sharing food, and dinner prayers. *Helalleşme* means healing, healing the wounds of the past. There are wounds, politicians are scratching them to make them bleed more. No, sir, it is necessary to heal the wounds, it means learning from the atrocities of the past and not repeating the same mistakes. Without this, we cannot achieve unity. It is a very important move for us [...]. We should be together now, of course, there might be differences, there might be different opinions, but these should not be a reason for fights, we should know how to overcome them. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

In the excerpt above, Kılıçdaroğlu emphasizes his understanding and definitional standpoint of *helalleşme* through the specific contextualization of Turkish fragmented societal dynamics, which, in fact, lays the ground for the justification of his initiative to a great extent. Such a justification is based on the rationale that 'since the wounds and past

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<sup>5</sup> The six parties agreed on a detailed 48-page text on a 'Strengthened Parliamentary System', and shared it with the public at a launch on February 28, 2022.

atrocities harm us/Turkey, we should fight against them,’ and the argument is further developed through the conditional: ‘if we want to leave peacefully, we have to initiate the helalleşme process.’ In order to sustain his stance, he anthropomorphizes Turkey by employing the conceptual metaphor ‘*conflicting Turkey, wounds harm Turkey*’ as well. While Kılıçdaroğlu utilizes an inclusive discourse embracing all different groups of society without explicitly mentioning their names, one of his indirect emphases appears to blame politicians for the ongoing fragmentation and polarization of society: ‘*politicians are scratching wounds to make them bleed more.*’ In this respect, his message conveys the ideational core of populist discourse, which constructs both moral and causal opposition between the ‘good people’ and corrupt political elites (Hameleers et al., 2018).

His repetitive uses of ‘we’ construct an in-group, leading to identification with Turkish society, implying a unity between himself and the nation and distinct boundaries by creating ‘Otherness.’ Accordingly, this anticipates three consecutive processes in building intergroup relations: positioning himself on the side of the people, negative othering (‘we’ implies there is also ‘them’), and ‘others’ who are not on the side of the people. On the other hand, to construct the sameness of the in-group, Kılıçdaroğlu refers to cultural (sharing food) and religious (dinner prayers) elements of Turkish society. The religious referrals in his call illustrate the changed vision of the CHP under his chairmanship. In addition, such societal-values-based construction of the in-group by Kılıçdaroğlu, in fact, implies presenting a counterargument to what has been claimed by the AKP, as discussed by Yalvaç and Jonathan (2020) – that CHP is the representative of state-building-elites that are alien to the ‘actual’ values of society. Kılıçdaroğlu equating himself with the ‘people’ is further developed through a statement within his call that:

[I]f we want to live together, to have peace and prosperity in every house [...]. We should know how to greet people we do not know on the street [...]. My childhood was spent in such an environment. Anatolia, where I grew up, I was such an Anatolian. In secondary school, we used to go to villages. We used to go to the villages of the Genç district of Bingöl [...]. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

Through underlining his Anatolian origin, Kılıçdaroğlu develops a populist mantra of equating himself with a large section of the Anatolian Turkish people. This equivalence also simultaneously responds again to the elitist accusations that the AKP has often engaged in hegemonic resistance by directing social resentment against the established elites (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019), as portrayed through their association with the CHP.

During his party’s parliamentary group meeting on 16 November 2021 in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Kılıçdaroğlu explicitly specified the target groups of his call and constructed connection and empathy by creating sameness among different social, ethnic, religious, and political groups in Turkish society:

Reconciliation means [...] being able to make peace and to continue. We’re going to do this with communities with scars. We will close up the injuries caused by 28 February [the so-called ‘post-modern coup’ of 1997] and make amends. We will make amends to our headscarved girls who were placed in ‘persuasion rooms.’ We will make amends to Roboski. The state will pay compensation to people, but on the other hand, we will also make amends.

We will make amends to victims of Sivas and Kahramanmaraş [massacres]. Several other groups have been wronged in the past by the policies of the governments. Among them [...] Diyarbakır prison inmates, Roma people who have been marginalized with the recent gentrification process, minorities on whom a 'wealth tax' was imposed [*varlık vergisi* in Turkish], victims of the September 6–7, 1955 İstanbul pogrom, Turkey's bright youth who migrated abroad, the family of killed Gezi Park protester Ali İsmail Korkmaz, family members of men killed in the Soma mining disaster, and exiled Kurdish singer Ahmet Kaya. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021b)

In the excerpt above, Kılıçdaroğlu bases his argument on the historical traumas of the different identity groups of society to draw a link with the contemporary 'ongoing' struggles of Turkish society. In this respect, in his construction, he mentions historical events to refer to the destructive consequences of inter-group hostility within society, as discussed above. His referral to the historical events unleashes the usage of topos of history: '[B]ecause history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation comparable with the historical example referred to' (Reisgl & Wodak, 2001). In this way, by highlighting the struggles that originated in past incidents, he again justifies and legitimizes his call to *helalleşme*.

Kılıçdaroğlu clearly and discursively defines the different subordinate identities as the subjects of these historical events, including ethnic, racial, political, and religious groups, by building a victim-victimizer relationship between them and the Turkish government(s). While such construction of duality relies on the positive representation of the – above clarified – 'victims versus the – then and current – political regimes,' he in fact repetitively makes use of the populist construction of 'us' and 'them,' creating distinct boundaries concerning the 'otherness' of leading political elites (Ibáñez-Rosales, 2019). In this respect, he employs the type of polarization characteristic of populist dynamics, as seen in most European right-wing discourses, that functions to bolster the political opposition between the people and the elites (as put forward in the valuable findings of Van Dijk, 2003). However, his populist construction is not intended to marginalize or alienate any ethnic, minority, or migrant group within society, in contrast to most European right-wing discourses. Instead, Kılıçdaroğlu's construction is empathically aimed at bringing about social harmony and reconciliation among the subordinate group members. In this respect, Kılıçdaroğlu utilizes an anti-establishment yet inclusionist discourse. Such a comparison between the mainstream populist discourses of the European right-wing political discourse with Kılıçdaroğlu's *helalleşme* call shows that the latter populist discourse that juxtaposes the people and the political elites is based on the premise that society is fully integrated and peacefully co-exists, thereby ignoring the specific fragmentation and potential or ongoing conflict among subordinate groups. Kılıçdaroğlu clearly defines the pre-existing identity-based fragmentation of Turkish society. This is evident in his explicit referrals to various minority groups such as ethnic (Alevi, Roma, Kurdish, victims of the September 6–7, 1955 İstanbul pogrom – i.e., the Greek diaspora in İstanbul), and religious (headscarved girls, victims of the 'wealth tax,' i.e. non-Muslims) and political (Ali İsmail Korkmaz) minorities. Thus, his method of mobilizing populist elements strongly differs from those associated with mainstream populist discourses. Through such a specific defi-

inition of the subordinate identities within society, Kılıçdaroğlu creates an equivalence between socially and politically excluded groups, implying socio-political transformation in the hierarchy of identities within Turkish society. In this respect, his political discourse is adjusted to entail the democratic and inclusionary nature of CHP's populism.

With such a populist attitude, he also refers to socioeconomically deprived groups (Turkey's bright youth who have migrated abroad, family members of men killed in the Soma mining disaster) through the construction of an appeal that focuses on the economic problems in society, unemployment, the poverty of youth, and the 'covertly' risky conditions of labor. The reconciliation of his discourse with the economic concerns of economically weaker/deprived groups is further boosted by statements in his helalleşme call: '[...] If I cannot end the fight just to be a breadwinner, if I do not fight for peace in every house, why am I doing politics?' (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022). The promise of the economic-conditions-based inclusion of the people can be regarded as grounded in and part of left-wing populism. It also implies Kılıçdaroğlu's vision of social policy and the welfare state he envisages for the 'future.' With regard to this, he also portrays images of a shared future in terms of achieving social cohesion, in parallel with the findings of Vaara et al. (2003), who argued that visualizing a common future is employed to enhance a shared identity:

We love our country, our flag, our people, so what is this fight then? Helalleşme also means growing love. We have to grow love, brotherhood, and friendship. We have to embrace each other. We have to share our pains and happiness. Helalleşme also means growing companionship. We have to do this [...]. My party will go through heavy 'pressure' due to this reconciliation process, but someone has to do it [...]. We will make amends, my friends. When our children look at the past in the near future, they will say, 'So many things happened, but they knew how to look ahead, well done to them [...].' My party is opening a door to a future that will serve many more governments ahead. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

'History is the centerpiece of identity' (Cohen, 1999, p. 28), providing guidance for the future regarding where we are heading (Hedetoft, 1995). In the excerpt above, legitimization is achieved through a hypothetical future connected to the past, present, and future; one of the legitimization strategies employed within political discourses, according to Reyes (2011). In parallel with these arguments, after highlighting the contemporary struggles that originated from past events, as discussed above, Kılıçdaroğlu reveals images of a shared future of 'growing love, brotherhood, and friendship, companionship' as a prescription for an ideal state of reconciliation and social cohesion. In this respect, through the excerpt above, the future and history are used to portray the grounded reasons for his helalleşme call and legitimize his political action. In contrast to the country's divided past and contemporary struggles, the positive vision for the future is utilized as a vehicle for advancing people's belonging to society associated with a prosperous, peaceful, and reconciled future. Accordingly, the future prospect *par excellence* is constructed as hinged upon the fulfillment of Kılıçdaroğlu's helalleşme call. His presentation of his call as the right thing to do reinforces the level of commitment to his call regarding promoting the common good of the community. It is an act of persuasion that targets his political party base to convince them of the need to bear the dramatic consequences of 'going through heavy pressure.' In addition, in facing dramatic consequences by endeavoring to promote the common good of Turkish society, he implicitly refers to himself as a 'man on the mission.'

## 6 Conclusion

The main opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has put substantial effort into renewing CHP's approach to addressing the severe polarization within Turkish society since he obtained a leadership position. The most striking element of this so far has been his recent helalleşme call. The present study investigated how Kılıçdaroğlu constructs and envisages the reconciliation process among hostile groups of society. This article substantiates the following claims by discursively analyzing his speeches at the textual and inter-textual levels.

First, Kılıçdaroğlu's justification and legitimization of the helalleşme call as a form of political behavior relies on the topos of history regarding how it highlights the necessity of standing together and preventing the repetition of past atrocities in Turkey through a reciprocal process of helalleşme. In this respect, the future prospect *par excellence* is constructed as hinged upon fulfilling his call for helalleşme. His presentation of his call as the right thing to do and for the common good of the community is constructed to reinforce the level of commitment and appeal to the call.

Second, Kılıçdaroğlu employs an inclusive rhetoric that embraces different identities and inter-group relations and dialogue. Within such a construction, he indirectly blames politicians for society's ongoing fragmentation and polarization. In this respect, his message conveys the ideational core of populist discourse, which constructs moral and causal opposition between the 'good people' and corrupt political elites. This further contributes to his construction of himself as a 'man on the mission.' Through specifying subordinate identities within society, Kılıçdaroğlu creates equivalence between socially and politically excluded groups, implying a socio-political transformation of the hierarchy of identities within Turkish society. In this respect, his political discourse is adjusted to entail the democratic and inclusionary nature of CHP's populism.

Here, another important finding is that the inclusionary discourse that aims to bring about social harmony and reconciliation among subordinate group members differs greatly from mainstream populist discourses of the European political right wing. Such a finding shows us that the latter populist discourse, which juxtaposes the people and political elites, is based on the premise that society is fully integrated and peacefully co-exists, ignoring the specific fragmentation and potential or ongoing conflict among subordinate groups. This revealed difference suggests a further research agenda – an investigation (in different contexts) of how identity fragmentation is discursively addressed by opposition parties within different political settings.

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