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# Mapping Anti-Diyanet Oppositional Publics During the 2018 Deism Controversy on Turkish Twitter

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## Abstract

*Amidst rumors that deism - a form of agnosticism that rejects organized religion - was becoming popular amongst students attending religious schools in Turkey, Ali Erbaş, the head of the Religious Affairs Directorate, made a public statement wherein deists were described as adhering to “a perverse and heretic philosophy”. Soon afterwards, social media was abuzz with responses to Erbaş’s controversial statement. Using computational data collection strategies to amass a dataset of 21,674 tweets sent out by 15,226 distinct Twitter users within 48 hours of the event, this study examines the positions and themes through which the controversy was discussed on Twitter. It relies on both qualitative analysis as well as social network analysis to present evidence on how the controversy turned the Turkish Twittersphere into a temporary dialogical space for the a) enunciation of “deconversion narratives” from Islam, b) expression of grassroots civil activism attempting to hold government actors accountable for Erbaş’s comments, c) voicing of rationalized collective critique towards the policies of Ali Erbaş and the Diyanet.*

**keywords:** religion in turkey, deism, Twitter, computational methods, social network analysis, content analysis.

## Résumé

### **Cartographier les publics opposés à Diyanet lors de la controverse au sujet du déïsme en 2018 sur Twitter turc**

*Au milieu des rumeurs selon lesquelles le déïsme - une forme d'agnosticisme qui rejette la religion organisée - devenait populaire parmi les étudiants fréquentant les écoles religieuses en Turquie, Ali Erbaş, le chef de la Direction des affaires religieuses, a fait une déclaration publique dans laquelle les déïstes étaient décrits comme adhérant à "une philosophie perverse et hérétique". Peu après, les médias sociaux ont été envahis par les réactions à la déclaration controversée d'Erbaş. En utilisant des stratégies de collecte de données computationnelles pour rassembler un ensemble de 21 674 tweets envoyés par 15 226 utilisateurs distincts de Twitter dans les 48 heures suivant l'événement, cette étude examine les positions et thèmes à travers lesquels la controverse a été discutée sur Twitter. Elle s'appuie à la fois sur une analyse qualitative et sur une analyse de réseaux sociaux pour montrer comment la controverse a transformé la twittersphère turque en un espace de dialogue temporaire pour a) l'énonciation de "récits de déconversion" de l'islam, b) l'expression d'un activisme civil de base tentant de rendre les acteurs gouvernementaux responsables des commentaires d'Erbaş, c) l'expression d'une critique collective rationalisée à l'égard des politiques d'Ali Erbaş et de la Diyanet.*

**mots-clés :** religion en Turquie, déïsme, Twitter, méthodes informatiques, analyse des réseaux sociaux, analyse de contenu.

## Öz

### 2018'de Türkiye Twitter'ında Diyanet Karşıtı Muhalif Kamusalılıkta Vuku Bulan Deizm Tartışmasını Anlamak

*Deizmin Türkiye'de imam hatip okulu öğrencileri arasında yaygınlaştığına dair tartışmalar sürerken Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Ali Erbaş 12 Nisan 2018 tarihinde deistleri "sapık ve batıl felsefi bir düşüncenin takipçileri" olarak tanımladığı bir açıklama yaptı. Açıklamanın ardından sosyal medya, A. Erbaş'ın beyânatına verilen sert tepkiler ve kısmen de olsa destek açıklamalarıyla dolup taşıdı. Erbaş'ın açıklamasının tetiklediği bu tartışmayı anlamlandırabilmek amacıyla Twitter'da beyâattan sonraki 48 saatlik süreyi mercek altına almaya karar verdik. Sayısal veri toplama yöntemlerini kullanarak elde ettiğimiz 15.226 farklı Twitter kullanıcısına ait 21.674 tweetten oluşan bir veri seti ile tartışmada gündeme gelen temaları ve alınan pozisyonları analiz ettik. Hem niteliksel içerik analizi, hem de sosyal ağ analizi kullanarak gerçekleştirdiğimiz araştırmamızın bulguları, Twitter'da A. Erbaş'ın tetiklediği deizm tartışması vesilesiyle 3 temel sonucun ortaya çıktığını göstermektedir. Bu sonuçlar şöyleözetlenebilir: a) Twitter "dinden (Sünnî İslâm) dönme hikâyeleri"nin dile getirildiği geçici bir diyalojik alana dönüşmüştür; b) Twitter A. Erbaş'ın ve Diyanet'in politikalarına yönelik eleştirileri yapabilmek bir fırsat penceresi açmıştır; ve c) Twitter kullanıcıları A. Erbaş'ın açıklamalarından sadece A. Erbaş'ı değil hükümet aktörlerini doğrudan sorumlu tutmuştur.*

**anahtar kelimeler:** Türkiye'de din, deizm, Twitter, sayısal yöntemler, sosyal ağ analizi, içerik analizi

## Introduction

It can be argued that the so-called “deism controversy” began on the 17th of March 2018, when a talk given by conservative Islamic theologian İhsan Fazlıođlu was leaked onto the Internet. In his talk, Fazlıođlu (2018) tells of his encounters with growing numbers of pious university students who have turned away from Islam to become atheists. He argues that this transformation has been caused by “the actions of those who represent Islam in public” and accuses religious authorities of setting a bad example for the youth. Fazlıođlu concludes by warning of serious consequences if no action is taken against the growing tide of unbelief amongst the pious youth of Turkey.

Soon after Fazlıođlu’s talk, the findings of a report commissioned by the Konya Directorate of National Education were presented in a workshop titled “Youth and Faith”. The findings of the report (2018) suggests that deism, a form of agnosticism that rejects the teachings and practices of organized religion, is spreading amongst pious youth attending religious Imam Hatip schools. Furthermore, the report suggests that the main cause behind this trend is the inconsistency between official curriculum and daily religious practices. Youth undergoing religious education find it hard to associate with the official theological curriculum and as a result, begin to feel alienated and disenfranchised from Islam. However, as interviews included in the report demonstrate, rather than giving up on organized religion wholesale and becoming atheists, youth alienated from official Islamic education begin to define themselves as deists. Within the context of the report, deism is defined as both a religious philosophy rejecting the practices of Islam while retaining monotheistic belief as well as a form of adolescent angst. In the case of the latter, the report presents conversion into deism as a rebellious response to the current hegemony of pious conservatism in Turkish society, drawing a parallel to the trend of youth from secular families becoming pious in previous decades. Fatigue from the demands of Islam, or what has been described by theologian Ayşe Böhürler (2017) as “religion fatigue” is presented as a key catalyst for conversion into deism. The report concludes by proposing that deist youth find it particularly difficult to associate with theological teachings that refer to issues such as ethics, fate, and social deviance.

The report made national headlines on the 4th of April after conservative media pundit and columnist Elif Çakır (2018) published a newspaper article citing its findings. In the article, she accuses public authorities of preaching a form of Islam that is not only outdated but also inconsistent with their own behavior in public. In her concluding remarks, she writes, “when wanting to bring up a pious, conservative youth, did we end up creating a deist generation?”. In the days following the publication of Çakır’s article, a few politicians and religious authorities felt obliged to make public statements about deism.

In the first of these statements, Devlet Bahçeli (2018), leader of the ultra-nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), criticized the findings of the report and suggested that deism is a conspiracy against the Turkish nation. Subsequently, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan interrupted a Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) parliamentary hearing to call upon İsmet Yılmaz, the minister responsible for education, and inquired about the published report. Soon after, the minister publicly declared the findings of the report to be bogus and stated that the AKP's opinion on the matter was in line with Devlet Bahçeli's earlier statement. Yet one can argue that the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back occurred on the 12th of April, after the comments made by Ali Erbaş, the President of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, from here on referred to as Diyanet) on the 12th of April. Towards the end of a program on TRT Haber (a state television channel), Erbaş (2018) claimed that:

No individual of our nation would ever give the benefit of the doubt to such a deviant and heretic belief. No one dares slander our nation, our youth. After this statement, I doubt that any of our youth will consider following this deviant and heretical philosophical thought.

In his statement, Erbaş declared deism to be a form of both "superstition" (batıl inanç) and "heresy" (sapkınlık). Only hours after these comments, deism became a national trending topic on Twitter, with thousands of tweets being posted in response to Erbaş's comments.

We believe that the deism controversy is important insofar as it signals both a break and a continuity with historical trends. On one hand, it can be seen as a continuation of the Turkish state's intervention in the religious sphere. Historically speaking, the Turkish state has used the Diyanet to apply pressure on individuals and communities it considered to be threats to the nation building project. Yet the situation of other religious (like Alevis) or non-religious communities have dramatically worsened in the past decade. This has led scholars to describe Diyanet's current policies as "Sunni Supremacist" (Akyıldız, 2022). These policies as well as the current government's uncompromising defense of Sunni Islam has led to a public backlash and the emergence of oppositional social groups. With mainstream mass media almost entirely under the control of pro-government corporations and business circles, Twitter has inevitably become the main arena for the expression of oppositional reactions to the Diyanet and state-imposed religiosity. As such, this study offers a snapshot into both the discursive content as well as the communicative network through which opposition to the religious policies of the state is articulated on Twitter.

Using computational data collection strategies to amass a dataset of 21,674 tweets sent out by 15,226 distinct Twitter users within 48 hours of the event, this study examines the positions and themes through which Erbaş's comments were discussed on Twitter. It relies on both qualitative content analysis as well as social network analysis to present evidence on how

Erbaş's controversial comments turned the Turkish Twittersphere into a temporary dialogical space for the a) enunciation of "deconversion narratives" from Islam, b) expression of grassroots civil activism attempting to hold government actors accountable for Erbaş's comments, c) voicing of rationalized collective critique towards the policies of Ali Erbaş and the Diyanet. The concluding remarks to this article connect the controversy surrounding Erbaş's comments to a wider discussion on hegemony, religion, and non-conformism in contemporary Turkish society.

### **Religion in Contemporary Turkey**

In secular regimes, the relationship between state authority and its citizens is expected to be democratic in nature when it comes to religion, rituals, and religiosity. For this matter, freedom of belief/religion and freedom from belief/religion all existed within the same body of freedoms and rights. The state authority in this sense plays the role of protector and arbiter at the same time. The state is not supposed to impose any form of religion or non-religion, it must refrain from any gesture or policy that would look like it is prioritizing certain groups and their beliefs.

Despite being a secular regime, the modern Turkish state has tried through various ways to regulate religion. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) was founded in 1924 to control the religious field and to teach a desired version of Sunni Islam to citizenry, "good Islam" (Azak, 2010). Although it is financed by taxpayers, the Diyanet as an institution never catered non-Muslims, Alevis, deists, atheists, or any other non-Sunni group since its foundation. The creation of "good" Sunni Muslim citizens was the goal of state authority and Diyanet was the tool to perform this task. During its early years, ordinary Sunni citizens were mostly satisfied with Diyanet while certain Islamists were highly critical of its mission to impose a state-centric understanding of Muslim Sunniness on the Turkish population. On the other hand, non-Sunni Turkish citizens tended to be dissatisfied with the discriminatory policies of Diyanet. The state's imposing its own form of acceptable Sunni Islam on its citizenry through Diyanet has made religion always a controversial subject in contemporary Turkey. This was more or less the state of affairs in Turkey until the authoritarian turn of the AKP (Tuğal, 2016).

With the consolidation of the AKP's grip over the state and consecutive electoral victories from 2010 onwards, the state budget allocated to the Diyanet began to gradually increase, leading to what some describe as the golden age of the Diyanet (Lord, 2018). It is during this period that the number of religious İmam Hatip schools increased in unprecedented numbers, and large numbers of academically unsuccessful students were directed to these schools. The appointment of Ali Erbaş in 2017 as the head of the Diyanet led to the intensifica-

tion of state imposed religious indoctrination on the Turkish public.<sup>1</sup> After the appointment of Erbaş, the Diyanet began to be more visible in public and institutionally asserted itself in areas that it had not previously been involved in. The increasingly religious nature of the Turkish state was compatible with the AKP's "New Turkey" vision to produce a religious, conservative Sunni citizenry.<sup>2</sup>

The aspirations of the AKP to establish a new religious status quo within Turkish society have also led to oppressive religiosity, polarization, and corrupt conservative elites. These aspirations have also led to "religious fatigue".<sup>3</sup> Hence, the controversy around deism needs to be understood as a reaction by pious conservative youth to this new wave of state-sponsored Islamization from above. As such, we argue that deism signals deep discontent with increased visibility of Islamic piety by pro-government public figures as well as the Diyanet not by the secular segments of society but rather by youth subjectivized within the framework of "New Turkey". As such, deism needs to be understood as a reactionary identity to the cultural policies imposed by the government through institutions like the Diyanet. It is likely that the AKP sees deism as an existential threat to the monopoly they've established over the hearts and minds of the pious conservatives. This makes deism a particularly noteworthy topic of study within the context of religion and non-conformism in contemporary Turkey as it offers evidence that AKP's hegemonic project is not as successful as some imagine it to be.

Deism can be defined as "(...) a sense of religion that is based on reason, not on authority (revelation), ignoring the natural direction of religion". It is a "rationalist doctrine" that accepts God as only the first cause and does not know any qualities and powers to God. It is a philosophical system that rejects all religions and believes in only a limited understanding of God" (Başçı 2018:33). Academic studies about the subject tend to focus on the historical genealogy of deist beliefs in Turkey or how deism constitutes a break from orthodox Islamic belief (see for instance, Dormen, 2021; Düzgün, 2021; Kardaş, 2022). Rather than discussing the historical or theological aspects of the controversy, our study chooses to adopt a media studies approach. In doing so, our study focuses on social media and more specifically on Twitter. It contributes to our understanding

1 Compared to predecessor directors, Ali Erbaş proved to be an extremely polarizing figure, often making controversial actions and discriminatory remarks in public. For instance, during the 2018 Hagia Sophia mosque opening, Ali Erbaş delivered a sermon (hutbe) holding a sword wherein he indirectly targeted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic. Some argue his behavior in public resembles an Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam (Şeyhülislam) rather than a state bureaucrat.

2 For a detailed analysis about "New Turkey" please check the introduction of Hecker, Furman and Akyıldız's *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey* (2022).

3 The concept of religious fatigue has been formulated by Necdet Subaşı (2017) and influential conservative such as Ayşe Böhürler, Elif Çakır and Nihal Bengisu Karaca. Religious fatigue is generally used to describe the state of apathy or weariness towards organized religion, religious institutions, beliefs, and practices. Necdet Subaşı amongst others have argued that religious fatigue is both causing more general disassociation from Islam amongst conservative youth in Turkey. Fatigue from Islam is also the reason as to why deism is spreading in Turkish society.

of how Twitter users challenge pious conservatism and official state discourses on the freedom from belief in Turkey.

### **Twitter in Turkey**

In media studies literature, Twitter is widely seen as an arena wherein public discourses are created, and maintained or contested (Bruns & Burgess, 2016). The platform's affordances (particularly microblogging, hashtags, and retweeting) facilitate the instantaneous circulation of media content at a massive scale. Furthermore, the networked structure of communication on Twitter is characterized by asymmetrical connections and different ways of interaction (i.e., tweeting, retweeting, mentions, and replies) and facilitates the formation of networked publics on the basis of ad hoc issues (Bruns & Moe, 2014). Here, it is argued that the emergence of social media platforms like Twitter created the possibility for hitherto passive and silent audiences to aggregate collectively online (Arvidsson et. al, 2015) and form networked public(s) (Boyd, 2011). Regardless of longevity or potential to create lasting socio-political change, it has been demonstrated that networked publics are able to influence public discussions for short periods of time within a wide variety of contexts including natural disasters (Sakai et al., 2010), terror attacks (Eriksson, 2016), elections (Al-saqaf & Christensen, 2019) or protests (Özduzen & McGarry, 2020; Siapera, 2014).

Scholars familiar with Turkish society need no introduction on how Twitter usage has exploded throughout the country since the 2013 Gezi Park Protests. Although the numbers are not fully accurate, it is estimated that out of Turkey's 85 million population, around 69 million are active social media users (We are Social 2022).<sup>4</sup> As of January 2022, there were roughly 16.10 million regular Twitter users (We Are Social, 2022).

Academic research on Twitter usage in Turkey indicates that most use the medium to follow the public agenda and access information not normally found on mass media (Sözeri C., 2011). This is perhaps because Twitter, as a micro-blogging service, is well suited for the fast and efficient sharing of information (Kwak et al. 2010). It offers the possibility to construct an alternative to mass media narratives and valorize the voice of marginalized political actors operating in asymmetric environments overdetermined by the political economy of mass media (Murthy, 2011).

The ability of Twitter users in Turkey to produce counter-narratives to the establishment has been particularly well documented (see Tunç, 2014). Although the establishment has been relatively slow to catch up, politicians, activists, opinion leaders and journalists have begun to use the platform for political means. In this respect, it can be argued that the political establishment have only just started to understand the importance of Twitter within the daily routines of millions of

4 <https://recrodigital.com/we-are-social-2022-turkiye-sosyal-medya-kullanimi-verileri/>



people in the post-Gezi period. Reaching out to their respective audiences directly and without the help of mass media, actors such as activists, academics, analysts and journalists attempt to manage perceptions and influence public opinion.

Another category of Twitter users who have appeared in the post-Gezi period are political trolls (Bulut and Yörük, 2017; Saka, 2018). Either voluntary or employed, trolls use Twitter as a space to feverishly conduct propaganda on behalf of the political or religious movements they belong to (Sözeri E.F 2015; Ural 2021). Evidence from the dataset collected for this study suggests that all the actors mentioned above were active on social networks emerging around Ali Erbaş's controversial statement.

### **Computational Methodologies and Twitter Research on Turkey**

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that using computational methodologies for online research is a relatively new phenomenon (see Puschmann and Burgess, 2014). Increasing public availability of online digital data as well as the advent of automated data collection techniques challenge, in a very radical way, the standard research practices within the social sciences, and the application of these practices to digitized, online environments. As Savage and Burrows (2007) have argued, social science methodologies have not adequately risen to the challenge of confronting the possibilities afforded by abundant online data. Accordingly, both call upon social science researchers to develop innovative methodologies that use social media platforms as a resource (Burrows and Savage 2014). Over the past decade, a new generation of methodologies stemming from very different disciplines have led to the creation of what can be broadly described as computational social science (Cioffi-Revilla, 2014; Lazer et al., 2009).

Although the deeply interdisciplinary nature makes it difficult to present a definite bibliography of literature about computational methodologies, Giglietto et. al (2012) provides a useful analytical framework to situate these methods. Their paper proposes that the new wave of computational methodologies is distinguished from ethnographic and statistical approaches by their reliance on algorithms to optimize the analysis of large-scale datasets (Giglietto et. al, 2012:147). As such, computational methods refer to the study of social phenomena using digitized information as well as methods drawn from computer science (Furman 2022).

In contrast to international trends, Twitter studies that use applied social network analysis remains an emerging subfield within Turkish media studies research. Social network analysis tends to be mostly used to study news, political polarization and agenda setting on Twitter. For instance, Demir and Ayhan (2020) apply SNA to map agenda setters active in the Turkish Twittersphere. İspir and Deniz (2017) deploy SNA to analyze the impact of newspaper columnists on the

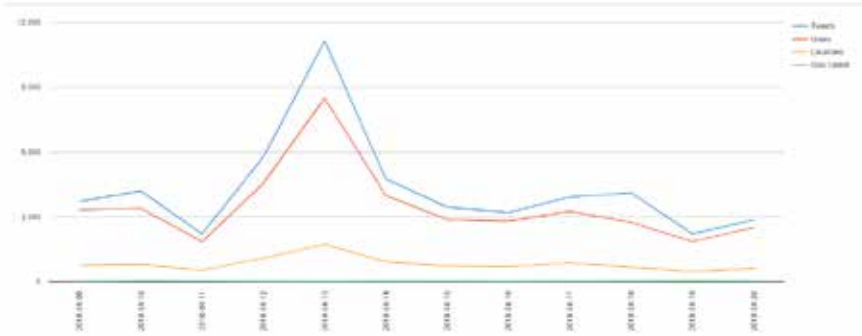
Twitter agenda during the November 2015 general elections. Similarly, Doğu and Mat (2019) use SNA to test whether news media in Turkey can still set the political agenda in a highly polarized political environment. In their study, they apply the network agenda-setting model to Twitter and compare the issues on the media and political agendas in Turkey. Another study by Doğu (2017) uses the SNA approach to map out Turkey's polarized news media landscape in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. Furman and Tunç (2019) use SNA to explore political polarization within the context of the 2017 Constitutional Referendum. Irak (2016) uses SNA to map political concentration in Turkey's public media by means of an analysis of the Twitter interactions of Anadolu Agency (AA) board members, between August 2011 and February 2015.

The study of networked social movements on Twitter is another area where one can find Turkish media studies adopting the SNA approach. Doğu (2019) uses SNA to map the framing practices of actors involved in Cerattepe ecological protests. In a similar manner, Kobak (2022) uses SNA to explore hashtag activism and map actors involved in a local Twitter initiative to ban Tictoc usage in Turkey. Sevgi (2021) applies SNA to compare worker union activities in Turkey and the Netherlands. Lastly, Büyük and Bozkurt (2020) apply SNA to explore networked resistance on Twitter against the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.

The data collection methodology used in this study relies on TCAT, an adaptation of the open-source Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool (see Borra and Reider, 2014). The Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool (TCAT) platform allows data collection strategy based on hashtags/keywords and has a number of in-built features which provide basic frequency-based metrics as well as statistical analysis.

Prior to Ali Erbaş's statement, data collection from Twitter had already begun on the 4th of April, with a list of hashtags and keywords that were related to the themes of deism and atheism conversations on Twitter. A snowballing technique based on co-occurrence of hashtags was used to compile this list. Using TCAT, 21,674 tweets sent by 15,226 unique users within 48 hours of Ali Erbaş's statement were retrospectively identified. This figure corresponded with the sharp increase of tweets observed between the 12th and 14th of April 2018 (graph 1). Yet at the same time, one can see that the response to Erbaş's comments weakens within 48 hours of the event. This seems to be in line with Ural's (2021) observation that the capacity for Turkish online public to generate long lasting counter-discourses on Twitter is limited, making them ephemeral, volatile, and episodic in character.

**Figure 1:** Tweet and user activity for atheism / deism debates between 9.4.2018 - 20.4.2018. The spike in the middle corresponds to the period immediately after Erbaş’s comments.



An important characteristic of Twitter is that it offers a range of different interactions, both amongst users and between users and tweets. Within the scope of this paper, mention networks as well as status reply chains are included in the analysis. A mention network connects users if one has mentioned another in a tweet and includes tweet replies. On the other hand, a status reply chain connects users if one has replied to the status update of another. Both networks are directed which means that the relationship between two nodes is non-reciprocal (Watts and Strogatz, 1998).

To measure patterns of communication, social network analysis (SNA) was applied to the collected dataset. Social network analysis focuses specifically on identifying and forecasting connections, relationships, and influence among individuals as well as groups. It is mostly based on the visualization of the “who is following who?” graph that highlights the structure of the network’s relationships (Grandjean, 2016). The SNA approach has proven to be particularly popular within the realm of Twitter research, with much of the empirical studies focusing on the networks and patterns of interaction that emerge from user engagement with specific hashtags or keywords.

Alongside social network analysis, qualitative content analysis techniques were also applied to study content tweeted in the aftermath of Erbaş’s comments. Content analysis can be defined as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2017). It is an approach that examines the symbolic connotations in media texts, thus encouraging an in-depth understanding of a particular context (Krippendorff, 2018). As such, one can argue that qualitative content analysis is concerned with “meaning and interpretation of symbolic material,” where the context helps determine meaning through an iterative procedure (Schreier, 2012, p. 173). Accordingly, the symbolic and contextual qualities of qualitative content analysis make it the perfect counterbalance to SNA, which prioritizes relationality over attributes.

One issue impeding the application of qualitative content analysis was the large number of duplicate messages and retweets (RT) in our dataset. A filtering process was introduced to resolve this issue and eliminate unwanted tweets. Therefore, all duplicates and retweets as well as any non-Turkish tweets were eliminated from the dataset. After filtering, 5325 tweets remained. The remaining data was fed into MAXQDA, a software designed for qualitative research, for manual collaborative coding. In keeping with ethical guidelines outlined for Twitter research (see Williams et. al, 2017), no data from private accounts were used in this study. Private accounts on Twitter are accounts that have restricted access to their tweets and information. When an account is set to private, only the people who follow that account can see the tweets and information that it shares. On the other hand, public accounts on Twitter are accounts that are open to the public and anyone can see the tweets and information that they share. This means that anyone can view the tweets, follow the account, and engage with the content shared on the account.

Multiple coders were used to ensure coding reliability. The coders were primarily from social science backgrounds and had in-depth knowledge of contemporary Turkish society, effectively allowing them to work with intercoder reliability. Yet particular attention was paid to identifying areas of disagreement between coders and retaining consistency over time.

## Results and Analysis

Content analysis of tweets in the dataset reveals that the deism controversy opened a space for the circulation and enunciation of what Théo Malçok describes as “deconversion narratives”.<sup>5</sup> In his ethnographic study (2022), Malçok suggests that deconversion is something experienced by those born into faith, rather than those who come from irreligious backgrounds. Building on this, he argues that these narratives are important insofar as they open the path to a form of secularization wherein authentic (ir)religious identities are built upon on the premise of personal choice rather than inherited confessional traditions. As such, during public debates on religious/confessional identities, deconversion stories provide a strong response (or an alternative) to the argument of the belief in God is something “natural” or that atheism is ontologically impossible.

In Malçok’s work, one common leitmotif of deconversion narratives is that the theological aspect of religious disaffiliation is emphasized at the expense of sociological context. In other words, deconversion is presented as something caused by religion and not society. Furthermore, deconversion narratives tend to follow certain structural patterns; there often are several catalysts that cause the protagonist to quit organized religion. For instance, one interviewee (“Emre”) in

5 According to Malçok, the term “deconversion” was first used by Richard Dawkins Foundation’s website to describe personal stories of religious disaffiliation. In his research, Malçok borrows the term to describe religious disaffiliation in Turkey.

Malçok's article (2022, p. 12) discusses three events that led him to renounce his faith and quit a tarikat: endless controversies about metaphysical issues with his master, the re-reading of the Quran in Turkish, and the encounter of internet forums discussing atheism.

In contrast to the deconversion narratives featured in Malçok's research, society, and politics (namely the AKP, Diyanet and political Islam) are frequently cited as the primary catalysts for deconversion in our Twitter dataset:

After "armored Mercedes" Mehmet [former head of Diyanet], as students of Fatih - Çarşamba Imam Hatip high school, decided to become deists.

After Erbaş's statement, I also decided to become a deist. Whatever you call perversion is a good thing. How come you do not criticize those [...] wanting to marry a 6-year-old child, those who steal, those who harbor sick thoughts towards their mothers.

I became a deist with the AKP. That was their biggest contribution. I learned from you that religion is an instrument to rob, exploit, rob and deceive. Allah is mine, you can keep religion! [Allah benim, din sizin olsun!]

I'm a #deist because of these freaks. The AKP is something temporary. Religion and the prophet are also the same. There is even a verse in the Quran about this. Stay strong and even if you lose everything don't lose faith in the #Creator!

After seeing what the AKP's understanding of religion looked like, I became a deist. Out of #courtesy

I'm not an extreme deist-atheist. I even sometimes go to Friday prayers so that my family will be happy. What is true however is that Islam lost its legitimacy in this country on the day it was turned into ideology.

This is important insofar as it suggests that the catalyst for deconversion stems from political rather than religious motives. In other words, loss is not caused by the demands of Islam per se, but instead by the demands of a regime which instrumentalized religion and tries to impose a form of governance mandated by the tenets of religion. While tweets are not "full" or complete narratives, their demarcation of politics as the catalyst for deconversion suggests a break with the ethnographic findings of Malçok's study. Accordingly, one may argue that the perceived anonymity and safety of Twitter created the conditions for users to openly express identities and their true opinions about subjects in a manner that might be unsuitable or taboo in public life. In any case, the deconversion tweets in our dataset need to be understood as anti-conformist statements for those coming from conservative, pious backgrounds. Similar to the images of unveiling posted under #10yearchallenge hashtag (Çavdar, 2021), the rejection of

organized religion is a provocation meant to irk those pertaining to pious conservative ideology of the AKP regime. Furthermore, these tweets play to the politics of (in)visibility, contesting the silence of mass media around this topic.

This silence around the topic of deism is largely caused by the pressure of politics on mass media institutions in Turkey. As numerous commentators (Baybars-Hawks, 2012; Yeşil, 2018) have repeatedly pointed out, mainstream mass media is almost entirely under the control of pro-government corporations and business circles. Furthermore, an increasingly draconian and security oriented legalistic framework makes it extremely difficult for journalists working in mass media to pursue any form of news coverage that goes beyond kowtowing to ideological boundaries delineated by the state regulatory institutions such as RTÜK or the Directorate of Communications. As a result, the public backlash to Erbaş's comments were mostly ignored by mainstream media outlets. Instead, social media became the primary (and only) space wherein the public were able to tell their stories and speak for themselves. As such, stories of de-conversion and enunciations of deist identity on Twitter are in fact, thinly veiled contestations of hegemonic social exclusion from Turkey's public sphere.

The silence of both Ali Erbaş's personal and Diyanet's institutional Twitter accounts in the aftermath of Erbaş's comments made it impossible for Twitter users to directly confront either actor via replying to their status updates. Instead, users expressed their reactions through the mentions (@). On Twitter, a mention is a tweet containing another account's username anywhere in the body of the post. Mentions are used to a) get the attention of another Twitter account, b) draw public attention to another Twitter account, c) reply to another user's post or d) as a matter of "tagging" a user in a post (i.e., to say that "I was here"). Evidence from our dataset suggests that mention tweets were used as a ruse to attract the attention of both Ali Erbaş's personal and Diyanet's institutional Twitter accounts as well as draw the attention of other users to the ongoing controversy. The following examples help illustrate how mentions were used in this manner:

@DIBAliErbas how dare you call me a pervert? #deism

@diyanetbasin @DIBAliErbas Damn those who attack others' beliefs. There are millions of deists in this country #DiyanetKapatılsın

@diyanetbasin @DIBAliErbas deism, atheism, agnosticism, are not perversions but freedoms of belief and non-belief. If you are looking for perverts, check the Ensar Foundation right under your nose.

@diyanetbasin @DIBAliErbas Have you considered becoming a deist? It would chill you out a little, I recommend.

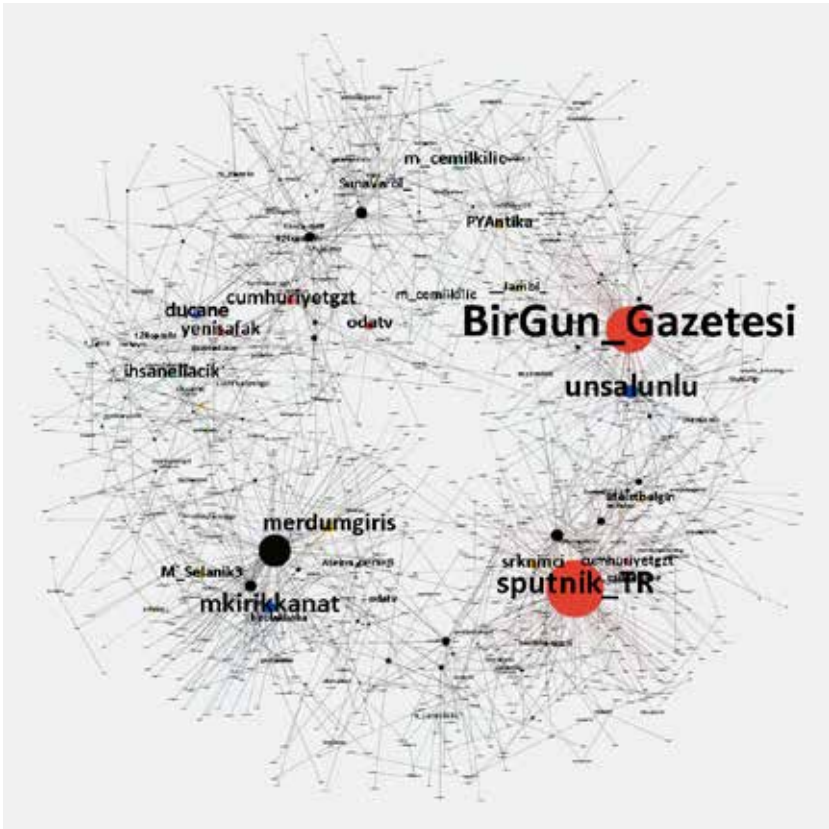
@DIBAliErbas I BELIEVE WHATEVER I WANT. I DON'T NEED TO BE A MUSLIM. RESPECT MY CHOICE!

The usage of mentions in such a manner can be interpreted as individual efforts by angry Twitter users to hold Ali Erbaş and the Diyanet accountable for Erbaş's controversial comment. As such, our findings seem to be in line with Conover et al. (2011) who suggest that mentions on Twitter represent ideological opposition.

Yet ultimately one can argue that these efforts were for the most part futile as almost none of the tweets mentioning @DIBAliErbas or @diyanetbasin are retweeted or liked by other users. Similarly, neither @DIBAliErbas nor @diyanetbasin reply to the tweets that mention them. Regardless of what they achieve, such tweets are important insofar as they demonstrate the willingness of some Twitter users to demand accountability from political actors. As such, they constitute an example of how online publics can use social media to hold government actors accountable for their actions. When channeled towards responsive and responsible political actors, this willingness can lead to positive social change (Ceron, 2017; Tufekci, 2017).

Stories of deconversion and grassroots demands for political accountability constitute an important part of content found in our dataset. Yet not all tweets are about accountability or identity politics. Quite a sizable portion of tweets demonstrate the presence of an angry yet rationalized collective critique. The presence of rationalized, collective critique is particularly visible in status reply networks. The graph shown in Figure 2a is a visualization of status reply networks and has 1426 nodes, 1259 edges. This means that there are roughly 1426 actors interacting a total of 1259 times with another.

**Figure 2a.** Status Reply Network (1,426 nodes and 1,259 edges)



Yet as the size of the different nodes in Figure 1b suggest, not all actors interact the same number of times; neither do they interact with other nodes in an equal manner. In-degree and out-degree centrality can be applied to measure how attention is distributed across a network.

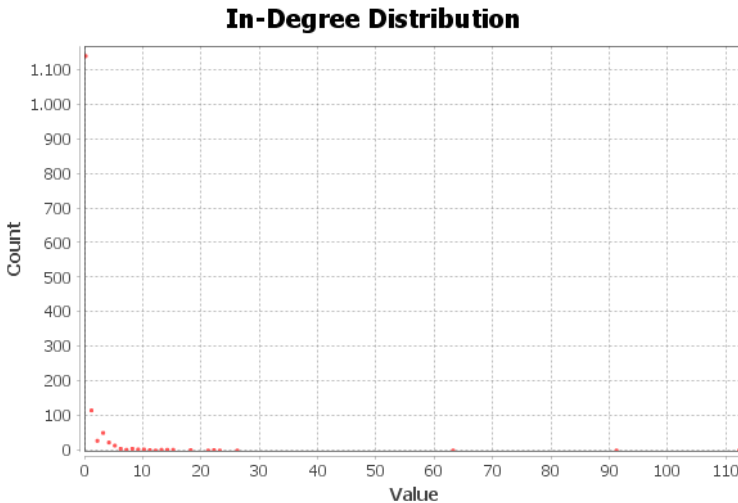


**Figure 2b.** Status Reply Network Close-up



Taken as a whole, the graph represents a broadcast network with a visible “hub-and-spoke” structure wherein most engagement occurs around a number of central nodes. This structure indicates that most users in the network are replying to content from a small number of central sources (hubs) without otherwise interacting with each other.

In graph theory and network analysis, centrality metrics are used to assign numbers or rankings to nodes within a graph corresponding to their positional value in a network. Degree Centrality is one of the most commonly used centrality measurement for mention and status reply networks. Degree centrality can be defined as the number of links connecting a node to the wider network. Simply put, a node with a high degree ranking is more central in a graph. In many instances high degree centrality can be interpreted as a sign of popularity. Being the most popular actor also creates certain risks, for instance being the most susceptible to being infected by whatever is flowing through a network (such as a virus, or some information). In the case of a directed network (where ties have direction), in-degree and out-degree centrality metrics are applied to measure two different types of popularity in a network. Indegree is a count of the number of ties directed to the node and outdegree is the number of ties that the node directs to others. Within directed networks when ties are associated with some positive aspects such as attention or friendship, indegree is often interpreted as a form of popularity, and outdegree as gregariousness.

**Table 1.** In-degree Distribution of Status Reply Network

The distribution of the in-distribution metric suggests that the conversation is strongly focused around several accounts/nodes. The accounts with the highest in-degree rankings are as follows:

**Table 2.** In-degree Distribution Ranking of Status Reply Network

<b>Nodes</b>	<b>In-Degree</b>
Sputnik (Digital News Agency)	112
Birgün Gazetesi (National Newspaper)	91
Ünsal Ünlü (Journalist)	26
Mine Kırkkanat (Journalist)	21
Merdumgiris (Troll)	26
Dücanec. (Popular Philosopher)	15
Cumhuriyet (National Newspaper)	15
Cemil Kılıç (Popular Religion Expert)	14
Yeni Şafak (National Newspaper)	14
İhsan Eliaçık (Popular Religion Expert)	14
Serkan İnci (Social Media Celebrity)	13
PYAntika (Social Media Celebrity)	12
M_Selanik3 (Troll)	11
Suna Varol (Social Media Celebrity)	10
Ateistbelgin (Troll)	9
Ateizm Derneği (Civil Society Organization)	6

Although research about hubs on Twitter broadcast networks suggests that such sources tend to often be mainstream elites (Smith et al, 2014), evidence from our study paints a slightly different picture. What our findings suggest is that within the context of Ali Erbaş's comments, Twitter users chose to engage either with news stories covering the comments, or with public intellectuals, social media celebrities, trolls or journalists commenting on the news stories. Other than the two anonymous troll accounts (M\_Selanik3 and Ateistbelgin), most of these central sources are what Jackson and Welles (2016) have identified as "counterpublic elites" or individuals who hold influential positions or have significant expertise within alternative or oppositional public spheres. They may be activists, intellectuals, artists, or other types of cultural producers who are highly regarded within their own counterpublics and have the ability to shape opinions and mobilize social action. Unlike traditional elites, who hold power and influence within mainstream public spheres, counterpublic elites challenge the dominant discourses and values of society and may operate outside of traditional power structures. However, they still hold significant cultural and symbolic capital within their own counterpublics and can use this influence to advocate for social change and challenge dominant power structures. Serkan İnci, the founder of urban dictionary İnci Sözlük, retired bank board director Piraye Antik (PYAntika), opposition activist Suna Varol, independent journalist Ünsal Ünlü, opposition columnist Mine Kırıkkanat as well as theologian İhsan Eliaçık (known for his heterodox and socialist interpretations of Islam) belong in this category.

Looking at the comments posted by these counterpublic elites, one can argue that their role in the network was to act as "initiators of online dissent" (Jackson and Welles, 2016). For instance, in the immediate hours following Erbaş's comments, theologian İhsan Eliaçık posted a tweet that was retweeted 1,066 times and liked 3,795 times:

Unlike what the President of Religious Affairs claims, a person is not a pervert by being a deist or atheist. On the contrary, being a murderer, a thief, a swindler, a briber, a rapist, etc. is perverse. Religion is not belief, ritual, or identity; it is behavior. Anyone with good behavior will be saved.

Initiators can be defined as an active and highly committed group of actors who engage with a controversy in its initial stages and eventually assume a leadership role. Initiators draw online attention and support to controversies and motivate the engagement of establishment elites, potentially creating the condition for the discussion to diffuse into the mainstream.

More apolitical and mainstream elites also involved in the deism controversy include pop philosopher Dücane Cündioğlu and pop theologian Cemil Kılıç. In contrast to the initiating actions of counterpublic elites, both actors take up

the role of “explaining” the sociological implications of deism to their Twitter followers. For instance, Cündioğlu in a series of tweets, frames deism as a third way to both Kemalist secularism and pious conservatism:

Deism is not an intellectual but an emotional reaction, liberating faith from all its historical burdens (religion), rituals, priests, institutions, and being content with a tired god... (...) Because religion is perceived by the state as either as a social necessity or a political danger, faith has never been the subject of intellectual criticism, it has instead been either humiliated or glorified, and blessed. Deism is an ideology of a new political beginning, it is the ‘future’. (...) Deism is a fatigue of faith, a holiday fantasy for those who are tired of keeping vigilant and of being led.

One can argue that such roles are taken up voluntarily and in an organic manner as most of the actors doing the explaining do not profess deist beliefs. For example, Cündioğlu openly defines himself as a Muslim and not a deist.<sup>6</sup>

News accounts active in the status reply network include national opposition newspapers *Cumhuriyet* and *Birgün*. Despite being a Russian-affiliated digital news agency, *Sputnik*’s editorial policy for national news tends to be oppositional (see Furman et. al, 2023) and thus can be included onto the list of oppositional media. Perhaps surprisingly, the pro-government Islamist *Yeni Şafak* newspaper is the only account on the list who belongs to the establishment elite. This is partly because *Yeni Şafak* was one of the first news sources to publicize the contents of Ali Erbaş’s speech. While a few of the replies posted to *Yeni Şafak*’s tweet are retweets, the overwhelming majority are quite confrontational:

Even if the Diyanet does not agree with deism, it should be respectful to those who are deists... The Diyanet’s statement on this issue is sheer ignorance!

You think so, Ali Erbaş.... those who see you are becoming deists.... because nothing you do is compatible with Islam....

It is noteworthy that Diyanet as well as Ali Erbaş’s Twitter account are conspicuously absent from this list. This means that Twitter users chose not to engage directly with government authorities. In comparison, the Atheism Foundation (*Ateizm Derneği*) is on the list. This is because the Foundation released a press statement criticizing Erbaş’s comments soon after the TRT Haber television program.

For content analysis, TCAT’s conversation detection algorithm was used

6 <https://twitter.com/ducane/status/954979436771926016?s=20>

to detect a total of 167 conversations.<sup>7</sup> The following example helps illustrate how a typical conversation on a status reply chain unfolds:

The deist beliefs that are becoming popular amongst young people today need to be interpreted as an objection to Umayyad Islam, to sects, congregations, and cults, not to Muhammadian Islam. I find this objection very valuable. (Original tweet from Cemil Kılıç, popular religion expert)

When I was a Muslim, I rejected Umayyad Islam. Not sects, but the logical errors in the Quran is the reason why people become deists. Nevertheless, thank you. As a theologian, you are the defender of deist youth. (Reply from Follower 1)

You are wrong. Deism is not a part of Islam. Tired of repeating myself. (Reply from Follower 2)

How did the Turks become Muslims? Are we really a Muslim country now? Whether we are deists or atheists may be due to our pre-Islamic religion, Shamanism.

Young people become deist or atheist because they read the Quran. Let's be realistic, they are fleeing from Muhammadian Islam. (Reply from Follower 4)

He thinks deism is an objection to the sects, congregations, and cults of Umayyad Islam. Truth is people become deists because they know about Muhammadian Islam. (Reply from Follower 5)

In this conversation thread, followers of Cemil Kılıç (a popular theologian) are replying to Kılıç's tweet about deism. Here, using theological logic, Kılıç contends that the emerging trend of deism constitutes a return to the original precepts of Islamic religion, one wherein spirituality rather "sects, congregations and cults" (mezhep, cemaat and tarikat) dominate. Some of Kılıç's followers agree with this interpretation while others disagree or offer alternative explanations. Nevertheless, what is striking about this conversation is how Kılıç's tweet sparks off a public and relatively democratic discussion about deism amongst his followers. In certain instances, the dialogue sparked off by Twitter pundits attain a more sophisticated form of rational critique typical of a Habermassian public sphere. For instance, some tweets criticize the institutional policies of the Diyanet while others question the constitutional legality of Erbaş's comments:

Neither deism, atheism, nor any other belief is a perversion. The real source of unrest in Turkey is caused by those bullies who think that

<sup>7</sup> A key question here is the minimum number of nodes required for a status reply chain to count as a conversation. Typical convention dictates that at least 2 nodes (or 1 dyad) is required for a reply chain to qualify a conversation. Quite commonly, qualitative analysis of the posted content on status reply networks reveals the ideal number of nodes needed for a meaningful conversation. Within the context of this chapter, 4 was the chosen minimum number. It is also important to note that from 167 conversations, 94 were without roots, meaning that the original tweets stimulating these conversations were either deleted by the tweeter or not collected by TCAT.

Allah needs a discriminatory, divisive Minister of Religious Affairs with an 8 billion TRY budget.

Those who have increased the number of religious schools (Imam Hatip) throughout the country 10-fold still unabashedly complain about deism. Maybe it is because you are forcing people into religious schooling?

Ali Erbaş declares deist and atheist youth are “perverts”. You are in flagrant violation of the constitutional principle of secularism. You propagate the religion of Tayyip to everyone, regardless of their beliefs. Who are you, man? What the hell!

Although these tweets, amongst thousands of others, do fall short of stipulating a political demand, they nonetheless suggest the presence of aggregated collective dialogue and opinion. Hence, Erbaş’s comments open a temporary, dialogical space, replete with experts, journalists as well as ordinary users expressing their opinions on deism, atheism, and the state of religion in Turkey.

The refreshing albeit slightly chaotic manner of the conversation on Twitter stands in stark contrast with the silence one encounters in the traditional bastion of the public sphere, namely mass media such as television and newspapers. As such, one may argue that the dynamism of the conversation as well as the characteristics of content tweeted, carries the characteristics of what has been described as a counterpublic. According to social theorist Nancy Fraser (1992), counterpublics can be defined as spaces “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”. Other counterpublic sphere theorists like Felski (1989) or Asen and Brouwer (2001), have illustrated how traditionally marginalized groups create and maintain their own, alternative publics with the express goals of both legitimizing and communicating their lived realities and pushing the mainstream public sphere to acknowledge and respond to these realities. When applied to social media and the online realm more broadly, the term refers to the unique sites and methods members of subordinated groups use to produce non-dominant forms of knowledge (Jackson and Welles 2015). As such, it has been suggested that the goal of a counterpublic is creating mass agitation of, and eventual shifts in, the status quo (Jong, et al., 2005).

## **Conclusion**

This study relied on both qualitative content analysis as well as social network analysis to examine the positions and themes through which Erbaş’s controversial statement on deist beliefs were discussed on Twitter. It used computational data collection strategies to amass a dataset of 21,674 tweets sent out by 15,226 distinct Twitter users within 48 hours of the event. The findings of our study can be summarized as such:

1. Content analysis of tweets in the dataset suggests that the deism controversy opened a space for the circulation and enunciation of “deconversion narratives” on Twitter. Within the context of academic research on religion in Turkey, these narratives are unique insofar as they present politics (and not theology) as the primary catalyst for deconversion from Islam. Furthermore, the voicing of deist and atheist identities on Twitter need to be interpreted as a challenge to the silence of Turkish mass media on this topic. Social media become the primary (and only) space wherein the public are able to tell their stories and speak for themselves.

2. The silence of both Ali Erbaş’s personal and Diyanet’s institutional Twitter accounts in the aftermath of Erbaş’s comments made it impossible for Twitter users to directly confront either actor via replying to their status updates. Instead, users expressed their reactions through the mentions (@). Regardless of the engagement created, these tweets constitute an example of how grassroots civil activism in Turkey uses social media to hold government actors accountable for their actions.

3. Quite a sizable portion of tweets demonstrate the presence of an angry yet rationalized collective critique. The presence of rationalized, collective critique is particularly visible in status reply networks. Twitter users chose to engage either with news stories covering Erbaş’s comments, Ateizm Derneği or with the counterpublic elite. Twitter users chose not to engage directly with government authorities. As such, one may argue that the dynamism of the conversation as well as the characteristics of content tweeted, carries the characteristics of what has been described as a “counterpublic”. During the immediate hours after Erbaş’s comments, the counterpublic elite functioned as initiators of online dissent.

Our findings demonstrate that Erbaş’s comments opened a temporary, dialogical space on Twitter replete with experts, journalists as well as ordinary users all expressing their opinions on deism and the state of religion in Turkey. During the first 48 hours of the controversy, Twitter functioned as both a counterpublic and a prefigurative free space - open to expressing values that radically differ from those characterizing mainstream society. Accordingly, one can conclude that in societies such as Turkey wherein public discussions on agnosticism, non-belief, or the right to freedom from religion are frowned upon and considered to be taboo, social media facilitate the freedom of speech and the expression of counter-hegemonic discourses.

Within the wider framework of religion in contemporary Turkish society, the deism controversy signals both a break and a continuity with historical

trends. On one hand, it can be seen as a continuation of the Turkish state's intervention in the religious sphere. Historically speaking, the Turkish state has used the Diyanet to apply pressure on individuals and communities it considered to be threats to the nation building project. Naturally, those marginalized by the Diyanet have evolved alongside shifts in the Republican nation building project. As such, the deism controversy constitutes as a break insofar as it is one of the first instances wherein the Diyanet targeted and criminalized people from within Turkish society. Although describing it as a turning point signaling the collapse of AKP's hegemonic project might be an exaggeration, the deism controversy does offer a compelling portrayal of one of these moments in which workings of counter-hegemonic rejection materialized against the AKP's hegemony project.

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Ethics Committee Permission is not required for this study.

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