Who are the candidates for the Turkish presidency? And what policies do they want to implement? To answer these questions, this article looks at the Twitter accounts of the four leading contenders in the upcoming Turkish elections: Meral Akşener, Selahattin Demirtaş, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Muharrem İnce. First, it provides a thematic analysis of each tweet from 1 December 2017 until 15 May 2018. Second, it looks specifically at their communication strategies over the last month (15 May-15 June), drawing from a database of 915 tweets collected in the six-and-a-half-month period (580 from Akşener, 177 from İnce, 103 from Erdoğan, and 55 from Demirtaş) to identify the most recurrent themes of their communications. Each tweet is manually coded into two groups. The first refers to the broad typology of the tweet: criticism of the current rulers or other contenders; Candidate propaganda; Proposed policies; Other. The second specifies the particular topic: Pluralism, democracy and the rule of law; Cultural and social issues; Pro-inclusiveness and anti-discrimination; Economic policy; Nationalism; Kemalism; Religious references; Foreign policy; Environment and animal rights; Other.

The analysis is then complemented by a specific study for this past month (15 May-15 June) when the electoral campaign is in its most intense phase, looking specifically at the communication strategy of each candidate and their core themes in this crucial period.

A more detailed explanation of the methodology can be found in the appendix to the article.
Meral Akşener is the leader of the Good Party (İYİ), a recently founded political group with a conservative, nationalist and secular orientation. Akşener, former Minister of the Interior, has been compared to Marine Le Pen for her political position and style, despite having a more moderate-stance and centrist outlook than the leader of the Front National. Before founding the İYİ party, she was a leading member of the ultra-conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Akşener has focused her current campaign on winning the support of conservative and moderate voters, especially those disappointed with the policies of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Akşener’s goal of discrediting Erdoğan and the AKP rule can be identified by looking at the typologies of her tweets. Contents that criticise the ruling party and the President hit 40.9% of the total. Looking at those tweets in detail, it emerges that the İYİ party’s candidate aims at convincing conservative and moderate Turks that Erdoğan and the AKP party do not represent their interests any-

more. In this respect, she often argues that they are using Turks’ votes to gain absolute power. An example is the following tweet:

“The powerful rulers of the past would have told him (Erdoğan) that he cannot even become the head of a village, but he is the president today. It is not enough, now he wants to rule alone. But today this nation says no to him, says no to a one-man rule. Hear this voice, brother, hear!”

Another common type of tweet refers to the policies proposed by the candidate (26.68%). In this respect, Akşener mostly aims at convincing voters that her innovative economic model for Turkey dramatically differs from the AKP’s, as it focuses on investing in new technologies and creating quality jobs for youth and women, rather than promoting investments in infrastructure and buildings.

When looking at the issue distribution of tweets, messages that have a nationalistic slant represent more than a quarter of the total (27.79%). For example, Akşener proudly states that the İYİ party “believes in Allah and believes in this nation”, and that she will base her political actions on these two principles. Furthermore, Akşener often celebrates the glorious history of Turkey and argues that the country’s potential has not been fully expressed under the rule of Erdoğan. Other tweets refer to the military operations on the Syrian border and against the PKK. In these tweets, the İYİ candidate often praises the role of the army in protecting Turkish citizens and celebrates soldiers who lost their lives in fighting the PKK. Another recurrent topic of Akşener is the economic development of Turkey (18.79%). Finally, she often speaks about social issues (18.2%), mostly connected with public security. In the last month, Akşener has increasingly posted tweets that support the empowerment of
women, elders and young people in society, as she claims they have been excluded from economic and social opportunities under the AKP rule. In this respect, she proposes a basic income for all university students, an increase in pensions for retired people, and new policies to provide better jobs opportunities and to improve the living conditions of Turkish women. These ideas are well embodied in this tweet:

“Our women want a Turkey in which they are a part of its economic production, in which they can raise their children peacefully, in which they are not told by someone what to eat or drink, what to say or not, in which they are not treated as if they are inferior.”

DEMİRTAŞ: DEMOCRACY AND JUSTICE AT THE CORE

Selahattin Demirtaş was the co-leader of the leftist, secular and pro-minority rights Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) with Figen Yüksekdağ until February 2018. The party obtained a significant share of votes in the Kurdish-majority region, but leftist voters also support it in western Turkey, and he has gained support among a share of some Turks with a non-Sunni background (e.g. the Alevi and Christians). Demirtaş is currently in jail with the accusation of spreading propaganda for militants fighting the Turkish state. Despite current limitations to his freedom, he was anyway authorised by the electoral commission to conduct the electoral campaign. Having almost no possibility of becoming the next president of the Republic, his campaign focuses on obtaining more than 10% of the votes for his party to surpass the electoral threshold and thus obtain seats in parliament.

In this respect, a large majority of tweets from Demirtaş have focused on the policy proposals of his party (80%). The remaining types of tweets revolve around criticism of the current rulers (13.04%), and even less on the promotion of his party’s campaign (6.96%), which is by definition limited because of his current prisoner status. In this respect, he often links his imprisonment to the general conditions of justice and democracy in Turkey. As can be seen in this tweet:

‘Allegedly I have been arrested because I escaped from justice, but I have waited 13 months for a sentence. Those who commit these crimes will sooner or later be brought before the law. Not us - those who bend their knee to the Palace will be marked by shame in history.’

The issue analysis shows that the issue of pluralism, democracy and the rule of law (66.07%) is central in the communication strategy of Demirtaş. A closer look at this issue category shows that he often calls for independent justice (28.74%) and a stronger democracy (33.33%). Another significant share of tweets revolves around the call for a more inclusive society and anti-discrimination policies (27.59%), which are the core issues for his party. The HDP has often presented itself as the defender of the rights of the ethnic and religious minorities, youth, women, and the
LGBTQ community. An example of this narrative can be found in this tweet:

“Our people have different religious and ethnic backgrounds, you will soon see that you are equal and proud members of a fully democratic country. 50 days are left.”

Finally, Demirtaş has increasingly posted content on his social platform in the last month. He has been allowed to conduct the electoral campaign from behind bars, and he recently released a video on national television about his candidature. Other contents refer to making Turkey more pluralistic and democratic, and to the beneficial effects of democracy and pluralism on economic growth.

There is a direct relationship between democracy and economy. Of course, countries without consolidated democracy might also be very rich, but only the rulers and the elites. On the other hand, each and every single person shares the wealth in a country with a strong democracy. If there is no democracy, there is no welfare to the poor.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the strong-man of Turkish politics since 2002. He served as Prime Minister from 2003 until 2014 and as President of the Republic since 2014. He is the leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). AKP’s ideology combines conservative and religious-oriented stances on social issues with a liberal outlook on the economy. Erdoğan criticised by his opponents of having taken an authoritarian turn in recent years, especially with approval of the new constitution in 2017 that grants a considerable degree of power to the president.

Erdoğan’s Twitter communication strategy is mostly centred on promoting AKP policies (62.87%). Differently from the other analysed Twitter accounts, he limits criticisms of other contenders to a very low number of tweets (0.50%). The observed results can be explained as an attempt by the Turkish president to set the thematic agenda of political discussion. Furthermore, it seems that Erdoğan aims at presenting himself as a pragmatic leader who focuses on concrete projects for the sake of the Turkish people. The message to his electors is that there is no reason to change their voting preference, as the AKP has already demonstrated itself capable of improving their social and economic conditions. An example of the aforementioned discourse is a recent tweet, where Erdoğan proudly asserts that “the GDP in the first semester of 2018 has increased by 7.4% compared with the same period last year. The remaining types of contents revolve around the candidate’s propaganda (22.28%) and other types of tweets on sport, religion and other issues (14.36%).

An issue analysis of the collected tweets shows that wide variety characterises Erdoğan’s communication strategy. Social is-
sues occupy a significant share of the collected tweets (20%), as Erdoğan often expresses support for workers and families. In doing so, he probably aims to show his sympathy for ordinary middle-class Turks, who represent the core of his electorate. When discussing economic policies (15.56%), the president vigorously defends past decisions, by arguing that the focus on infrastructures and large projects has boosted Turkey’s growth. He also promises that the best is yet to come. For example, he stated in a tweet that “the metro of Istanbul will reach a thousand kilometres from the current 160 by the end of 2023.” Another recurrent topic is that of internal and external enemies, which the Turkish president blames for the recent rise in inflation and the devaluation of the national currency. In a tweet he proudly states that:

“No matter the traps that they are setting up on our way, they will not be able to prevent us from reaching our 2023 targets. No made-up scenario will convince us to give up on our vision for 2053 and 2071. Because we are Turkey! Because we are the Turkish nation!”

This discourse is strictly linked to nationalism (14.07%), as Erdoğan often claims that the economic and political success of the country has attracted the hostility of many. In the president’s rhetoric, only a strong government can secure the current path of Turkish growth. The presidential system, which Erdoğan often associates with efficiency, offers the best guarantee for preserving citizens’ interests in spite of external attempts to weaken Turkey. Within this framework, he presents the attempted military coup of 2016 as orchestrated by the internal and external enemies of Turkey. In the last month of the electoral campaign, the president has often shared live direct videos of his speeches. In the follow-up to visits, he has often praised political supporters, local excellences and traditions of the visited cities, to show that he still enjoys a considerable degree of popularity.

İNCE:
ANTI-ERDOĞANISM AND A FAIRER TURKEY

Muhtarrem İnce is a leading political figure in the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the main opposition political movement in Turkey. CHP’s worldview traditionally draws from the thoughts and actions of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Its current ideology is based on secularism and social-liberalism. İnce’s political message aims at bringing the CHP message closer to centrist-moderate sectors of Turkish society, and eventually Kurdish public opinion. İnce thus seeks to enlarge the traditional support-base of the CHP, made up of urban, secular, and progressive Turks.

Almost half of the tweets from the CHP candidate have focused on criticising the current rule of the AKP and President Erdoğan (49.67%). In this respect, the CHP confirms its traditional stance on the Turkish president, as
the party has been vocally critical of most of the AKP party policies in recent years. In a tweet, he clearly states that:

“For the peace and safety of Turkey, for the future of our nation and our children, we want to be free of Tayyip Erdoğan.”

The remaining content focuses on presenting the policies of the presidential candidate for the upcoming elections (21.85%) and refer to forthcoming rallies and events (14.57%). Finally, The remaining tweets (13.91% of the tweets) focus on a plurality of issues, like the celebration of a sports victory and best wishes for Ramadan.

The main topic of Ince’s communication has been that of pluralism, democracy and the rule of law, which comprises more than a third of the total tweets (36.69%). In this respect, he probably wants to be perceived as the only credible candidate in opposition to the authoritarian turn of Erdoğan in the eyes of those who claim that the AKP rule has weakened Turkish democracy. He thus aims at gaining the support of voters who do not necessarily identify with the official ideology of the CHP, but are concerned with AKP policy on this specific issue. Ince strongly emphasises the need for abolishing the changes of the constitution approved in the popular referendum in 2017, claiming that these reforms have legitimised authoritarianism. The economic issue also covers a significant share of tweets (15.83%), as Ince claims that what Turkey needs to change its development strategy is boosting investments for research and renewable energy. Finally, the CHP candidate focuses on some ideological issues, in particular those referring to Kemalism (15.11%) and secularism. An example is the following re-tweet:

“Neither inside, nor outside the parliament, we have never let anyone insult the founder of our Republic, our Supreme Leader Atatürk, and we will never let them do so.”

In the last months, Ince has reinforced his message about economic reform and education. Furthermore, he has often re-utilised the slogan #TAMAM in content referring to his public speeches. #TAMAM has become a viral hashtag on the Turkish social media following a statement of Erdoğan who said in an interview: “If one day our nation says tamam (enough), only then will we step aside.” This hashtag has been used by many ordinary users to stress that the time of the AKP and Erdoğan is over.

**Methodological Appendix**

The database draws from 915 manually coded tweets. The tweets that do not include an ideological issue or a relation to the upcoming elections are excluded from the analysis, along with contents such as videos or announcements of TV appearances. Each tweet is manually included in two categories, the first of which groups according to the broad typology of the tweet, and the second of which specifies the particular topic.

**Primary Categories (Types):**

Criticism of the current ruler or other contenders: All tweets which contain a criticism of the ruling party of government or other candidates, either by directly mentioning their names or by a strong reference to an unidentified target of criticism;

Candidate propaganda: All tweets that refer to promotion of the candidate’s image, mostly referring to his/her skills and competences;
Proposed policies: All tweets that concentrate on the new policies to be implemented in the country at a social, institutional and economic level;

Others: All tweets that cannot be included in the previous categories, such as general ideological stances or tweets that refer to sports, religious festivities, etc.

Secondary Categories (Topics):
- Pluralism, democracy and rule of law: All tweets on democracy and governance in Turkey (e.g. elections, separation of powers, independent justice, the role of the military, freedom of the media);
- Social issues: All tweets focusing on the promotion of social justice (e.g. education, workers’ rights, public safety);
- Pro-inclusiveness and anti-discrimination policies: All tweets promoting empowerment of disadvantaged categories, discouraging discrimination (e.g. against women, homosexuals, minorities, youth);
- Economic policies: All tweets on the economic state of Turkey and proposed reforms (e.g. investments, economic equality, labour conditions);
- Nationalism: All tweets containing references to patriotism and its symbols (e.g. flag, army, shared origins of the Turks);
- Kemalism: All tweets referring to the ideology that draws on the thought and deeds of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey (e.g. secularism, statism, progressivism);
- Religious references: All tweets which contain a reference to Islamic values or traditions (e.g. celebration of Ramadan, sentences of Muslim authors, Quran quotes);

Foreign policy: All tweets on the role of Turkey in the world and its foreign policy (e.g. Syrian crisis, U.S. bilateral relations);

Environment and animal rights: All tweets on animal rights and protection of the environment (e.g. pollution, anti-nuclear energy);

Others: All relevant tweets that cannot be included in the previous categories (e.g. support for the presidential system, references to past governance, comments on other candidates excluding Erdoğan).

This tweet from Muhtarrem İnce, followed by a proper explanation, provides an example to better understand the coding methodology:

“The TV channels that live broadcasted the AKP’s district congresses did not live broadcast the (CHP) rally in Yalova yesterday. We will be fighting the battle with this media order. If the media embargo on oppositions continues as ordained by the palace, we will make our rallies in front of the TV channels!”

In this case, the tweet is categorised as a “Criticism of the current ruler or other contenders” for the typology category, and “Pluralism, democracy and the rule of law” for the topic category.

Finally, it is important to stress that some tweets that contained more than one topic (e.g. nationalism and foreign policy) are coded in both categories.