Democracy's Tools, Authoritarian Ends:

Participatory Repression and the Politics of Denunciations in Hybrid Regimes-The Case of Turkey

Emine Ay
B.A, M.A.

School of Law and Government
Dublin City University

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Iain McMenamin
Supervisor: Dr. Roman-Gabriel Olar

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Tool	Output	Prompt & Iteration	Critical reflection
GBT-5.1 used between June 2024-September 2024.	I used GPT-5.1 to produce English translations of publicly available Turkish presidential speeches quoted in the thesis. No data protection or confidentiality issues arose, as all source material consisted of publicly accessible political speeches.	I asked the tool to translate the quotes from the presidential speeches by maintaining their authentic rhetorical arc.	Because these speeches are analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it was essential to preserve their rhetorical structure, tone, and stylistic features. Standard machine-translation tools were unable to capture this rhetorical arc with sufficient accuracy. GPT-5.1 was therefore used only as a translation aid, not for generating ideas, arguments, interpretation, or analysis. All analytical work, coding, interpretation, and argumentation remain entirely my own.
Google Gemini, 2.0 Flash used between August 2025-November 2025	Grammar corrections, minor language refinements, and suggestions for clearer phrasing in sentence, and occasionally paragraph levels. The tool did *not* generate academic content, arguments, or interpretations.	I used the tool selectively, asking it to check individual sentences or occasionally short paragraphs for grammar, clarity, or readability. Prompts were limited to requests such as "check grammar," "improve clarity without changing meaning," or "correct syntax."	My use of Google Gemini 2.0 Flash was occasional and limited to proofreading during the editing phase of the thesis. The tool served only to correct grammar or refine wording; it did not contribute to the development of ideas, analysis, or arguments. All substantive intellectual work remained my own.

To mum and dad,
who gave me the privileges
they themselves were never given…

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List of Abbreviations

GDR	German Democratic Republic
EU	European Union
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
AKP	Justice and Development Party
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
CHP	Republican People's Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
FETÖ	Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation
DHKP-C	Revolutionary People's Liberation Party–Front
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
PDY	Parallel State Structure
YPG	People's Protection Units
CİMER	Presidency Communication Centre
BİMER	Prime Ministry Communication Centre
SABİM	Ministry of Health Communication Centre
VİMER	Tax Communication Centre
UYAP	National Judiciary Informatics System
HSYK (CJP)	Council of Judges and Prosecutors
SYOK	Decision of Non-Prosecution
HAGB	Suspension of the Pronouncement of the Verdict
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DHA	Discourse-Historical Approach
PCEI	Problem Centred Expert Interview
İHOP	Human Rights Joint Platform
ICJ	The International Commission of Jurists
FIDU	Italian Federation for Human Rights
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe
YÖK	The Council of Higher Education

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Abstract

Emine Ay, Democracy's Tools, Authoritarian Ends: Participatory Repression and the Politics of Denunciations in Hybrid Regimes- The case of Turkey

This thesis investigates mass denunciations in authoritarian hybrid regimes, using Turkey as an in-depth case to theorize their emergence and operation in contemporary autocratization. It argues that in political systems where formal democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian practices, denunciations can be mobilized through politically engineered reporting systems embedded within a nominally democratic order and enabled by its norms, procedures, and rhetoric. The Turkish case shows how mass denunciations, often associated with totalitarian rule, can re-emerge as strategically reconfigured instruments of hybrid autocratization. This reconfiguration unfolded through Turkey's crisis-driven authoritarian trajectory. Across successive crises, the regime constructed internal enemies and framed hidden affiliations, dissent, and disloyalty as threats to national survival, thereby intensifying political demand for denunciatory information. This demand was channelled and institutionalized through reporting mechanisms that enabled citizens to supply accusations, grievances, and intelligence via formally legal and participatory channels.

To theorize this process, the thesis conceptualizes denunciations through a demand–supply dynamic (Kalyvas, 2006): political actors demand information, and citizens supply it. To capture the top-down and bottom-up forces underpinning the creation and endurance of mass denunciations, it adopts a multi-level research design. At the macro level, it analyses the political ideology and discourse that justify, promote, and normalize denunciation, using the Discourse-Historical Approach. At the meso level, it investigates the institutional arrangements that facilitate reporting, drawing on expert interviews with legal, bureaucratic, and trade-union actors, as well as analysis of laws, policy documents, and administrative procedures. At the micro level, it explores the lived experiences of individuals who use or are victimized by the system through semi-structured interviews. Across these levels, the thesis examines how repression, co-optation, and legitimation operate in practice, structuring discourse, shaping institutions, and guiding citizen engagement.

The thesis argues that reporting mechanisms in authoritarian hybrid regimes function as instruments of governance by integrating the authoritarian pillars of repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013) into a unified system of control that turns democratic-looking tools toward authoritarian ends. At the discursive level, denunciations are cultivated through enemy-making, collaboration narratives, and appeals to civic duty. At the institutional level, they are embedded in legal, judicial, bureaucratic, and administrative processes that produce repressive outcomes for dissenters while delivering responsiveness and problem-solving benefits to regime-aligned citizens. At the individual level, denunciations generate incentives for participation, turning accusation into a practice justified through responsibility, loyalty, grievance, or self-interest. In this way, denunciations consolidate when political demand meets societal supply, embedding participatory repression in everyday social relations. Citizens become not only subjects of surveillance but also active participants in its enforcement, reinforcing the regime's reach and resilience from below.

Chapter I. Introduction

On the night of the 2016 coup attempt, Y. K. (46) joined the thousands who took to the streets upon President Erdoğan's call to resist the putschists. The following day, he phoned his son, who was living in one of Gülen's houses. Alarmed by his son's support for the Gülen movement, which the government accused of orchestrating the coup attempt, he reported him to the police, offering to share further information through his son's network. His son, S.K., was soon arrested. Y.K. recounted: "By reporting him, I was not trying to harm my son, but to save him. This is the time to protect the state, not the child. I couldn't stop him from serving the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization, so the state should stop him" (Doğan, 2016).

This is only one of the many denunciation stories that appeared in the media recently in Turkey, echoing a practice that is not very different from those of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. While reflecting the parallelism with those earlier dictatorships, the case raises intriguing questions: How can denunciations thrive in a context that outwardly upholds democratic norms and institutions, without relying on secret police, paid informers, or official denunciation campaigns? More provocatively, how do denunciations become so embedded in the social fabric that they shape daily life without the coercive machinery of totalitarianism in the 21st century? Even in the absence of answers, the questions themselves indicate two things. First, in public and scholarly imagination, denunciations are still largely framed and explained through terms of the past. Second, their persistence today suggests that mechanisms sustaining such practices have adapted in ways that allow them to flourish at scale. Why this matters is the central concern of this thesis.

What may appear as isolated acts of betrayal, as illustrated above, in fact reveal deeply structured mechanisms embedded in the political and social order from which they emerge. With surveillance and policing outsourced to ordinary citizens, denunciations sit at the intersection of state repression and societal participation, becoming a convenient tool through which autocratic regimes identify enemies and consolidate control. The phenomenon has been extensively examined in studies of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, which demonstrate how denunciations stood at the core of state terror, sustained by vast bureaucratic apparatuses, intelligence networks, and ideological mobilization designed to elicit reports from citizens.

Yet in the current global political arena, where the normative power of democracy holds over across autocracies and non-democracies alike, with an increasingly prevalent pattern of nominally democratic institutional configurations involving elections, parliaments, etc., it is a

puzzle how mass denunciations can persist. Particularly, in the "gray zone" (Schedler, 2009) of hybrid contexts (Levitsky & Way, 2010, 2002), where democratic forms coexist with authoritarian control, it is striking that mass denunciations can be systematically institutionalized and weaponized against citizens. In such contexts, not only would the traditional totalitarian toolkit of secret police and informer networks be productive, but also an outright state terror would be politically costly for the aspiring autocrats. With an increasing need to preserve democratic credentials while retaining repressive capacities in the prevailing global conditions, this new breed of regimes has evolved within formal democratic frameworks, learning to manipulate and repurpose them to serve authoritarian ends (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014b). Aspiring autocrats and democratic backsliders have thus become increasingly adept at subverting the very institutions and norms of democracy from within (Bermeo, 2016), while keeping their authoritarian essence, deploying them to repress opponents, co-opt strategic actors, and maintain a façade of legitimacy. In doing so, they have rewritten the language and practice of autocracy, developing a subtler repertoire of control suited to an era of global democratic norms. Despite this evolution, little is known about how denunciations, an ostensibly archaic form of citizen surveillance, are adapted, sustained, and legitimized within such hybrid regimes.

Turkey offers an illustrative case for examining denunciations within an authoritarian hybrid regime. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country has undergone what Akkoyunlu and Öktem (2016) describe as "fast-paced authoritarianism." This trajectory, particularly from around 2010 onward, was marked by the increasing personalization of power, the blurring of boundaries between party, state, and leader, and the concentration of authority in Erdoğan's person. Existing scholarship has also analysed this transformation as the rise of competitive authoritarianism, in which formal democratic institutions persist while the conditions of political competition are increasingly distorted (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). The consolidation of executive power was subsequently institutionalized through constitutional amendments approved in the 2017 referendum and brought fully into effect following the June 2018 elections. These amendments replaced the parliamentary system with a presidential model widely criticized for producing hyper-presidentialism, weakening checks and balances, and concentrating authority in the presidency (Özsoy Boyunsuz, 2016; Venice Commission, 2017). The regime's efforts to consolidate power generated resistance from opposition forces and segments of society, producing successive crises that threatened its political survival. These pressures created a governing environment in which Erdoğan increasingly relied on domination, personalization, and the concentration of power to secure his rule (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016, p. 507).

The resulting authoritarian turn produced a tense and volatile socio-political environment marked by escalating polarization, social unrest, and state violence. This consolidation not only restructured the political architecture but also transformed Turkey's social fabric. Once classified by V-Dem as an electoral democracy in 2011, Turkey was classified as an electoral autocracy by 2016 and remained in that category through 2024 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Political polarization surged after 2013 and remained at historically high levels, while social polarization followed a similar upward trajectory, indicating that divisions in politics have penetrated everyday social relations. Together, these trends show that political and social polarization have become mutually reinforcing, producing the tense and volatile environment in which contemporary denunciations take shape (V-Dem Institute, 2022).

Within this increasingly polarized political landscape, denunciations began to surface in everyday life with striking frequency, appearing both in media and reflected in official statistics. Citizens started reporting colleagues, relatives, neighbours, and political opponents to the authorities for a wide range of reasons (Özer, 2025; Pamuk, 2016; Pitel, 2017). Examples abound: individuals accused others of terrorist affiliation; professors were reported for giving low grades; a muezzin for reciting the *azan* too fast; a doctor for not wearing a mask; and civil servants for "liking" social media posts. Many of those reported were subsequently detained, arrested, imprisoned, or subjected to administrative or criminal investigations; others simply lost their jobs (Pitel, 2017).

The numbers are equally revealing. Submissions to the Presidential Communication Centre (CİMER) have surged in recent years. Applications rose sharply from approximately 3 million in 2018 to almost 5.9 million in 2020, nearly doubling in two years. They reached a record 7.65 million in 2023, partly reflecting the exceptional volume of applications following the February earthquakes, before declining to 4.59 million in 2024. Despite this annual variation, the figures demonstrate the large-scale and continuing importance of CİMER as a channel for citizen–state communication[1]. This sharp rise underscores the platform's expanding role as the primary channel for citizen petitions, and, in practice, as a conduit for denunciations. However, reports was not limited to CİMER but streamed from multiple channels. Following the coup, between July and October 2016 alone, around 40 thousand terrorism related denunciations were made to the police headquarters in the capital Ankara (Çülük, 2016). In İzmir, an emergency commission received approximately 21,000 reports through police and gendarmerie lines, Alo 140, BİMER, prosecutors, and email; around 9,000 were selected for detailed examination, and some supplied initial information for operations (Yıldırım, 2016).

[1] Compiled from open-source institutional data released annually on the official website of Presidential Communication Directorate https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/

Official website statistics indicate that submissions made through the National Intelligence Organization's "I want to help" channel increased from approximately 41,000 in 2019 to 118,000 in 2023, before declining to around 111,000 in 2024[2].

1.1. Research Questions

Against this backdrop, this study examines how denunciations are institutionalized as a tool of governance within a nominally democratic landscape: how they are normalized, justified, and made compatible with the language and principles of citizen participation, and how they sustain legitimacy while simultaneously generating repression. The empirical focus is on Turkey, a paradigmatic case of democratic backsliding and hybridization (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Tansel, 2018), where citizen denunciations have proliferated on a massive scale through a comprehensive reporting system embedded in existing institutions. The central question guiding this research is: *How do state-orchestrated systems of citizen denunciation operate in hybrid regimes, and what do they reveal about the authoritarian dynamics of repression, co-optation, and legitimation?*

Building on existing literature (Kalyvas, 2006), the thesis conceptualizes denunciation as a phenomenon shaped by both political demand for information and control, and societal supply through citizen reporting and participation. To capture top-down dimensions underpinning the state's interest in mobilizing denunciations, bottom-up dynamics informing society's participation in them, and the intermediary aspect of how this interaction is facilitated, the study adopts a macro-meso-micro analytical framework. This framework structures three interconnected sub-questions:

1. **Maco level —Political demand:** How does the state ideologically and discursively construct demand for denunciations and justify their use?
2. **Meso level —Institutional mediation of demand and supply:** How do institutional arrangements structure, channel, and facilitate the translation of political demand into citizen reporting?
3. **Micro level —Societal supply:** How do citizens respond to and reproduce this demand through denunciation practices, both as participants and as targets?

1.2. Contributions

By addressing these questions, the thesis situates denunciations within broader debates on authoritarian resilience, societal participation, and social control. It contributes to this

[2] Compiled from open-source institutional data on the official website National Intelligence Organization on https://www.mit.gov.tr/

literature on theoretical, empirical, and methodological grounds, while highlighting its wider significance.

Theoretically, the study advances the field of comparative politics by theorizing how hybrid regimes instrumentalize democratic institutions and procedures to transform denunciations into tools of repressive governance. The analytical value of the hybrid regime category lies in this specific configuration: denunciations are neither openly imposed through the coercive infrastructures associated with consolidated authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, nor constrained by the legal safeguards that shape reporting practices in democratic contexts. Instead, they are routed through legal, bureaucratic, and participatory mechanisms that retain the appearance of democratic legitimacy while producing authoritarian effects. By conceptualizing denunciations as a contemporary addition to the autocratic toolkit, the thesis fills a significant gap in existing research, which has largely treated denunciations as relics of the past. It demonstrates how today's autocrats learn from historical practices, adapting and upgrading them to fit within formally democratic frameworks. Importantly, the thesis also shows that these dynamics are not solely driven from above, but are co-produced through citizen practices, whereby participation in denunciatory mechanisms contributes to the reproduction of authoritarian rule and the erosion of democratic norms.

Empirically, the thesis offers one of the first systematic examinations of mass denunciations in a contemporary hybrid regime. Through a multi-level analysis encompassing the macro level of political discourse, the meso level of institutional design, and the micro level of lived experience, it brings together diverse sources of data to capture how denunciations are constructed, organized, and experienced across the regime's political and social landscape. In this way, it demonstrates how citizen engagement with denunciatory practices not only reflects authoritarian governance but actively contributes to its normalization and everyday reproduction.

Methodologically, the study employs a multi-method and multi-level design that integrates state narratives, institutional structures, and citizen perspectives. This approach provides a replicable framework for examining everyday authoritarian practices beyond the Turkish case.

In a broader sense, the thesis demonstrates that authoritarian resilience can be maintained and legitimized through democratic means and principles, transforming citizens into agents of surveillance. By situating the role of citizen agency in these processes, it also highlights how de-democratisation unfolds not only through institutional manipulation but through the cumulative effects of everyday practices. In doing so, it connects the Turkish experience to global trends of democratic backsliding and the evolution of twenty-first-century authoritarianism.

1.3. Outline

The thesis is organized into nine chapters, each addressing a distinct dimension of the research question and collectively contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how citizen denunciations operate within authoritarian hybrid regimes.

Chapter 2, Literature Review, surveys scholarship on mass denunciations in twentieth-century authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, alongside more recent studies on hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding. It identifies the key features of denunciations, including their role in repression, social participation, and interpersonal weaponization. The chapter also highlights the contemporary blind spot in the literature: the need to understand how denunciations are reconfigured in hybrid regimes, where authoritarian control operates through nominally democratic institutions and participatory channels.

Chapter 3, Theoretical Framework and Research Design, introduces the analytical triad of repression, co-optation, and legitimation. It conceptualizes denunciations as a governance mechanism that disciplines, mobilizes, and normalizes citizen participation in authoritarian control. The chapter also extends the theoretical framework beyond strategic participation by incorporating the emotional, interpersonal, and everyday dimensions of denunciation, as well as the role of citizen agency and responsibility in processes of de-democratisation. It then presents the research design and explains the thesis's multi-level analytical strategy, moving from macro-level discourse, to meso-level institutions, and finally to micro-level lived experiences.

Chapter 4, The Making of the Enemies, constitutes the first empirical chapter within the macro-level analysis. Following a detailed description of the selected methodology, Discourse Historical Approach, the chapter critically analyses political discourse. Through an examination of presidential speeches, it traces how ideological boundaries of belonging are drawn, in-group and out-group hierarchies are established, and how certain groups are catalogued as targets. The chapter maps the discursive formation of "the enemy" and how denunciations are framed as patriotic and moral acts that defend the nation against them in the Turkish context.

Chapter 5, Establishing the Social Contract: The Discursive Co-optation of Society, extends the macro-level analysis by examining how political discourse constructs a form of state–society collaboration grounded in a social-contract logic. The chapter shows how the regime mobilizes citizens in alignment with its political agenda by elevating "the nation" as a strategic ally and framing participation as a civic obligation. It demonstrates how material and symbolic rewards, alongside moralized and patriotic narratives, are used to encourage and

legitimize societal collaboration in the state's witch-hunt, ultimately drawing citizens and strategic actors into denunciation practices. Together, Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how denunciations are discursively justified before being institutionally operationalized.

Chapter 6, Reporting Mechanism as the Machinery of Repression, initiates the meso-level analysis. As the first empirical chapter at this level, drawing on expert interviews and documentary analysis, the chapter examines how denunciations are institutionalized through the legal framework, the judiciary, and bureaucracy. It shows how authoritarian discourse becomes materially enacted through legal categories, administrative procedures, and bureaucratic routines, transforming citizen reporting into an infrastructure of repression.

Chapter 7, Implementing the Social Contract: Co-optation through the Reporting Mechanism, continues the meso-level analysis by investigating how participation in the reporting system is incentivized, normalized, and legitimized. It examines how law and bureaucracy encourage reporting through legal protection, responsiveness, moral framing, and forms of proxy accountability. The chapter also analyses procedural legitimation, showing how legality and the illusion of justice help sustain engagement with the mechanism even when its outcomes are politically shaped.

Chapter 8, Repression, Participation, and the Ordinary: A Micro-level Analysis of Denunciations, turns to the lived experiences of individuals who have been reported and those who use the complaint mechanism. Based on semi-structured interviews, the chapter examines how denunciations are experienced as repression, civic death, and everyday authoritarianism, while also showing how the reporting system is normalized through perceived efficiency, procedural trust, and ordinary use. This chapter demonstrates how authoritarian control is reproduced not only through institutions, but also through everyday practices, emotions, and interpersonal relations.

Chapter 9, Conclusion, synthesizes the findings across the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. It outlines the thesis's theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, situates the Turkish case within broader debates on authoritarian hybrid regimes, and reflects on the comparative implications of studying denunciations as a contemporary tool of authoritarian governance.

Denunciations provide an insightful window into the everyday workings of hybrid regimes, where authoritarian practices operate through the institutional and discursive forms of democracy. They reveal how state power is exercised not only through top-down coercion but also through democratic procedures such as petitioning, accountability mechanisms, and

participatory channels, which enable citizens to assume roles in surveillance and monitoring. By outsourcing surveillance to ordinary citizens via these ostensibly democratic tools, the regime mobilizes individuals to report one another, transforming repression into a participatory practice framed as civic responsibility. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining how contemporary hybrid regimes sustain control and legitimacy: not primarily through overt coercion, but through appeals to security, morality, and patriotism that align authoritarian objectives with democratic language and practices.

This thesis contributes to advancing the conceptualization of denunciations not as a relic of the past but as a modern incarnation of an outdated convention that is upgraded in the aspiring autocrat's toolkit. It presents denunciations as an autocratic tool that checks all boxes of a classic authoritarian system, merging repression, co-optation, and legitimation. It bridges literatures that have traditionally treated state control and citizen participation as opposing logics, showing instead how they can be intertwined within the same political practice. Empirically, it provides one of the first systematic analyses of citizen denunciations in contemporary Turkey, combining discourse analysis, institutional study, and semi-structured interviews to trace how these practices are constructed, organized, and experienced across different levels of the regime.

The analysis unfolds across macro, meso, and micro levels, moving from ideological and discursive justifications of denunciation to the bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms that sustain it, and finally to the lived experiences of those who participate in or are subjected to it. Together, these levels reveal how denunciation systems consolidate authoritarian control while simultaneously enlisting citizens in their legitimation.

Chapter II: Literature Review

1. Introduction

Denunciations as accusatory practices are neither new nor confined to the past. They can occur across different political systems and legal frameworks. What makes denunciations a sustained subject of academic inquiry is their emergence on a mass scale. When denunciations emerge on such a scale, they have profound political implications, reflecting forms of mass mobilization through which regimes enforce control and cultivate loyalty. They also carry significant societal implications, becoming embedded in the social fabric of the contexts in which they occur.

Accordingly, denunciations have been most systematically examined in settings where they unfolded on a mass scale, particularly in historical totalitarian and authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and the GDR, as well as in contemporary authoritarian contexts such as China. While these bodies of work offer important insights into the dynamics of large-scale denunciation in overtly repressive settings, they provide only a partial basis for understanding how mass denunciatory systems that are characterized by scale, routinization, and social embeddedness are reconfigured and normalized within hybrid regimes that blend democratic and authoritarian features, such as Turkey.

What is analytically significant in this context is not merely the regime type itself, but the transformation of how denunciatory practices are organized, legitimized, and experienced. In hybrid regimes, denunciation operates through institutionalized and socially legitimized forms of participation, as legal, bureaucratic, and participatory frameworks that are supposed to align with democratic norms are repurposed with an authoritarian logic. This reflects a distinct mode of organization that produces a deeper and more normalized embedding of denunciatory practices in everyday social life.

This review contends that political science still lacks a framework for understanding how mass denunciations are transformed under contemporary hybrid conditions, where they are facilitated and framed through the tools and language of nominally democratic institutions and discourse, and become widespread and socially normalized practices. Addressing this gap not only advances the literature but also illuminates the political and institutional dynamics through which nominally democratic mechanisms are reoriented toward authoritarian ends, sustaining systems of denunciation.

2. What We Know: Lessons from Historical Mass Denunciations

Section 2 examines what the existing scholarship reveals about historical cases of mass denunciation. It begins by addressing the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the definition of denunciations, before turning to their institutional and legal foundations within repressive regimes. The following subsection explores the role of ordinary citizens and grassroots participation in sustaining systems of terror. The section concludes by identifying the enduring patterns that emerge across historical contexts, providing a framework for understanding how similar dynamics may reappear in contemporary hybrid regimes.

2.1. A fuzzy concept: The challenge of defining denunciations

Defining denunciations is inherently challenging. Across the literature, a wide range of accusatory practices, such as denouncing, informing, reporting, and whistleblowing, are often used interchangeably, despite carrying distinct meanings and implications. While these practices all involve communicating accusations to authorities, their political significance varies considerably depending on the context in which they occur.

This ambiguity is particularly pronounced in repressive regimes, where the boundary between legal violations and political crimes is frequently blurred (Gellately, 1996 p.932). In such contexts, laws are often politicized, selectively enforced, or vaguely defined, making it difficult to distinguish between ordinary crime reporting and politically motivated accusations. Acts that target individuals for ideological or moral reasons may nonetheless appear as routine reporting and be framed as a civic duty insofar as they refer to codified offenses. Prohibitions such as contact with Poles, interaction with Jews, or even listening to foreign radio in Nazi Germany illustrate this dynamic (Gellately, 1996, p.942). Under such legal arrangements, the distinction between legal compliance and political participation collapses, obscuring the role of citizens in sustaining systems of control.

Despite this conceptual ambiguity, the literature identifies a recurring underlying logic: denunciation is rarely a neutral or disinterested act. Rather, it involves exposing and implicating others by calling for their punishment, often with harmful consequences (Arcimowicz et al., 2022; Bergemann, 2017; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Kalyvas, 2006). Unlike routine information-sharing with authorities, informing, denouncers typically select their own targets (Bergemann, 2019, p. 9), and the alleged wrongdoing does not necessarily produce direct material harm to the accuser. Such acts are sometimes described as "victimless"(Bergemann, 2017, p. 386), yet they are frequently grounded in perceived moral, political, or ideological violations. As Mireanu (2021, p. 811) notes, the denouncer is rarely without an agenda, even when claims are framed in civic terms.

Building on these insights, this study argues that the key distinction between denunciation and other forms of accusatory practice does not lie primarily in individual motivations, but in the broader systems within which these acts are embedded, which shape the conditions under which they become widespread and politically consequential. Accusatory acts aimed at harming others may occur across different political contexts and can resemble denunciation in their intent and effects. However, their analytical significance shifts when they move beyond isolated incidents and become widespread, routinized, and institutionally embedded. It is under these conditions that denunciation transforms from individual acts of accusation into a systematic mechanism of governance with far-reaching political and societal implications.

On this basis, the study distinguishes between related but analytically distinct categories. *Denunciations* are defined here as accusatory acts communicated to authorities that are mobilized within political contexts to expose and target individuals, often with the intention or effect of causing harm. Unlike reporting, which is typically framed as a neutral civic practice aimed at addressing wrongdoing within the constraints of law and accountability, denunciations operate within asymmetrical power relations and can be instrumentalized to discipline, punish, or eliminate perceived opponents. *Informing*, by contrast, refers to more systematic forms of collaboration with authorities, often institutionalized through formal arrangements, coercion, or incentives. *Reporting* is used as a broader term for notifying authorities of legal breaches, bureaucratic misconduct, suspicious activity, or grievances as part of civic citizenship.

The distinction between reporting and denunciation is therefore not determined by the accusatory form of the act alone, but by the political conditions under which it is mobilized. In democratic settings, practices such as whistleblowing, crime reporting, and petitioning are typically understood as mechanisms of accountability, embedded within legal safeguards and normative commitments to rights protection. Although they involve accusations directed at others, they are not inherently denunciatory in the sense used in this study, because they are normatively oriented toward exposing wrongdoing rather than targeting individuals as political subjects. However, such practices may take on denunciatory characteristics when they are systematically encouraged or instrumentalized in ways that enable the targeting of individuals beyond the limits of accountability.

This conditional boundary has become increasingly important in critical security studies, where denunciation has re-emerged as a concept for analysing security-oriented forms of civic participation in liberal democratic contexts, particularly in relation to post-9/11 counterterrorism, community policing, crime control, and public order. Recent scholarship points to the rise of "participatory surveillance"(S. P. Hier & Greenberg, 2009) and what

Vaughan-Williams (2008) terms "detective citizenship," whereby citizens are encouraged to monitor and report suspicious behavior. Within this framework, reporting is framed as a civic duty and legitimized through security discourse, legal frameworks, and digital technologies (Reeves, 2017). Mireanu's (2021) study further extends this discussion by showing how reports may also emerge through grassroots demands for security, moral panic, and middle-class claims to public order. In this case, reporting is not simply imposed from above, but becomes a civic practice through which citizens participate in the surveillance and repression of marginalized groups. As a result, some forms of state-encouraged or socially mobilized reporting have been reinterpreted as denunciatory practices (Akarsu, 2020; Mireanu, 2021; Purenne & Palierse, 2016).

Yet, important differences remain. In consolidated authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, denunciations are systematically weaponized through formal and informal structures of control, often institutionalized and deeply embedded in everyday governance. By contrast, in liberal democratic contexts, such practices tend to be more diffuse, selectively mobilized, and less socially entrenched. They operate through fragmented mechanisms rather than forming a core pillar of political control. As such, this strand of literature does not fully account for how denunciations function as a systematic instrument of authoritarian governance.

Hybrid regimes present a particularly revealing configuration for understanding why denunciation is difficult to define. Here, accusatory practices are neither fully constrained by democratic norms nor overtly imposed through coercion. Instead, they operate through institutionalized and socially legitimized forms of participation that are nominally aligned with democratic procedures. Reporting systems, complaint mechanisms, and digital platforms are framed as tools of civic engagement, yet they can be repurposed to facilitate the identification and targeting of perceived opponents. This configuration blurs not only the boundary between reporting and denunciation, but also the motives that underpin such acts, since accusations driven by civic concern, ideological loyalty, personal grievance, fear, or opportunism may all be processed and legitimized as democratic participation. Under these conditions, even formally neutral practices such as petitioning or complaint-making may acquire denunciatory effects in practice, as their institutional processing can produce arbitrary, unpredictable, or punitive consequences for those accused. In such contexts, denunciations are not only reproduced but transformed: repression is enacted through participation, and coercive functions are embedded within practices that appear democratic.

This section demonstrated that denunciation is difficult to define because its meaning does not lie solely in the accusatory act itself, but in the wider political and institutional system that mobilizes, processes, and legitimizes it. This explains why the literature has most often located

denunciations in repressive regimes, where accusatory practices become embedded in systems of surveillance, coercion, and social control. Building on this conceptual clarification, the next section examines how denunciations have been understood as an apparatus of repressive regimes.

2.2. Denunciations as an apparatus of repressive regimes

Denunciations are not confined to any single regime type; however, the literature has most consistently conceptualized them as a defining feature of repressive political systems. Their prevalence and intensity vary depending on political culture, institutional arrangements, and, crucially, the extent of state interest in monitoring and controlling society(Bergemann, 2017, 2019; Dimitrov, 2023; Dimitrov & Sassoon, 2014; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Kalyvas, 2006). Even though similar denunciatory practices may emerge episodically in other contexts, such as during moments of moral panic as seen in the Salem Witch Trials or the McCarthy period in 1950s USA (Bergemann, 2017), their systematic deployment has been most closely associated with regimes seeking to extend control beyond the limits of formal institutions.

Historical accounts of totalitarian regimes provide the clearest illustration of this dynamic. In Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, denunciations were deeply embedded in systems of surveillance and coercion, forming what has been described as a "totalitarian kind of intimidating surveillance" apparatus (Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996, p. 755). These regimes cultivated denunciatory practices not only through coercion but also by fostering norms that encouraged citizens to report on one another. Similar patterns can be observed in the German Democratic Republic, where denunciations operated through formalized networks of informants (Bruce, 2003; Dennis, 2014; Fulbrook, 2005), in communist Bulgaria through institutionalized complaint systems (Dimitrov, 2014) and in China, where petitioning and reporting have long functioned as integral components of governance (Dimitrov, 2023; Jiang, 2021).

Across these cases, denunciation emerges not as an incidental practice but as a systematically embedded instrument of rule. It operates primarily through formal mechanisms such as reporting systems, informant networks, and bureaucratic procedures and also informal social dynamics that normalize suspicion and encourage participation. Importantly, denunciation is not solely imposed from above. While regimes may incentivize, encourage, or coerce participation, they rely fundamentally on citizens to supply information that cannot be accessed through institutional means alone (Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Fulbrook, 2005; Gellately, 1996, 2001).

This dynamic reflects a structural condition common to repressive regimes: the demand for control exceeds the capacity of formal surveillance apparatuses. Even extensive bureaucratic and security infrastructures cannot fully penetrate private and social life without citizen involvement. As a result, authorities depend on individuals who possess localized knowledge and are willing or compelled to share it (Bergemann, 2017, 2019; Kalyvas, 2006; Dimitrov, 2014, 2023). This reflects what authoritarian scholarship conceptualized as the autocrat's information problem: inherently uninformed, these regimes seek to identify threats, discontent, and deviance, yet much of this knowledge is dispersed across society and asymmetrically held by ordinary citizens. Denunciations thus emerge at the intersection of state demand and citizen supply, becoming central to authoritarian governance when information needs are high (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 12–173).

The literature thus converges on an understanding that problematizes denunciation as a practice that becomes central to governance when it is systematically mobilized to bridge this gap between state capacity and societal knowledge. It is under such conditions that denunciations function as a key mechanism through which repressive regimes sustain surveillance, enforce conformity, and manage perceived threats.

2.2.1. Institutionalization of denunciations

Historical cases show that mass denunciations flourish when citizen reporting is institutionalized, that is, when authorities establish formal structures to systematically gather and act on public information (Bergemann, 2019). Even in pre-modern states, such as during the Spanish Inquisition or under the Romanovs, denunciation was codified into legal and bureaucratic frameworks, illustrating its early integration into governance (Bergemann, 2017, 2019). In the 20th century, totalitarian regimes advanced these systems through organized state surveillance. Agencies such as the Gestapo, the Stasi, and the NKVD became central organs of surveillance and repression, although their relationships with citizen informants differed considerably. The Stasi developed an extensive formal network of unofficial collaborators, whereas the Gestapo relied heavily on unsolicited denunciations supplied by ordinary citizens (Bergemann, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Gellately, 1996; Goldman, 2011; Kozlov, 1996). While these institutions coordinated surveillance, much of it was socially embedded, driven by voluntary or recruited citizen participation (Bergemann, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Gellately, 1996; Goldman, 2011; Kozlov, 1996). These agencies operated with broad mandates and minimal oversight. The Gestapo operated with extraordinary discretionary and extrajudicial powers, leading Gellately to characterize it as functioning as "lawgiver, judge, jury and executioner" (1991, p. 39-62). The Stasi, which was described characterized as acquiring features of "state within a state," exercised extensive surveillance

and coercive power in the German Democratic Republic (Miller, 1997, p.17), while the NKVD oversaw mass repression during the Great Terror during the Stalinist USSR (Shearer, 2001, p.532).

2.2.2. Weaponizing the law

In the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the law served as a central instrument of repression. It was weaponized to empower state security agencies and expand surveillance, to target political opponents, and to facilitate mass denunciations. This involves deliberately creating legal ambiguities to protect denouncers and enable arbitrary enforcement.

The role of the state security agencies must therefore be understood within this legal architecture of repression. These agencies were not created in a vacuum; they were products of the political and legal systems within which they operated. Legal frameworks defined the mandate of security agencies, enabling them to conduct surveillance, manage denunciations, and carry out mass repression. The Gestapo was established in Prussia in April 1933 within the repressive legal order that followed the Reichstag Fire. The Reichstag Fire Decree of 28 February 1933 suspended fundamental civil liberties and due-process protections, enabling the regime to arrest political opponents and expand police power (Gellately, 1988, 1991, 1996). Codified laws were used to define deviance, identify political opponents, and justify their punishment under the guise of legality (Gellately, 1996, p. 933).

Closely tied to this expansion of security powers was the politicization of law itself. Legal categories were stretched so broadly that the line between criminal activity and political deviance became indistinguishable (Gellately, 1996, p.942). This led to what scholars have called an inflation of crimes, where even minor acts, such as criticizing the regime, expressing dissatisfaction with living standards, or defending free speech, could be criminalized and denounced (Bergemann, 2019, p.145). In Stalinist Russia, anti-terrorist legislation was so vaguely defined that it could be applied to virtually anyone. The concept of the "enemy" was, as Goldman (2011) notes, "sufficiently elastic to accommodate almost everyone and anyone," including friends, relatives, and co-workers, under the logic of guilt by association (p. 30–61).

This legal elasticity not only enabled repression from above but also opened the floodgates for denunciation from below. Laws were stretched to broaden definitions of crime, and they were also applied elastically to facilitate mass denunciations. A key pattern across totalitarian regimes was the authorities' receptiveness to all kinds of denunciations, including those that were baseless or false. Goldman's study of the Great Terror in the USSR shows that denunciatory allegations could be forwarded to the NKVD without prior substantiation and that officials often treated referral as the safer course of action (2011). In Nazi Germany,

denunciations could be treated as sufficient grounds for Gestapo scrutiny even when they were uncorroborated at the point of submission. Reports did not invariably produce punishment, but they could initiate investigation without the evidentiary safeguards associated with ordinary criminal procedure (Bergemann, 2019). In both cases, the law functioned not as a check on arbitrary power, but as its facilitator, one that encouraged citizen participation in state repression.

The weaponization of law was not limited to explicit regulations; it also operated through purposeful ambiguity. Authoritarian regimes strategically exploited legal grey zones to encourage denunciations while shielding denouncers from accountability. In Nazi Germany, this was particularly evident in the deliberate decision not to codify denunciation as a legal obligation. By avoiding formal regulation, the regime allowed denunciations to arise voluntarily, unburdened by legal duty or risk (Bergemann, 2019, p. 134). False accusers were rarely prosecuted, and the decision to pursue them was left to individual victims, not the state, creating a zone of impunity (p.155-158). Also, the regime blurred the boundaries between legal and illegal behavior through vaguely defined criminal categories, which were often extended to stigmatize and eliminate targeted social groups (Bergemann, 2019, p.139; Gellately, 1996, p. 932). In doing so, legal ambiguity became a tool not just for repression, but for broadening the scope of citizen complicity under the guise of legality, as I discuss in the next section.

2.2.3. Grassroots involvement in the terror system

A central theme in denunciation studies is the widespread popular participation in authoritarian terror systems. Paradigmatic cases show that mass denunciations depend not only on top-down mechanisms but also on widespread grassroots participation through the active involvement of ordinary citizens who voluntarily supply it. Scholars widely agree that voluntary participation was a crucial counterpart to institutional structures, and that both elements were necessary for mass denunciation systems to function at scale (Bergemann, 2017, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Gellately, 1988, 1996, 2001; Goldman, 2011, 2007; Kalyvas, 2006).

However, not all systems of mass denunciation rely on consent. Bergemann (2017) identifies two main models: a coercion model, where an active police force enforces participation through pressure and incentives, and a volunteer model, where a weaker state apparatus depends on citizens to provide information freely. Despite their differences, both can generate widespread denunciations. In highly receptive systems, whether driven by coercion or consent, the steady supply of citizen reports meets official demand, forming a self-reinforcing mechanism (Bergemann, 2014; Kalyvas, 2006).

This recognition of citizens' active participation has prompted scholars to revisit the long-dominant "police state" paradigm in studies of totalitarian regimes. This shift, pioneered by Robert Gellately, questioned the dominant portrayal of the Third Reich as a regime maintained primarily by an omnipresent and omnipotent Gestapo (Arendt, 1962; Friederich & Brzezinski, 1965). Gellately and others argue that this image is misleading because the Gestapo was relatively small in size, and also because it depended heavily on the voluntary cooperation of ordinary citizens. Through denunciations, citizens became active participants in sustaining the system of terror, serving as central agents rather than passive subjects (Bergemann, 2017, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Gellately, 1988, 1991, 1996, 1997; Mallmann & Paul, 1995). Gellately argues, "self-policing society" better captures this dynamic, where repression is co-produced by state and society (p. 966–967).

Building on this perspective, recent scholarship views denunciations not merely as acts of betrayal or coercion, but as mechanisms of collaboration between state and society. At the heart of the discussion, there is the argument that citizens' alliance with the state produces repression, which has proven essential to sustaining authoritarian control. Bergemann (2017) describes this as "participatory repression," where ordinary individuals' collaboration enhances state capacity by reporting deviant behavior (p. 386). Similarly, Kalyvas (2006) identifies denunciations as the "micro-foundations of violence" in civil wars, enabling alliances between citizens and political actors that drive targeted repression (p. 14). In a comparable vein, Dimitrov (2014) conceptualizes a transactional "social contract" in which citizens provide information and support, often through expansive complaint systems in exchange for goods, services, or protection. Even in the German Democratic Republic, where informing, systematic collaboration with the police under (in)formal arrangements, rather than classical denunciation, was central, citizen collaboration was key. As Fulbrook (2005) observes, many East Germans participated in surveillance through formal and informal work for the Stasi, forming "micro-structures of power." This diffusion of authority created an "extended state" where repression and normalization intertwined, and informing helped legitimize the system itself (pp. 280–281). Though the structure and motivation of these alliances vary, they collectively point to the ways authoritarian regimes enlist societal participation to reinforce control from below.

The active role of citizens in sustaining repression raises longstanding questions about why individuals denounce neighbors, co-workers, or even family members. Yet identifying motives is methodologically challenging. They are often ambiguous, overlapping, and subject to retrospective justification. A single act of denunciation may reflect a mix of political, personal, and emotional drivers, blurring the line between affective and instrumental intent. Despite these challenges, scholars proposed useful typologies. Mann (1979, 1987) distinguishes *affective*

motives, such as patriotism, ideological commitment, or respect for law and order, from *instrumental* ones, like personal disputes. Fitzpatrick (1996) points to class resentment, family conflicts, moral judgment, and opportunism. Kozlov (1996) categorizes motives as *interested* (e.g., revenge, self-protection) versus *disinterested* (e.g., ideological loyalty or bureaucratic overreach). Bergemann (2017) identifies three recurrent patterns: inter-group conflict, ideological alignment, and self-interest. Kalyvas (2006) finds that denunciations may be politically motivated, malicious, or both. *Letting off steam* is also identified as a significant motive, particularly in the GDR, where it emerged as part of a broader *Meckerkultur*, a state-tolerated culture of complaint that encouraged citizens to express discontent (Staadt, 1996).

The empirical grounding of the diverse motives behind denunciations is a significant contribution of these studies. Crucially, they challenge the earlier assumption, advanced by totalitarianism scholars Arendt (1962) and Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), that ideology was the primary driver. Instead, empirical research consistently finds that self-interest is the prevailing motive in contexts where popular denunciations are widespread. (Bergemann, 2017, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Gellately, 1988, 1991, 1996, 1997; Gross, 2001, 2002; Kalyvas, 2006; Kozlov, 1996). This recognition has reshaped theories of denunciation. Across pre-modern monarchies, totalitarian regimes, and civil wars, denunciation systems often became arenas where political and private interests converged, allowing citizens to manipulate the state for personal gain. Fitzpatrick (1994) notes that even when designed as top-down tools of state surveillance, such systems also operated "from below," enabling individuals to pursue personal agendas through state channels (p. 255). Regimes actively encouraged this by fostering division and distrust: a *divide-and-rule* strategy that mobilized citizens around personal grievances. As Gross argues, they "institutionalized resentment" (p.4) while citizens "privatized the instruments of control" (p. 117), producing a system of mutual instrumentalization (2001, 2002).

2.2.4. Enduring patterns in mass denunciations

Historical cases of mass denunciation offer crucial insights into the persistence of this practice in contemporary contexts, albeit under different institutional configurations. At their core, mass denunciations are tools of repressive regimes, institutionalized as mechanisms of surveillance and control. The law plays a central role in enabling these systems, often being weaponized to legitimize and facilitate denunciatory practices. Yet, state repression alone does not fully account for their endurance. What these cases consistently reveal is that mass denunciations are not only state-led but also sustained from below through the active, and at times voluntary, participation of ordinary citizens. This dual dynamic of top-down

enforcement and bottom-up engagement remains one of the most significant continuities across time and regime type.

At the same time, these continuities should not obscure important differences in how denunciations are organized across political contexts. The mechanisms identified in historical cases do not travel unchanged across regime types. In consolidated authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, through mechanisms of law, institutionalization, and citizen participation, denunciations are embedded in overt systems of coercion, surveillance, and punishment. In hybrid regimes, by contrast, similar logics are reconfigured through nominally democratic institutions, legal-bureaucratic procedures, and participatory channels that make coercive functions appear as civic engagement. This distinction provides the bridge to the following section, which examines why hybrid regimes offer a distinct institutional and normative environment for the contemporary operation of denunciatory practices.

3. The Contemporary Blind Spot: The Hybrid Regime Context

How can denunciations emerge in regimes that outwardly uphold democratic norms in the absence of classical methods of secret police, paid informers, or official denunciation campaigns? More intriguingly, how does political reporting become so deeply embedded in everyday life that it transforms social relations in the absence of the coercive machinery of totalitarianism? To answer these questions, it is necessary to move beyond historical cases and examine the contemporary political environments that make such practices viable today. The existing literature has not yet situated denunciations within hybrid regimes, creating a gap in our understanding of their institutional and normative dynamics, where the boundaries between democracy and authoritarianism blur. The hybrid regime framework is useful because it captures a distinctive mode of authoritarian governance: one in which repression is not only imposed, but also procedurally mediated and socially enacted. In this context, denunciation operates through the very institutions that appear to organize citizen participation, legal accountability, and bureaucratic responsiveness. Its authoritarian function, therefore, lies not in the suspension of formal procedures but in their instrumentalization.

This section, therefore, shifts focus to the broader hybrid regime scholarship, which provides the conceptual grounding for understanding how citizen-led reporting can thrive in systems that maintain democratic façades while exercising authoritarian control. It first outlines how hybrid regimes are theorized, then examines the tensions and ambiguities that define their operation, explains their logic of manipulation and subversion, and finally introduces an analytical lens through repression, cooptation, and legitimation for interpreting these regimes.

3.1. The Hybrid Landscape: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism

As optimism over the third wave of democratization faded, scholars turned to regimes that resisted it and proved durable. Building on Barbara Geddes's (1999) early work, authoritarianism research began focusing on the institutional foundations of regime stability. This literature highlights how political actors strategically use institutions to maintain power, often framed through a game-theoretic lens (Boix & Svolik, 2007, 2013; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Magaloni, 2006; Svolik, 2012).

The neo-institutionalist turn in authoritarian research challenged earlier assumptions about the role of political institutions. Contrary to the view that institutions constrain elites, this literature argues that elites design institutions to consolidate power and foster durable authoritarian rule. Building on this premise, neo-institutionalist scholars focus primarily on regime survival as the key outcome of political institutions (Pepinsky, 2014, p.631-37). By the late 1990s, research on authoritarianism increasingly focused on formal political institutions: parties, legislatures, and elections. Scholars highlighted the authoritarian logic behind adopting these institutions, showing that they are used not to constrain power but to manage threats from elites, opposition, and the broader public. Rather than limiting incumbents, democratic institutions serve to maintain elite cohesion, secure policy concessions, dominate opposition forces, and gather information about regime supporters and opponents, thus aiding control and stability (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006, 2007; Magaloni, 2006; Svolik, 2012).

The cross-national research tradition pioneered by Barbara Geddes helped demonstrate how formal political institutions bolster authoritarian durability worldwide (Boix & Svolik, 2007, 2013; Brownlee, 2007, 2009; Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014a, 2014b; Svolik, 2012). In today's political landscape, elections, parties, and legislatures have become ordinary features of illiberal and hybrid regimes and appear throughout autocracies (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014b). By the 2000s, electoral autocracies, regimes that allow multi-party elections but subvert them to maintain control, had become the most common form of authoritarian rule (Schedler, 2002, p.47)

Conceptualizing autocracies alongside nominally democratic institutions has enabled the development of new theoretical frameworks, regime typologies, and historical explanations for the shifting dynamics of authoritarianism. Kendall-Taylor and Frantz (2014b) capture this trend of "mimicking democracy," arguing that contemporary autocracies have evolved by learning from their predecessors. By adopting formal democratic institutions, these regimes not only appease domestic and international audiences but also strengthen their rule by

harnessing the stabilizing effects of institutionalization. In today's political context, institutionalization is seen not as a constraint but as a tool of authoritarian consolidation (Cassani, 2014, p.544). Heydemann (2007) describes this adaptation to changing political, economic, and social pressures as "authoritarian upgrading," aimed at preserving authoritarian rule in an era of global democratization.

The shift in authoritarian rule is partly driven by the growing influence of international and domestic audiences. Scholars trace this transformation to the post–Cold War dominance of Western liberal democracy, which led many regimes to adopt formal democratic institutions to gain international legitimacy. As global norms shifted, the costs of overt repression increased, pushing authoritarian regimes to adopt more strategic methods of control, relying on co-optation and targeted repression instead of brute force (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014a; Levitsky & Way, 2002). The historical shift in global political norms resulted in adaptive strategies by authoritarian regimes. In response to these shifting constraints, autocratic rulers have developed more sophisticated and adaptive strategies for regime survival. In the wake of the Third Wave, research on authoritarianism has highlighted the centrality of co-optation and strategic repression, showing how regimes adapt to domestic and international pressures by channelling them through formal democratic institutions. Scholars have demonstrated how these authoritarian strategies are embedded within new institutional configurations and how they intersect to reinforce regime stability (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014; Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012).

While the literature on durable autocracies offers important insights into openly authoritarian regimes that make no claim to democracy, it falls short in accounting for regimes that actively present themselves as democratic by adopting the full institutional vocabulary of liberal democracy with elections, courts, and parliaments, while simultaneously deploying authoritarian strategies from within.

3.2. Trapped in conceptual discussions: hybrid cases

While one strand of post–Cold War research focused on durable autocracies that deflected the Third Wave through formal democratic institutions, another turned to hybrid regimes, systems blending democratic and authoritarian traits and occupying the "political grey zone" (Carothers, 2002, p. 9). Though not new (Diamond & Linz, 1988; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), the proliferation of such regimes in the late Third Wave marked them as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon (Diamond, 2002; Olcott & Ottoway, 1999). Early democratization studies, shaped by post–Cold War optimism, viewed these regimes as flawed democracies in transition toward full democratic consolidation (Carothers, 2002). This led to a

proliferation of terms, a trend Levitsky and Collier (1997) criticized what they termed "democracy with adjectives," referring to the labels that described hybrid regimes as "diminished subtypes of democracy" (p.431), systems lacking full democratic attributes but still grounded in the democratic model. Concepts such as "illiberal democracies" (Zakaria, 1997), "delegative democracies" (O'Donnell, 1994), "semi-democracies" (Diamond & Linz, 1988), and "defective democracies" (Merkel, 2004) exemplify this trend. However, by the 2000s, scholars began questioning the transition paradigm. Carothers (2002) argued that many regimes had settled into the grey zone, neither democratizing nor fully authoritarian. Following Linz's (2000) call to use autocracy as a root concept, others reversed course and began defining hybrid regimes as "diminished subtypes of authoritarianism." Olcott and Ottaway (1999) called them "semi-authoritarian," while Levitsky and Way (2010, 2020, 2002) introduced "competitive authoritarianism" to highlight limited but real electoral competition. Similarly, Schedler (2002) coined "electoral authoritarianism," and Diamond (2002) further distinguished between its "competitive" and "hegemonic" variants.

Despite the shift toward authoritarian-rooted frameworks, critics argue this approach also fragments the field (Bogaards, 2009; Cassani, 2014; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011), creating what Gilbert and Mohseni (2011) term "authoritarianism with adjectives." While this literature clarifies boundaries between democracy and non-democracy, it also risks obscuring core regime distinctions with inconsistent taxonomies (Armony & Schamis, 2005). Still, the authoritarian subtype approach has yielded key insights. Unlike earlier views focused on democratic deficits, it emphasizes the intentional authoritarian features of hybrid regimes (Cassani, 2014). It challenges the assumption that regime change necessarily signals democratic progress (Carothers, 2002) and highlights the strategic design and resilience of hybrid systems (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Olcott & Ottoway, 1999; Ottoway, 2003; Schedler, 2009). Yet the literature remains fragmented. Some see hybrid regimes as residual categories (Bogaards, 2009; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011), while others classify them as authoritarian regimes cloaked in democratic form (Cassani, 2014). Even critics of this conceptual overload often contribute to it, reinforcing what Armony and Schamis (2005) call the "terminological babel" of democratization studies (p.113). While these discussions are important for revealing the authoritarian tendencies that lie beneath democratic façades, they say little about how hybrid regimes play by the rules of the game. The next section turns to the institutional logic of these regimes, which is key to understanding how mass denunciations take root and operate within them.

3.3. Why hybrid regimes matter: from mimicry to manipulation

This new breed of authoritarian regime strategically uses democratic means to strengthen authoritarian control. What sustains authoritarian practices within a democratic architecture is the subversion and instrumentalization of nominally democratic institutions. By leveraging the credibility of elections, legislatures, courts, and legal systems while simultaneously undermining their substance, these regimes maintain a democratic façade that masks authoritarian practices. This pattern is a defining feature of hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions that exist more in form than in function become tools for undermining democracy itself. The literature on democratic backsliding foregrounds this subversion as a key feature of contemporary democratic erosion, showing how autocrats increasingly rely on legalistic and incremental means rather than outright democratic breakdown. Rather than dismantling democracy openly, they hollow it out from within, preserving its façade while undermining its core (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Building on this logic, law itself becomes a central instrument of authoritarian rule in hybrid regimes. Rather than circumventing legal frameworks, these regimes exploit them by instrumentalizing courts, constitutions, and bureaucratic procedures to legitimize coercion and entrench executive power. Legal institutions are not weakened outright but strategically leveraged to serve authoritarian goals. This creates a veneer of legality that conceals repression behind the language of constitutionalism, reform, and public order. Judicial review, legal reforms, and participatory mechanisms are thus not discarded but weaponized to neutralize opposition, weaken accountability, and consolidate control while maintaining a democratic façade (Moustafa & Ginsburg, 2008; Scheppele, 2018; Varol, 2015)

Given this logic of mimicry and manipulation, the subversion of democratic legality extends beyond conventional institutions such as elections, legislatures, and courts. Yet the literature rarely considers how mechanisms typically associated with citizen participation, such as complaint, reporting, or feedback systems, can also be repurposed as instruments of control. In democratic contexts, such mechanisms are normatively associated with accountability, responsiveness, and rights protection. In hybrid regimes, however, these safeguards are weakened, selectively applied, or subordinated to authoritarian objectives. Participatory frameworks that appear as innovations of democratic governance can therefore be reframed to legitimize surveillance, discipline dissent, and mobilize citizens in the service of authoritarian ends.

This is also where an important limitation in the existing literature becomes visible. While this body of scholarship offers important insights into the institutional and legal dimensions of democratic erosion, it remains predominantly state-centered in its analytical focus. Existing

accounts tend to emphasize how political actors manipulate democratic frameworks, often overlooking the role of citizen practices in sustaining these dynamics (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Although some studies highlight how citizen attitudes and preferences can enable or tolerate illiberal practices (Bermeo, 2003; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Svolik, 2019) and others point to the role of societal compliance and legitimation in sustaining authoritarian rule (Gerschewski, 2013), they tend to treat citizens primarily as passive enablers rather than as active participants in these processes. As a result, the micro-level mechanisms through which ordinary individuals engage with, enact, and reproduce authoritarian practices remain underexplored.

Denunciation offers a particularly revealing example of this hybrid logic and addresses this gap. In consolidated authoritarian regimes, denunciation is typically embedded in openly coercive infrastructures of surveillance and punishment. In hybrid regimes, by contrast, denunciation is routed through mechanisms that retain democratic legitimacy: legal complaint channels, digital platforms, administrative petitions, and participatory reporting systems. The coercive function is therefore less visible because it is embedded within procedures that appear lawful, voluntary, and civic. At the same time, denunciation foregrounds the active role of citizens, showing how they do not merely tolerate or enable authoritarian practices but participate in their everyday enactment. This is precisely where the analytical value of the hybrid category lies: it captures how authoritarian repression can be produced not outside democratic institutions, but through their participatory and legal-bureaucratic forms.

3.4. Reframing denunciations through authoritarian strategies in hybrid contexts

To theorize how mass denunciations are reconfigured in contemporary hybrid regimes, this study brings together scholarship on historical mass denunciations, durable autocracies, and hybrid regimes. Earlier studies of denunciation show how these practices become institutionalized through the weaponization of law, the expansion of bureaucratic mechanisms, and the incorporation of citizen participation, together rendering them a core apparatus of repressive regimes. Scholarship on durable autocracies and hybrid regimes, meanwhile, demonstrates how formally democratic institutions can be manipulated to sustain authoritarian rule. In such regimes, repression and co-optation are not external to democratic institutions but embedded within them, woven into elections, legislatures, courts, party systems, and legal-bureaucratic procedures (Gerschewski, 2013).

This thesis conceptualizes denunciations as products of this hybrid logic: instruments enabled by democratic norms, procedures, and institutions, yet fulfilling authoritarian functions by generating repression, co-opting citizen participation, and securing legitimation. In doing so, it

extends the analysis of hybrid regimes beyond typological debates and toward a closer examination of how the authoritarian pillars of repression, co-optation, and legitimation are enacted through ostensibly democratic frameworks. Building on the enduring patterns identified in historical cases, following Levitsky and Way (2010) and Schedler (2002, 2013), the study adopts an institutional and strategic lens to examine how autocrats adapt and repurpose democratic structures to govern through participation and control. Within this framework, denunciations are understood not as relics of totalitarian pasts but as contemporary instruments of authoritarian governance embedded in legal, bureaucratic, and participatory arrangements that simultaneously mobilize, discipline, and legitimize.

This framework clarifies the position of hybrid regimes in relation to both democratic and consolidated authoritarian contexts. In democratic regimes, reporting and petitioning are normatively tied to accountability, and they are grounded in rights-based frameworks. In consolidated authoritarian regimes, denunciation is more openly embedded in surveillance and punishment. Hybrid regimes occupy a distinct position: they preserve the language and procedures of democratic participation while weakening the safeguards that would prevent these practices from being weaponized. Denunciation in hybrid regimes is therefore not simply a diluted form of totalitarian denunciation or a distorted form of democratic reporting; it is a transformed practice produced by the coexistence of participatory form and authoritarian function.

Chapter III Theory and Research Design

This chapter presents the theoretical framework and research design of the thesis. It begins by situating denunciations within the three core dimensions of authoritarian governance: repression, co-optation, and legitimation. It theorizes how these strategies operate and interact to sustain authoritarian control, while also showing how denunciations emerge at the intersection of state demand and citizen participation. The chapter then moves beyond a strictly mechanism-based account by conceptually situating denunciations within emotional, interpersonal, and everyday dimensions. This additional layer highlights how denunciatory practices are shaped not only by strategic incentives and institutional design, but also by affective motivations, interpersonal conflicts, social norms, and everyday forms of discipline.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the chapter outlines the multi-level research design of the thesis. Spanning the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis, it grounds each level in the relevant literature and explains the methodological choices and analytical approaches adopted at each stage. In doing so, the chapter shows how these levels collectively contribute to understanding the dynamics of denunciations in hybrid regimes and their role in the broader reproduction of de-democratisation.

1. Repression

Repression is a defining feature and the "backbone" of autocracies (Gerschewski, 2013), serving crucial authoritarian interests, such as establishing and maintaining order, surviving in the office, and thwarting political opponents (Bove & Rivera, 2015; Escribà-Folch, 2013; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014; Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012).

Although authoritarian interests have remained consistent, methods of repression have evolved with regime transformations. The classic literature on totalitarianism describes repression as "terror" (Arendt, 1962), while a post-1990s wave of research emphasizes a more strategic and calibrated use of repression, often modeled through game theory (Gerschewski, 2023). Gerschewski (2023, p. 486) characterizes this broader shift as "post–Cold War pacification," referring to the decline in some forms of overt state repression and the growing use of more calibrated strategies. This development occurred alongside regime hybridization and the increased international salience of democratic and human-rights norms (Davenport, 2007a).

This strategic use of repression is guided by a cost–benefit logic: authorities repress when the expected benefits outweigh the costs (Bove & Rivera, 2015; Davenport, 1997, 2007b; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014). While repression can help establish or maintain political order, it

carries significant risks: loss of legitimacy, high costs of sustaining repressive apparatuses (Davenport, 2007b), inciting unrest (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014), provoking backlash or opposition mobilization (Francisco, 2004), or even triggering defection by coercive agents (Wintrobe, 1998).

Although the underlying logic of repression is similar across regimes, variations in cost and perceived threat shape how it is applied. To minimize costs and respond to challenges from the public, elites, or opposition, autocrats adopt tailored strategies: they may employ violent repression, such as killing, torture, or political imprisonment, or non-violent repression aimed at civil liberties through censorship, surveillance, arrests, or restrictions on association and expression (Bove & Rivera, 2015a; Davenport, 2007b; Escribà-Folch, 2013; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014). The form and scope of repression, whether targeted or indiscriminate, depend on the perceived source and intensity of the threat.

These variations demonstrate that repression rarely operates in isolation but rather functions alongside other pillars of authoritarian rule, co-optation and legitimation, to maintain regime stability. The recent literature highlights this interdependence, especially in the strategic use of democratic institutions by autocrats. For example, targeted repression depends on identifying opponents, a challenge addressed through co-optation (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014), including party-based co-optation of ideologically aligned individuals to suppress rivals (Svolik, 2012). In hybrid regimes, repression is shaped by legitimacy concerns; to avoid undermining credibility, they favor low-intensity, covert repression aimed at opposition actors (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Denunciations play a crucial role in enabling repression by supplying the state with information about deviations and wrongdoings, an essential input for targeting dissent. This information flow follows a horizontal-to-vertical trajectory: it begins horizontally, as one citizen reports to another, and then moves vertically to state authorities. Once received, the state processes this information and converts it into repression. In mass denunciation contexts, the state's solicitation of information from citizens is characterized by a demand–supply dynamic, where authorities "demand" information and citizens "supply" it (Kalyvas, 2006). However, denunciations are not merely responses to state demand; they also articulate citizens' demands for retribution. This introduces a dual dynamic in which "demand" operates in two distinct but interconnected senses: as the regime's demand for information and as citizens' demands directed at the state. To conceptualize this dual dynamic, I draw on Easton's systems theory (1965) as adapted by Gerschewski (2023), to show how denunciations function as communicative exchanges within the broader machinery of authoritarian control.

From this perspective, these interacting demands, channelled through denunciatory practices, generate repressive outcomes.

According to Easton's systems theory, citizens' motivations, opinions, and interests constitute "wants." Once articulated, these "wants" turn into "demands," entering the political system and becoming politicized (Easton, 1965, p.48). In this view, demands are a vital form of informational input; without them, the system would lack the raw material necessary for processing. Applying this lens, denunciations can be seen as a form of political demand: regardless of their underlying motivations, they call, implicitly or explicitly, for the punishment of certain individuals or groups (Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996). As such, denunciations operate as inputs that enhance the informational capacity of the authoritarian system by identifying alleged deviants. In doing so, denouncers act as the "micro-foundations"(p.14) of repression (Kalyvas, 2006), helping the state target opponents more effectively.

Following Gerschewski's reconceptualization of repression through systems theory (2023), this process illustrates how repression is both reactive and adaptive. The denunciation system enables some citizens to articulate their demands directed at the state, which then trigger repressive responses from the regime. But repression also has a preventive and communicative function: by punishing specific actions, it sends a signal to others about the consequences of similar behavior (Kalyvas, 2006). In this way, repression responds to articulated demands expressed through denunciation while simultaneously deterring others from converting private "wants" into public demands. Extending Gerschewski's discussion of repression's pre-political effects, denunciatory punishment can shape behaviour before dissatisfaction is converted into overt political expression (Gerschewski 2023, p. 88).

Thus, repression through denunciations is both selective and diffuse. While denunciations may target specific individuals, the punitive outcome is visible to the broader public, producing a generalized deterrent effect. The communicative function of repression, central to Gerschewski's system-theoretic view, ensures that even selective acts of repression serve systemic purposes, reinforcing regime stability by managing both present and potential dissent. Yet this communicative logic also breeds arbitrariness through malicious reporting, further reinforcing its diffuse effect: state responsiveness sustains the flow of information, and in contexts where denunciations elicit high state responsiveness, citizens learn which types of denunciations prompt a state response. They may exploit this knowledge to frame personal grievances through malicious denunciation in the language of official ideology. In doing so, denouncers "privatize politics" (Gross, 2002, p.118), mobilizing state power to pursue private vendettas and turning authorities into personal "contract killers" (Kalyvas, 2006, p.14). This instrumental use of denunciation dissolves the boundary between public and private spheres,

fostering an atmosphere in which anyone can become a potential target. The result is a pervasive sense of insecurity that normalizes and extends repression far beyond its initial targets, leaving everyone equally vulnerable to repression.

2. Co-optation

Repression and co-optation are complementary yet contrasting strategies of authoritarian control, often framed in binary terms. While repression is a hallmark of authoritarianism, it alone cannot secure loyalty and may provoke resistance. Co-optation, by contrast, involves compromise, that is, trading access and inclusion for support. It incorporates various sectors and institutions into the system to align their power with regime interests rather than opposition (Linz, 1964). Unlike repression's exclusivity, co-optation is strategically inclusive, aiming to pre-empt dissent through participation (Gerschewski, 2013).

While co-optation received little attention in earlier studies of totalitarianism and bureaucratic authoritarianism, it has become central in recent scholarship on formal institutions in authoritarian regimes (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999). The neo-institutionalist turn challenged the notion that institutionalization constrains elites, showing instead that elites themselves design institutions to consolidate power and "foster durable authoritarian rule" (Pepinsky, 2014, p.632). Within this framework, legislatures, parties, and elections serve as strategic tools of co-optation, offering controlled arenas for articulating demands and negotiating concessions. These mechanisms help mobilize support, pre-empt rebellion, and bolster regime survival, often while preserving a veneer of democratic legitimacy (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006).

The existing literature is often limited to the study of co-optation into formal institutions, such as parties, elections, and legislatures, overlooking alternative channels in quasi-democratic settings. However, if co-optation is strategically inclusive, autocrats can exploit participatory venues such as petition systems, complaint mechanisms, and digital platforms to manage dissent and reinforce control in exchange of some rewards. While these venues operate under the democratic principles of inclusion, participation, and accountability, their instrumental use to solicit citizen engagement for identifying dissenters through citizen input reconfigures them into tools of co-optation. Citizens are drawn into these mechanisms by the promise of responsiveness, justice, or moral participation in governance. However, their involvement, even if voluntary and legitimate, ultimately serves regime interests by absorbing discontent, extending surveillance, and reinforcing control. Broadening our analytical lens to include these mechanisms reveals how authoritarian regimes adapt to normative pressures and sustain rule by embedding coercive functions within institutions that appear democratic on the surface.

Moreover, research on co-optation is heavily skewed toward elites. Studies show that military elites are co-opted to prevent coups (Bove & Rivera, 2015), while opposition figures in parties and legislatures are incorporated to foster elite division (Arriola et al., 2021; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006). In contrast, mass co-optation is largely examined in the context of popular uprisings, with an emphasis on material incentives exchanged for loyalty. This includes policy concessions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006), access to state resources in return for voter support (Magaloni, 2006), and long-term career opportunities through party structures (Svolik, 2010). However, co-optation can also rely on symbolic or status-based inclusion rather than material rewards. Stacher (2012) warns against reducing co-opted individuals in authoritarian systems to mere "negative rent seekers" (p.42). While this may be partly true, individuals also pursue co-optation to gain social status, prestige, recognition, or a sense of worth, or to protect themselves in contexts marked by legal arbitrariness and uncertainty.

Bringing the concept of co-optation into the analysis of participatory venues such as complaint systems, petition mechanisms, and digital platforms invites us to reconsider how these spaces not only allow citizens to seek redress and pursue personal interests but also bind them to the state by incorporating their participation into governance. These venues often offer tangible benefits, such as resolving grievances or accessing services, while also providing symbolic rewards like feeling heard, valued, or included. As Dimitrov's research on communist Bulgaria and China shows, complaint mechanisms have historically functioned as instruments of co-optation, facilitating a social contract wherein citizens provided information and support in exchange for goods, services, or state responsiveness (2013, 2014, 2023). Participatory infrastructures are not merely symbolic; they can constitute the primary channel through which co-optation is operationalized. In this sense, citizens may be co-opted through their participation in institutions that promise responsiveness and inclusion, even as they serve authoritarian ends. This perspective expands our understanding of mass co-optation beyond material exchange, showing how it also operates through everyday interactions with the state's participatory infrastructure.

Even when not explicitly acknowledged, historical cases of mass denunciation reveal that ordinary citizens' participation in state surveillance systems reflects an underlying mechanism of co-optation. This form of co-optation involves inclusion in exchange for a payoff, but not necessarily a material one. One core benefit is the protection of citizens from the abuses of bureaucracy (Dimitrov, 2014, 2023; Kozlov, 1996). Moreover, even in cases where reporting mechanisms do not offer formal rewards, citizens may gain social, psychological, or political benefits by aligning themselves with the state. By encouraging citizens to monitor deviant

behavior and act on behalf of the state, regimes delegate power downward, allowing individuals to exert authority over their peers (Kozlov, 1996), often for personal gain. Because repression is enabled through this delegated participation, co-optation precedes and facilitates repression, underscoring its central role in the process.

Examining the mechanisms of co-optation reveals how citizen participation is enabled and channelled into repression, highlighting the interplay between state and society. Integrating citizens into surveillance systems requires institutional arrangements that provide channels for denunciation, such as bureaucratic tools like petition systems, hotlines, and reporting platforms. Additional regulations may encourage collaboration with law enforcement in exchange for payment. These structures collectively facilitate the flow of information from citizens, thereby increasing the state's surveillance capacity for identifying dissenters. As the new authoritarianism literature suggests, co-optation through formal institutions can actively produce repression in these contexts, marking the point where the two strategies intersect.

Yet these institutional arrangements alone cannot fully explain why citizens participate in denunciatory practices. Historical cases reveal that ideology plays a crucial legitimizing role, framing collaboration as a moral or civic duty and reinforcing alignment with the regime's goals. In this sense, co-optation intersects with legitimation: citizens are mobilized not only through institutional channels but also through persuasive ideological narratives. However, even if participation is articulated in ideological terms, citizen motivations for supplying information are not always ideologically driven. Research establishes that self-interest frequently outweighs ideological conviction in these contexts (Bergemann, 2017; Gellately, 1996; Kalyvas, 2006). Still, self-interest and ideology are not mutually exclusive. A personal grievance can align with, or be expressed through, official ideological narratives. When political actors define deviance in ideological terms, they offer citizens a ready-made framework to justify their accusations. As Kozlov (1996) argues, nearly every denunciation contains a "compulsory minimum" of ideological language and moral judgment, regardless of the informer's true motivation (p.882).

At this point, co-optation offers important insights into the dynamics of interplay between political actors and ordinary citizens. According to Kalyvas (2006), denunciations crystallize the alliance between political actors and ordinary citizens. This linkage between elite and ground dynamics entails a transaction that benefits both sides: while ordinary citizens are delegated with power to exercise over their enemies to set personal scores, political actors can tap into local communities with the information provided by citizens (p.14). In this way, the delegation of power to citizens extends the scope of state surveillance by facilitating monitoring and denunciations, creating a space for the exertion of power for personal gains.

The concept of alliance further helps clarify the dual function of repression in mass denunciation contexts. By encouraging citizens to monitor and report one another, states extend policing into everyday life. Denunciations lead to targeted repression of the accused, while widespread surveillance fosters a climate of fear and suspicion among the broader population, bringing the chilling effect of being watched. This form of "participatory repression" (Bergemann, 2017, p.386), rooted in "grassroots involvement in the terror system" (Gellately, 1996, p.932), produces both individual and generalized repression. In such settings, mass participation blurs the boundaries of a traditional "police state," making self-policing a more accurate description (Gellately, 1996 p.942) since policing is outsourced to citizens themselves.

Placing denunciations at the center of the alliance between political actors and citizens offers important theoretical insights. Most notably, it foregrounds the agency of ordinary citizens within authoritarian systems. As Fulbrook notes (2005), despite power being concentrated at the top, citizens actively contribute to the production of repression through their roles as "micro-structures of power" (p.235) embedded in surveillance networks. Far from being passive subjects, they exercise delegated power at the grassroots level, helping to reproduce and sustain the system. This malign use of micro-level authority results in a diffusion of power that reinforces the terror apparatus from below.

Following Kalyvas (2006), conceptualizing state–citizen collaboration as an "alliance" offers a theoretical advantage by recognizing multiple agencies rather than treating the state or society as unitary actors. In this model, agency exists both at the center (political elites) and the periphery (citizens), each with diverse preferences and identities. Alliance operates as a transactional mechanism that links these levels through the convergence of interests (p.365-386). Crucially, such alliances involve mutual instrumentalization: while the state uses denunciations to monitor the population, citizens can exploit the same mechanism to pursue personal agendas or influence policy (Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Fulbrook, 2005; Kalyvas, 2006).

The interaction of multiple agencies from both the center and the periphery carries further theoretical implications. As scholars agree, denunciations serve as "micro-structures of power" through which the state extends control to the grassroots (Fulbrook, 2005). By assigning agency to ordinary citizens, this process blurs the boundaries between state and society, regime and people. Crucially, it also dismantles the divide between the political and the private, not only from above, but from below, as state power is franchised to individuals to pursue personal aims. In this dynamic, the politicization of everyday life gives way to the privatization of politics and its instruments (Gross, 2002, p.118). In mass denunciation

contexts, the rigid dichotomy between public and private becomes less relevant than the interplay between them (Kalyvas, 2006).

3. Legitimation

3.1. Legitimacy vs legitimation

According to Marquez (2016), legitimacy is central to power relations, but it is analytically more useful to examine the mechanisms through which authority is recognized, justified, and reproduced. This shifts the focus from legitimacy as an abstract normative condition to legitimation as an active political process. This view reflects a shift towards focusing on the sources and narratives that justify domination. Weber's typology offers a foundational framework by identifying three sources of political legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal (Beetham, 1991). Based on this typology, scholars have linked regime types with distinct sources of political legitimacy. However, it is widely acknowledged that Weber's typology presents ideal types, and legitimacy is multidimensional and dynamic (Alagappa, 1995; Beetham, 1991). Regimes do not rely on a single source but derive legitimacy from multiple sources regardless of their type (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Omelicheva, 2016; Tannenberg et al., 2021; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

Building on Weber, researchers have distilled typologies of legitimation strategies used by autocrats. These include foundational myths, ideology (ranging from communism to nationalism or religion), personal appeal, procedural legitimacy (based on rules and institutions), performance legitimacy (based on material outcomes), and international engagement. However, following the Cold War and the global rise of liberal democracy, democratic legitimacy, rooted in popular will and formal procedures, has become the dominant model. This shift has pushed even authoritarian regimes to adopt democratic forms and discourse to claim legitimacy, making repression alone insufficient for maintaining power (Dukalskis, 2017; Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014; Levitsky & Way, 2013; Tannenberg et al., 2021; von Haldenwang, 2017; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

Legitimation has been at the heart of scholarly discussions. Many scholars have discussed the complementarity of legitimation with other pillars of authoritarian strategies, repression, and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013, 2023; Maerz, 2020) as well as its repercussions for regime stability. Studies showed that legitimation explains the stability and resilience of authoritarian regimes (Gerschewski, 2023; Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014), and given the fundamental political consequences, it should not be overlooked as mere rhetoric (Tannenberg et al., 2021).

3.2. Legitimation through denunciations

In hybrid regimes, the facilitation of denunciations is more complex than in paradigmatic authoritarian or totalitarian cases. Contemporary autocrats rarely rely solely on overt coercion, secret police networks, or explicitly mandated reporting. Instead, they operate within institutional settings that retain the outward form of democracy, legality, and citizen participation, even as these forms are redirected toward authoritarian ends. This creates a distinctive challenge: regimes must encourage citizens to provide information, identify adversaries, and participate in surveillance while preserving the appearance of lawful and voluntary civic engagement. Denunciation, therefore, has to be made legitimate.

In this context, legitimation becomes central, operating at every stage of the process: justifying the creation of reporting channels, encouraging citizen participation, and enabling the joint production of repression through denunciations. By embedding reporting practices in democratic language and bureaucratic procedure, hybrid regimes normalize surveillance from below and transform denunciation into a seemingly legitimate form of civic engagement.

The creation of citizen-input channels in authoritarian settings is often tied to this legitimating function. Past and contemporary autocracies have not relied solely on repression, but have also developed extensive complaint mechanisms through which they respond, or appear to respond, to citizen demands (Dimitrov, 2014, 2023; Lueders, 2021). This form of responsive governance remains central in modern autocracies. China, for example, exemplifies "responsive authoritarianism" through its deliberative forums and complaint systems (Chen et al., 2016; Heurlin, 2016; M. K. Miller, 2015; Su & Meng, 2016; Yue et al., 2019). The primary motivation for repressive regimes to develop communication channels is to present a responsive image while gathering information through input mechanisms, which acts as a "barometer of public opinion"(Dimitrov, 2014, p.271). Complaints help regimes monitor policy implementation, detect corruption and abuse of power, and assess public trust, ultimately sustaining authoritarian rule (Dimitrov, 2013, 2014, 2023; Kozlov, 1996; Maerz, 2020).

Input institutions like complaint and petition mechanisms in a nominally democratic context derive their legitimacy from the foundational principle of accountability. Even when these mechanisms are weaponized to absorb denunciations, they continue to rest on this normative foundation. Their democratic appearance sustains a responsive façade, allowing regimes to claim inclusiveness and accountability

while directing these channels toward information gathering and control. In this context, responsiveness becomes a procedural pillar of authoritarian legitimation, masking surveillance and repression beneath the language of civic engagement.

Facilitating mass denunciations in 21st-century hybrid regimes requires more than input mechanisms, it also needs a tailored legal framework. A weaponized legal system serves an instrumental function by incorporating denunciations in the broader punitive framework, but its power lies equally in its normative appeal. Law derives legitimacy not only from its utility, but from the perception that it is non-arbitrary, rule-bound, and predictable. As Khosla (2025) argues, law is a normative space where political discourse is shaped and justified. By embedding denunciation practices within formal legal frameworks, regimes mask coercion in the language of legality, presenting repression as a rule-based response rather than arbitrary power. In doing so, they gather institutional credibility while mobilizing law as a tool of legitimation and repression.

Mobilizing citizens for engagement is both driven by and instrumental to efforts to secure legitimacy. In hybrid regimes, complaint mechanisms operate on an implicit social contract similar to that described by Dimitrov (2013, 2014, 2023), where citizens engage with the complaint mechanism in expectation of policy responsiveness and protection from official misconduct. In nominally democratic contexts, this contract is reinforced by the normative promise of accountability and problem resolution, foundational elements of democratic governance. However, by positioning these mechanisms as participatory and responsive, regimes keep the channels open not only for grievances but also for denunciations. In this way, complaint systems serve a dual function: they help sustain citizen trust through responsiveness while also functioning as catalysts for surveillance. The state's fulfilment of its social contract, resolving problems and curbing abuses, legitimizes and sustains the very venue through which it extracts politically useful information. Thus, the maintenance of the complaint system ensures both the appearance of accountability and a steady flow of denunciatory input, reinforcing authoritarian control under a democratic guise.

Responsiveness plays a central role in legitimizing citizen participation in complaint and reporting systems. Research on citizen complaints shows that participation depends heavily on trust, specifically, trust that the state will respond. States cultivate this trust through responsiveness; when it declines, citizens tend to withdraw from the system (Dimitrov, 2014). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: the more the state responds, the more citizens are encouraged to report. While this dynamic is most visible in formal complaint systems, it also applies to denunciatory practices more broadly. Responsiveness, in this context, serves not only a functional role but also a communicative one: it signals which issues the state prioritizes

and thus implicitly directs citizen attention and action. By selectively responding to certain types of complaints or reports, regimes condition citizen behavior, shaping what is seen as reportable or worthy of state attention. I refer to this dynamic as *responsive conditioning*: a process through which selective state responsiveness motivates citizens to participate in ways that reinforce regime priorities.

In hybrid regimes, particularly under populist leadership, citizen mobilization is deliberately cultivated as an ideological strategy of legitimation. Beyond the implicit social contract rooted in problem resolution and accountability, regimes can leverage what Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017, p. 261) note as an "amalgam" of ideational frames grounded in nationalism, politicized religion, historical grievances, or the construction of internal enemies (p.261) to mobilize participation. These narratives, often tied to the personality cult of the leader, create moral incentives for citizens to act in alignment with state ideology, especially when specific groups are marginalized or criminalized. In such contexts, citizens may view the act of reporting, framed as a civic duty, not only as loyalty to the state but as loyalty to the nation or the leader. When denunciations are openly encouraged against designated "enemies," complaint mechanisms become fertile ground for ideologically motivated participation, reinforcing authoritarian control through voluntary, even enthusiastic, citizen involvement.

This thesis conceptualizes mass denunciations as fundamentally authoritarian practices. By analyzing them through the core pillars of authoritarianism of repression, co-optation, and legitimation, it becomes evident that these strategies operate in tandem: repression enables control, co-optation mobilizes participation, and legitimation sustains the system's credibility. Together, they not only operationalize denunciations but also illuminate their deeper logic within authoritarian rule. Building on this conceptual foundation, the next section outlines the research design through which these dynamics are examined.

4. Beyond Strategic Participation: Emotional, Interpersonal, and Everyday Dimensions of Denunciation

The preceding section conceptualized state-sanctioned denunciations through the three core mechanisms of authoritarian governance: repression, co-optation, and legitimation. These mechanisms explain how, when engineered as an authoritarian project, denunciations contribute to authoritarian control by keeping regimes informed, mobilizing citizen participation, and legitimizing surveillance through the language of ideology, legality, and responsibility. However, even when micro-level citizen involvement in the production of authoritarianism is incorporated into the analysis of repression, co-optation, and legitimation,

a mechanism-based theorization of denunciations remains primarily state-centered. This perspective is necessary for analysing denunciations as mechanisms of autocratization, which is the central concern of this thesis. Yet such an explanation remains limited because it understands citizen involvement largely in terms of the state's governance objectives. It is therefore less suited to explaining how denunciation becomes meaningful, desirable, or actionable in everyday life. As a practice sustained through human input and involvement, denunciation is also embedded in emotional attachments, interpersonal tensions, institutional routines, and everyday norms of discipline, loyalty, and suspicion. To account for these dynamics, this section supplements the three-pillar framework with sociological and psychological lenses that illuminate the human and social dimensions of denunciatory practices.

4.1. Emotional choice and affective motivations

Scholarly explanations of how denunciations are sustained at scale increasingly foreground incentives rather than coercion alone (Bergemann, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Gellately, 1996, 2001). Existing literature shows that citizens may enter these systems instrumentally, engaging with denunciatory mechanisms because participation is expected to yield tangible outcomes such as problem resolution, responsiveness, protection, preferential treatment, or leverage over others (Bergemann, 2017; Dimitrov, 2014, 2023; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Kalyvas, 2006; Kozlov, 1996). In this sense, reporting can appear rewarding even when it does not produce direct material gain. More broadly, this reflects a wider logic of authoritarian co-optation in which alignment with the state may generate not only material benefits but also social status, recognition, or a sense of political inclusion (Josua, 2016; Stacher, 2012).

This instrumental dimension is particularly visible in rational-choice accounts of denunciation. Kalyvas (2006) conceptualizes denunciations as part of an alliance between political actors and ordinary citizens, grounded in a demand–supply dynamic of mutual instrumentalization: political actors seek information, while citizens provide it to pursue protection, advantage, or personal agendas. In related work on authoritarian complaint mechanisms, state–society alignment is conceptualized as a quasi-social contract, whereby citizens provide information and cooperation in return for responsiveness, access, or problem resolution (Dimitrov, 2014, 2023). These explanations resonate with broader studies of authoritarian institutions, which show how regimes structure participation through incentives, expectations, and opportunities embedded in institutional arrangements (Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Truex, 2017). From this perspective, reporting is not simply an act of compliance, but a form of strategic engagement.

Yet this instrumental account does not fully explain why denunciation becomes meaningful, justified, or desirable to citizens. Historical studies of denunciation show that reporting has also served as a medium for expressing loyalty, claiming status, venting frustration, or acting on resentment, jealousy, fear, and personal grievance (Bergemann, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fulbrook, 2005; Goldman, 2011, 2007; Gross, 2001; Kozlov, 1996; Staadt, 1996). These accounts suggest that denunciation should be understood not only as institutional or material, but also as experiential: it is shaped by how citizens encounter authority as responsive, protective, punitive, or morally validating. Literature on everyday encounters with the state is useful here because it shows that citizen–state relations are mediated not only through formal institutions, but also through lived experiences of waiting, recognition, dependency, discipline, and belonging (Auyero, 2012; Krupa & Nugent, 2015; Wedeen, 1998). Applied to denunciatory systems, this perspective suggests that citizens do not merely calculate rewards and risks; they also interpret reporting through emotions, moral evaluations, and affective attachments.

Participation in denunciatory systems is therefore not shaped only by calculations of reward, protection, or advantage. Citizens may engage these systems because they feel afraid, resentful, humiliated, angry, loyal, morally outraged, or eager to restore a sense of status and recognition. These motivations should not be understood as irrational or separate from interest. Rather, they shape how individuals define their interests, interpret threats, and evaluate the appropriateness of action. The broader literature on emotions and political action provides a good lens in this regard, as it demonstrates that emotions are not external to political agency but constitutive of how actors attach meaning to events, identify threats, and justify action (Ahmed, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2001; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Hochschild, 1979; Jasper, 1998, 2011).

This is where emotional-choice approaches are particularly useful. Emotional-choice theory does not treat emotions as the opposite of rationality. Instead, it shows that emotions shape how actors perceive interests, threats, risks, obligations, and possible courses of action (Markwica, 2018). In the context of denunciation, citizens may report others not only because they expect material rewards or wish to avoid punishment, but also because denunciation appears emotionally or morally compelling. Fear may make reporting appear necessary for self-protection; resentment or humiliation may make it appear justified as retaliation; moral outrage may frame it as a civic duty; and loyalty may turn it into a performance of belonging to the state, nation, or political community (Ahmed, 2014; Jasper, 2011; Sharafutdinova, 2020; Wedeen, 1998). These emotional dynamics do not replace self-interest; they help constitute what actors understand their interests to be. The value of emotional-choice theory for this

thesis, therefore, lies in its ability to bridge instrumentality and affect. It allows denunciation to be understood neither as a purely rational calculation nor as an irrational emotional outburst, but as an action in which interests, emotions, and moral evaluations are mutually constituted.

This affective dimension is especially important in systems designed to absorb both grievances and denunciations. Studies of authoritarian complaint mechanisms show that such institutions do more than process information: they create channels through which citizens seek responsiveness, problem resolution, protection from the state, and express loyalty (Bergemann, 2017; Dimitrov, 2014, 2023; Kozlov, 1996; Truex, 2017). Building on this insight and on literature on everyday authoritarianism and affective state–society relations (Ahmed, 2014; Greene & Robertson, 2016; Hale, 2011; Sharafutdinova, 2020; Wedeen, 1998), it can be argued that engagement with state institutions can generate experiences of acknowledgment, recognition, belonging, and moral validation. Applied to complaint systems, this means that repeated engagement with a responsive state may transform instrumental participation into a political-psychological exchange, producing affective attachment, perceived inclusion, and alignment with authority even in the absence of prior ideological commitment.

This dynamic becomes especially powerful when reporting is framed not merely as access to the state, but as a civic duty through which citizens are invited to protect the public good, defend legality, or demonstrate loyalty to the political community. Under these conditions, denunciatory participation may be sustained not only by incentives or coercive pressures, but also by the emotional rewards of being recognized as a vigilant, loyal, or morally responsible citizen. This affective recognition helps explain why denunciation may become desirable even when it does not produce obvious material benefits: it offers citizens a way to experience themselves as politically relevant, morally justified, and aligned with legitimate authority.

4.2. Interpersonal conflict and the privatization of politics

Denunciations do not simply transmit political loyalty, ideological vigilance, or civic responsibility from below. It also provides ordinary people with a state-recognized language and an institutional channel through which interpersonal conflicts can be recoded as matters of security, legality, morality, loyalty, or public order (Kozlov, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Bergemann, 2017). This is where affective engagement and instrumental motivation intersect most clearly. Anger, resentment, fear, jealousy, humiliation, or revenge become politically actionable when they are translated into accusations that the state is willing to recognize, process, and potentially punish. An emotional-choice perspective is therefore useful because it helps explain how malicious reporting can be both affective and strategic: emotionally charged grievances are pursued through institutional channels that make them consequential.

This dynamic transforms the political meaning of ordinary conflicts. Workplace rivalries, neighbourhood disputes, professional jealousy, family tensions, and personal grudges may be reframed through the language of disloyalty, illegality, corruption, terrorism, moral deviance, or threat to the public good. Historical studies of denunciation show that this dynamic is not incidental but central to how denunciatory systems operate. In Stalinist Russia, denunciations were frequently tied to professional feuds, family conflicts, apartment disputes, accusations of moral misconduct, and struggles over status or resources. Fitzpatrick shows that the responsiveness of the Soviet state made denunciatory systems vulnerable to manipulation by denouncers with personal agendas, as citizens learned to mobilize official categories such as loyalty, class, abuse of power, or morality to pursue private claims (1996). Similarly, Goldman shows how workers, foremen, party members, and union leaders adopted the slogans of repression and used them against one another to settle grievances, shift blame, or advance personal agendas (2007). Kozlov likewise demonstrates that denunciations could be used to expose ordinary forms of misconduct such as abuse of power, corruption, theft, pursue revenge for marital infidelity or alcoholism (1996).

These examples point to a broader theoretical claim foregrounded by Bergemann (2017): Every community contains relations of dislike, rivalry, distrust, resentment, competition, or unresolved grievance and denunciatory systems mobilize the negative ties that already exist within social life (p.388). Bergemann's analysis is useful here because it shows how denunciation activates these negative ties by giving individuals a means to harm those they dislike and to improve their relative position within a community. In local settings, where social status, professional hierarchy, economic competition, and moral reputation are relational, denunciation can become a tool for shifting relative standing. The denouncer does not merely report wrongdoing; they may also attempt to lower the status, credibility, security, or moral worth of another person. Gross (2001) captures this broader social logic by showing how Stalinist and Nazi systems exacerbated social antagonisms, setting people against one another and encouraging them to act on mutual dislike and resentment (pp.4). Denunciation, therefore, does not merely expose political deviance; it mobilizes existing social cleavages, deepens interpersonal distrust, and embeds authoritarian control within the social fabric itself.

As private grievances become politically legible, state power becomes available for the pursuit of personal conflicts. As a result, denunciation dissolves the boundary between public and private: it politicizes interpersonal relations while allowing individuals to privatize the instruments of politics (Kalyvas, 2006; Gross, 2001). This transformation is deeply political because it involves the diffusion of state power to citizens through delegated authority. When reporting systems invite citizens to identify deviance, they do not simply collect information

from below; they authorize citizens to act in the name of the state. Fulbrook's notion of citizens as "micro-structures of power" is useful here because it captures how individuals may internalize and exercise delegated authority over others through everyday practices of surveillance and accusation (2005). The affective dimension of denunciation is therefore layered. On one level, denunciation is driven by resentment, fear, jealousy, or revenge. On another, it is embedded in the experience of power itself: the ability to make one's grievance consequential by routing it through the state.

This helps explain why denunciation can "institutionalize resentment" (Gross, 2001). It provides a recognized language and official channel through which anger, rivalry, fear, envy, and revenge can be converted into accusations legible to the state. Denunciation, therefore, cannot be understood only as a vertical relationship between citizen and state. It also reorganizes horizontal relations among citizens by turning everyday conflicts into potential matters of state concern. The effectiveness of denunciatory systems lies precisely in this fusion of political authority with ordinary social life. Once citizens learn which accusations trigger state responsiveness, they may frame personal grievances in the idioms most likely to be heard: disloyalty, illegality, immorality, terrorism, corruption, or threat to public order (Kozlov, 1996). In this sense, denunciation privatizes politics while politicizing the private sphere. It allows individuals to mobilize state power for personal ends, while simultaneously allowing the state to penetrate intimate, professional, and communal relations.

Denunciation is therefore not simply a practice of informing; it is a mechanism through which interpersonal antagonisms are reorganized as political problems. Its power lies in the conversion of private affect into public accusation. Resentment becomes vigilance, revenge becomes civic responsibility, jealousy becomes moral concern, and personal conflict becomes a matter of state interest. This conversion is central to the social life of denunciation: it explains how authoritarian power is reproduced not only through coercion from above, but also through the affective and relational tensions of everyday life.

In hybrid contexts, where denunciations are organized through the language of democratic participation and digitalized through accessible reporting platforms, this privatization of politics is further transformed and acquires a particular form. When denunciation is routed through complaint mechanisms, petition platforms, or digital portals, it is not presented as informing in the classical sense, but as participation, accountability, and access to the state. This democratic framing lowers the moral and procedural threshold for denunciations: the vocabulary of rights, legality, and civic responsibility can legitimate accusations that are motivated by interpersonal resentment or private grievance. Digitalization, in turn, lowers the practical threshold for reporting by making accusations immediate, standardized and easy for

the state to process and act upon. It also expands the social reach of denunciations beyond immediate environments such as workplaces, neighborhoods, or families. Everyday online interactions, social media exchanges, bureaucratic encounters, and routine service transactions can become potential venues for accusation and retaliation. Through official response procedures, digital platforms translate private affect into bureaucratic claims. As a result, citizens may experience denunciation not as collaboration with repression, but as the legitimate use of participatory infrastructure. The affective and interpersonal dynamics identified in historical studies of denunciation therefore persist, but they are intensified and dispersed through the procedural legitimacy and accessibility of digital governance.

4.3. Everyday institutions, norms, and social disciplining

As discussed above, denunciations emerge at scale and become socially embedded when they are sanctioned, orchestrated, and promoted by the state. Once institutionalized, they generate a disciplinary regime: a normative environment in which the boundaries between loyalty and disloyalty, vigilance and dissent, compliance and deviance are continuously drawn and reinforced. In such settings, everyday behaviour becomes organized around an accusatory logic. Loyalty, compliance, and vigilance are performed, while suspicion becomes routinized and dissent, criticism, or non-conformity are interpreted as signs of threat. This reflects a broader insight from the literature on everyday authoritarianism: domination is sustained not only through coercive force, but also through ordinary practices of compliance, performance, ambiguity, and adaptation (J. C. Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 1998).

Everyday institutions play a central role in this process. Complaint mechanisms, digital platforms, workplaces, courts, and bureaucracies do not merely collect information or provide technical channels for reporting; nor are they neutral settings in which denunciations are lodged, processed, or responded to. Rather, they are social environments in which interactions, expectations, and affective experiences are embedded. Through repeated engagement with these institutions, citizens encounter the practical rules of authoritarian governance: which forms of behaviour are tolerated, which expressions invite risk, which grievances receive validation, and which loyalties are rewarded. In this way, institutional encounters become an experiential and affective learning process through which citizens internalize norms of entitlement, caution, silence, conformity, and vigilance. Crucially, these institutions condition expectations about state responsiveness and about the kinds of claims that are recognized as politically meaningful (Dimitrov, 2014, 2023; Truex, 2017).

This institutional learning produces what can be understood as a moral and political grammar of reportability. Citizens learn not only that reporting is possible, but also how to interpret conduct, speech, association, and identity through the categories made available by the state. Over time, denunciatory regimes discipline citizens by familiarizing them with the distinctions through which loyalty, threat, morality, and deviance are classified. Denunciation, therefore, becomes powerful not only when citizens actively accuse others but also when the surrounding environment teaches them what counts as suspicious, actionable, or deserving of institutional attention.

This dynamic resonates with Foucault's account of discipline and normalization, in which behaviour is shaped before punishment is applied (Foucault, 1995). Citizens do not need to be constantly coerced in order to regulate themselves and others. Rather, they learn to anticipate risk, monitor speech, interpret ambiguity, and avoid association with suspect persons or categories. Denunciation thus extends the disciplinary effects of state power beyond formal punishment by encouraging self-censorship, horizontal monitoring, and precautionary conformity. Its force lies not only in the punitive consequences that may follow a report, but also in the everyday uncertainty it produces about what can be said, where, and in front of whom.

In this sense, denunciation is not only a discrete moment of accusation, but also a routine through which authoritarian norms are reproduced in everyday institutional life. Its effects are not limited to those who denounce or those who are denounced. They extend to wider communities by producing caution, mistrust, and self-regulation. Denunciations, therefore, embed authoritarian control into the ordinary functioning of institutions, turning surveillance into a normal practice of civic, moral, and institutional responsibility.

5. From Participation to Reproduction: Citizen Agency in De-democratisation

The preceding discussion has conceptually demonstrated how repression, co-optation, and legitimation operate as intersecting and mutually reinforcing pillars in denunciatory systems. Repression highlights the coercive capacity of the state, while co-optation explains how citizen engagement is incentivized and structured. Legitimation, in turn, embeds denunciatory practices within the normative language of legality, accountability, and civic engagement, rendering them acceptable and even desirable. Crucially, these intertwined mechanisms rely on the active involvement of ordinary citizens at every stage. Co-opted through material and non-material incentives, citizens become active stakeholders of the authoritarian governance whose engagement directly contributes to the production of repression against the denounced. At the

same time, their involvement is underpinned by a perception of legitimacy, which not only sustains their participation but also reinforces the legitimacy of the system itself. Denunciations thus reveal a form of agency that is exercised within, but not wholly determined by authoritarian constraints. In this sense, citizens are not merely subjects of control but participants in practices that sustain and extend it.

The previous section also engaged with existing scholarship that conceptualizes the dynamics underpinning state–society interactions through denunciations, linking macro-level strategies with micro-level practices. These accounts highlight citizen agency, positioning citizens as active stakeholders in their interaction with the state. This interaction has been conceptualized as an "alliance" (Kalyvas, 2006), in which citizens are delegated a degree of power they exercise, monitoring, accusing, and reporting, thereby embedding surveillance within everyday social relations. As discussed above, this delegation produces "micro-structures of power" (Fulbrook, 2005) that diffuse authority beyond formal institutions and into the social fabric. Alternatively, this interaction is understood as a clientelistic exchange structured through a social contract (Dimitrov, 2014, 2023), in which citizens are bound into a reciprocal relationship with the state, trading information for problem resolution and protection. Whether conceptualized as alliance or exchange, and regardless of whether engagement is driven by ideology, self-interest, or personal grievances, citizens' involvement in denunciatory practices is an act of agency that contributes to the expansion of state capacity by supplying information and reinforcing mechanisms of control.

However, the implications of this interaction extend beyond the immediate production of repression. To fully capture its political significance, it is necessary to consider how micro-level actions aggregate into broader system-level outcomes. Here, I draw on Coleman's (1986) macro–micro–macro model of social explanation to examine how macro-level conditions shape individual action and how aggregated individual actions, in turn, produce macro-level outcomes. This thesis modifies Coleman's macro–micro–macro explanatory pathway by introducing a constitutive meso-level of institutional mediation between macro-level political conditions and micro-level action. Accordingly, authoritarian discourse (macro) shapes the conditions and incentive structures under which individuals act, while institutional frameworks and arrangements (meso) mediate these interactions by structuring state–society relations. At the micro level, citizens respond to these conditions by engaging in denunciatory practices for diverse and often overlapping reasons. Crucially, when these individual actions are aggregated, they generate effects that exceed their initial motivations. In the context of denunciations, widespread participation not only facilitates targeted and diffuse repression but also normalizes surveillance, erodes interpersonal trust, and embeds coercive practices within

everyday life. Over time, these cumulative effects contribute to the diffusion and social embedding of authoritarian control, transforming individual acts of participation into a systemic mechanism for the reproduction of authoritarian rule.

This process has direct implications for understanding de-democratisation. Much of the existing scholarship offers state-centered accounts of democratic erosion, focusing on how political actors incrementally undermine democratic institutions and norms (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In the context of denunciations, however, such top-down accounts provide only a partial explanation. Civic engagement, democratic procedures, and accountability mechanisms are not simply appropriated for authoritarian ends through top-down imposition, but are also enacted and reproduced through citizen practices. Through everyday acts of denouncing, monitoring, and compliance, citizens do not merely respond to state demand but actively shape how the system operates, embedding it within everyday social relations.

Building on these dynamics, when such practices are channeled through democratic institutions and framed in the language of participation and accountability, they actively contribute to and become constitutive of the hollowing out of democratic principles. In this process, participation is instrumentalized as a mechanism of control, accountability is redirected away from the state and toward horizontal forms of citizen monitoring, and the role of citizens is redefined from rights-bearing participants to agents of surveillance and enforcement. At scale, as denunciations become routinized, they normalize surveillance, reframe denunciation as civic responsibility, and erode norms of trust, accountability, and civic citizenship that underpin democratic life.

The diffusion of these practices blurs the boundaries between state and society, public and private, and disperses responsibility for repression across a wider set of actors. In doing so, denunciatory participation sustains an environment in which coercion is not only enforced but also socially embedded and continuously reproduced. This dynamic follows the macro–micro–macro process theorized by Coleman (1986), but with an intervening meso-level that plays a constitutive role: macro-level discursive and political frameworks generate demand for denunciation, which is translated and structured through meso-level institutional arrangements, shaping individual behavior at the micro level. The aggregation of these behaviors then feeds back into broader regime-level transformations, reinforcing and stabilizing patterns of authoritarian rule. In this sense, de-democratisation can be understood not only as a top-down process of institutional erosion, but also as a bottom-up dynamic in which citizen participation becomes integral to the reproduction of authoritarian rule.

Importantly, recognizing the role of citizen agency in these processes does not imply that participation is unconstrained or uniformly voluntary. As the literature demonstrates, motivations are often ambiguous, shaped by a combination of ideological alignment, personal interests, and structural pressures. Nonetheless, even when exercised under constraint, such forms of agency carry political consequences. By engaging with and reproducing denunciatory mechanisms, citizens contribute, intentionally or otherwise, to the maintenance and normalization of authoritarian rule. In this sense, denunciations illustrate how everyday practices can become constitutive of broader processes of de-democratisation, linking individual actions to systemic transformations. This conceptualization provides the basis for the multi-level analysis that follows, where the interaction between state strategies and citizen practices is traced across macro, meso, and micro levels.

6. Research Design

This section sets out the research design of the thesis, beginning with the selection of Turkey as the case and the reasoning behind this choice. It then explains the rationale for adopting a multi-level analytical framework and outlines the theoretical and epistemological premises that underpin the study. The discussion proceeds to describe the methods applied at each analytical level and the justification for their use. As each level draws on its own dataset and analytical techniques, the detailed presentation of these methods is reserved for the relevant empirical chapters.

6.1. Bringing Turkey into the picture: an authoritarian hybrid regime in practice

In Turkey, denunciation operates through a dispersed yet interconnected reporting architecture embedded across legal, judicial, bureaucratic, and administrative institutions. Rather than existing as a formally declared denunciation system, it functions through the strategic repurposing of infrastructures designed for complaints, petitions, crime tips, grievances, and citizen feedback. At the centre of this architecture is CİMER, a centralized communication platform that connects public institutions under presidential (formerly prime ministry) coordination while also enabling citizens to report private organisations to the public authorities responsible for regulating and supervising them. Formally, CİMER provides citizens with a channel to submit reports, complaints, requests, crime tips, grievances, and policy feedback. In practice, it also offers an institutional route through which accusations can be collected, transmitted, and processed, and through which selected allegations may be referred to bodies possessing investigative or sanctioning authority. Denunciations are therefore woven into ordinary forms of citizen engagement and embedded in everyday

bureaucratic routines. Framed as civic duty, responsiveness, and public participation, this engagement reinforces a democratic façade while enabling repression and the targeting of political opponents.

Turkey's status as an authoritarian hybrid regime is central to how this system operates. Existing scholarship has analysed Turkey's trajectory under the AKP as a process of democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarian consolidation, in which formal democratic institutions persist while judicial independence, media freedom, electoral fairness, and checks on executive power are progressively weakened (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, 2018). The significance of the Turkish case lies in how this combination enables denunciatory practices to function through democratic-looking procedures. Unlike consolidated authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, where denunciations are often embedded in openly coercive infrastructures of surveillance and punishment, denunciatory practices in Turkey are facilitated through legal complaint channels, administrative procedures, digital platforms, and participatory mechanisms. At the same time, unlike democratic contexts, these practices are not constrained by rights-based safeguards, judicial independence, or robust accountability mechanisms. This hybrid configuration allows reporting practices to retain the appearance of legality, voluntariness, and civic engagement while producing authoritarian consequences.

Against this backdrop, the Turkish case offers a rare opportunity to study how denunciations are transformed within hybrid regimes, a phenomenon largely overlooked in existing scholarship. It manifests the core authoritarian pillars by producing targeted and diffuse repression, co-opting citizens into collaboration, and legitimizing the process under the guise of democratic norms. Its prevalence and centrality to governance make it both illustrative and theoretically significant. Adopting a case study approach, with its "characteristic flexibility" (Gerring, 2012), allows for a multi-level exploration of denunciations in Turkey, tracing dynamics from the top levels of the state down to everyday interactions. This design enables the integration of diverse datasets and analytical methods, yielding an in-depth account while also laying the groundwork for future comparative research.

However, the study acknowledges certain limitations of the case study approach. While a single case can offer insights that resonate with other hybrid regimes, it cannot support broad generalizations across all hybrid contexts, given their inherent fluidity and diversity. The aim is therefore not to make universal claims, but to distil the analytical value of examining how the subversion of democratic norms and institutions facilitates denunciations and mobilizes core authoritarian strategies across repressive systems. The Turkish case also carries the potential for idiosyncrasy in its institutional arrangements, particularly the centralized CİMER platform, which may not exist in the same form elsewhere. As an illustrative case, however, it provides

valuable insight into the underlying dynamics of hybrid regimes without implying direct institutional parallels.

6.2. A multi-level analysis

This thesis problematizes denunciations as both a product of autocratization and a mechanism that sustains it. Building on denunciation theories, it adopts an approach that moves beyond state-centered explanations to incorporate citizens as active agents in both the operation of denunciations and the reproduction of authoritarian rule. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes the denunciation mechanism as a system of interaction between political actors and citizens, structured through a demand–supply dynamic in which the regime seeks information and participation, and citizens provide it through denunciatory practices. Given that denunciatory acts inherently link state strategies with citizen action, analysing this phenomenon requires attention to both sides of this interaction to foreground agency.

The study further argues that denunciation, as an authoritarian project and practice, is a phenomenon in which core authoritarian strategies, repression, co-optation, and legitimation, intersect across macro, meso, and micro levels:

- at the **macro**-level, guiding the politics and ideology behind the mass reporting system,
- at the **meso**-level, informing the institutional arrangement,
- at the **micro**-level characterising citizen participation and experiences.

Because the denunciation mechanism operates through distinct but interconnected levels of action, where political demand is produced, structured through institutional arrangements, and enacted through citizen practices, a multi-level approach is analytically necessary to capture how these processes interact and reinforce one another. Accordingly, this study examines the internal dynamics of this overarching mechanism across three levels, structured through a demand–supply framework and informed by co-optation, repression, and legitimation:

a) **The macro-level — production of demand:** This level establishes the demand side by analysing the discourse used by political elites to construct and justify demand for denunciations, persuading citizens to collaborate through material and non-material incentives (co-optation), targeting and framing political opponents (repression), and legitimizing participation and repression (legitimation).
b) **The meso-level— mediation of demand and supply:** This level outlines the institutional framework surrounding the denunciation mechanism, spanning legal, administrative, and judicial arenas, through which political demand is translated into

structured opportunities for citizen reporting. These arrangements co-opt citizens into collaboration, produce repressive outcomes for political opponents, and legitimize the mechanism through democratic procedures. It also examines the reporting tools available to citizens.

c) **The micro-level— generation of supply:** This level assesses the societal dimension of the denunciation mechanism by examining how citizens respond to and reproduce demand through denunciatory practices. This includes mapping instances of citizen victimization (repression) and analysing the incentives and attitudes that sustain participation (co-optation and legitimation). It also considers how these practices contribute to the normalization of surveillance and the reproduction of authoritarian dynamics in everyday life.

This design allows the analysis to capture the production of political demand (macro), its institutional mediation (meso), and its societal reproduction (micro), thereby revealing how de-democratisation is co-produced through interactions between state actors and citizens and how core authoritarian mechanisms are sustained across levels.

6.3. Macro-level

The analysis starts with the macro-level. Even though there is nothing intrinsically micro or macro in a unit (Eulau, 1977), in political science, the macro level refers to the realm of elites, ideologies, and grand politics (Kalyvas, 2006, p.10) as well as national structures such as political regimes (Caprioli & Dupuy, 2020). In the context of mass denunciations, the macro sphere is the realm where the ideology and politics that underpin policies, institutions, and citizen mobilization are shaped and maintained. The ideological framework also shapes narratives that translate broader regime objectives into the social, moral, and political justifications upholding denunciatory practices. This research, therefore, examines the political discourse informing the context in which mass denunciations occur, analysing the rhetoric of political elites through the lenses of the three pillars of authoritarianism.

6.3.1. Why Critical Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis is well-suited to examining how political elites construct the ideological and rhetorical foundations that normalise and justify denunciations. Two main approaches exist: *language-in-use*, concerned with linguistic structures, and *socio-political*, which explores how language both shapes and is shaped by its social context (Miles, 2010). Within the socio-political tradition, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) traces the historical emergence of discourses through archaeology and examines their power relations via genealogy (Miles, 2010, p. 369). In contrast, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) analyses texts in relation to social

practices, clarifying links between discourse, social structures, and inequalities (Grbich, 2012, p.251; Miles, 2010, p. 369). This study adopts CDA because it captures discourse as both socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Fairclough, 1993, p.134), making it ideal for analysing how elites and institutions produce, legitimise, and sustain denunciation, while also being shaped by public participation.

This research follows the framework set out in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) for both the principles of CDA and its practical implementation. Developed by scholars such as Fairclough and Wodak (1997), CDA departs from purely linguistic traditions by viewing language as a social practice and placing primary importance on the context in which language is produced. In CDA, the concept of discourse extends beyond spoken or written language to encompass policies, political strategies, speeches, narratives, or even historical monuments, what Wodak and Meyer (2009, pp. 12–13) describe as "stretching the meaning of discourse from a genre to a register or style, from a building to a political programme." This broad conceptualisation requires examining discourse alongside extra-linguistic factors such as culture, society, and ideology (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), with special attention to the social, political, historical, and cognitive context (Reisigl, 2017, p.53).

CDA is centrally concerned with ideology and power, viewing ideology as often latent within everyday beliefs and embedded in language through devices such as metaphors or analogies. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of power as relational, productive, and exercised through discursive and institutional practices, CDA analyses how those in power use language to reproduce domination and legitimise their authority, with language serving as a medium of organised power (Habermas, 1996; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Its critical orientation involves "making visible the interconnectedness of things" (Fairclough, 1995, p.36) by unmasking the structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, and control reflected in discourse. Recognising that "control is never absolute but requires constant reinforcement" (Fairclough, 1993), CDA treats discourse as a key site of struggle between domination and resistance. These principles align closely with the objectives of this thesis, which views mass denunciations in Turkey as a politically engineered phenomenon shaped by those in power. Accordingly, the first methodological component examines the discourse of political elites—specifically President Erdoğan—over the past decade, with the aim of revealing the underlying ideology and mechanisms of control that have enabled the promotion and legitimation of the denunciation system.

6.3.2. Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is a leading strand of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with an established methodology and theoretical framework refined over three decades

(Reisigl, 2017, p.44). While rooted in CDA's critical theory orientation, DHA adopts what Wodak (2013, p.2) calls "conceptual pragmatism," favouring operationalizable mid-range or context-specific topics, often in the domain of politics, over abstract "grand theories" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.36). It shares CDA's core focus on ideology and power, viewing ideology as "one-sided perspectives" of convictions and attitudes and power as the capacity to impose one's will over others in a social context, and emphasising their interconnection: in DHA, ideology functions as a key means through which power is exercised, with those in positions of authority mediating it through linguistic and semiotic practices (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.104-105). Distinctively, DHA places strong emphasis on historical contextualisation and the use of middle-range theories to explain discourses, treating discourse as both a representation of and a tool for shaping social reality.

DHA's conceptual and methodological orientation makes it well-suited to this thesis, which examines the evolution and normalisation of mass denunciations in Turkey over the past decade. This phenomenon is understood as a politically engineered process requiring both institutional infrastructure and widespread societal acceptance, achieved, in part, through the sustained discourse of political elites. DHA's focus on political language, its treatment of discourse as historically dynamic, and its view of discourse as a semiotic practice situated within fields of political action as outlined by Reisigl, (2017) provide the tools to analyse how denunciations are promoted, legitimised, and embedded in society. By situating elite discourse in its historical and political context, DHA enables this study to reveal the strategies through which President Erdoğan shapes public opinion, constructs legitimacy, and influences participation in the denunciation mechanism.

6.4. Meso-level

Across disciplines, the meso-level has been conceptualized as a middle ground between the macro and micro, often used for middle-range theorizing. Its definition varies across fields, with different units of analysis depending on the discipline and the study at hand. In political science, where analysis typically focuses on "decision" units at the macro level and "action" units at the micro level (Eulau, 1977), the meso-level remains relatively undertheorized. Nevertheless, even when not explicitly labelled as such, scholars have recognized its importance as a bridge between the macro and micro. Eulau (1977), an early advocate of multi-level research, emphasized the need for an intermediate layer that links these two levels, arguing that it is essential for understanding transformations in both. Easton's (1965) systems theory does not explicitly theorize a meso-level, but its concept of conversion provides a useful point of departure by identifying a middle tier situated between citizen-level political action and system-level political outcomes. In Easton's model, demands and support enter the

political system as inputs and are converted into decisions and actions. This thesis adapts that logic by locating the conversion process within the legal, judicial, and bureaucratic organisations that mediate between political demand and citizen action.

This intermediary dimension is particularly evident in the literature on mass denunciations. Bergemann (2017) highlights an institutional framework deliberately designed to elicit cooperation with authorities. Likewise, Kalyvas (2006) locates denunciations within the meso-level, framing it as a juncture where alliances between political actors and ordinary citizens take shape. Importantly, the meso-level is not a fixed phenomenon: as Eulau (1977) notes, "it is not the absolute nature of unit properties that defines the level of analysis, but rather the standpoint of the observer" (p.46).

This research draws on the mass denunciations literature and builds on Easton's theoretical grounding in formulating its approach to the meso-level. Within the demand–supply framework that structures the research design, the macro-level refers to the ideology and political dynamics that generate demands for denunciations (political demand), while the micro-level corresponds to the individual behaviours that respond to this demand (societal supply). The meso-level represents the realm in which the macro and micro intersect (Haanpää, 2007). It encompasses the procedures, processes, and institutional arrangements that mediate interactions between political demand and societal supply. In other words, it is the space within the judiciary, bureaucracy, and legal framework, where demand is translated into structured opportunities for denunciation and supply is organized and channelled.

To uncover the authoritarian logic embedded in this system, the meso level is analysed through three core strategies, co-optation, repression, and legitimation. This approach serves two purposes: mapping the institutional infrastructure mobilized to facilitate denunciations and showing how these domains deploy authoritarian strategies to sustain and normalize the practice. By emphasising the meso level, the analysis complements the macro-level focus on political and ideological drivers and informs the micro-level analysis by demonstrating how institutions shape individual behaviour.

The social sciences literature offers rich insights into the theoretical and conceptual richness that the meso level can provide. According to Reid et al. (2010), the meso level refers to a reality through which macro level change can be observed and micro level activity can be contextualized. According to Haanpää, the meso-level functions as a theoretical domain where structural mechanisms and the interactions between macro- and micro-levels can be traced (2007, p.57-58). Therefore, meso-level analysis sheds light on the findings of macro-level on political and ideological drivers, and in turn it informs the micro-level analysis by demonstrating how institutions channel individual behaviour. In this formulation, the meso-

level presents the connective layer mediating the transition from macro structures to micro experiences.

6.4.1. Expert interviews and document analysis

In line with the meso-level's dual goal, mapping the inner workings of the reporting mechanism and exploring how co-optation, legitimation, and repression are produced with it, expert interviews were conducted with three groups: public sector workers, legal practitioners and experts, and trade unionists. Expert interviews were particularly important for this level of analysis because the operation of the reporting mechanism is often discretionary, ad hoc, opaque, and practice-based. Official sources provide limited insight into how reports are interpreted, prioritized, circulated, or acted upon within institutions, and publicly available statistics, which are limited, do not illuminate the informal expectations, procedural shortcuts, and discretionary judgments that shape institutional responses. For this reason, expert accounts were essential for understanding the internal logic of the reporting mechanism and the ways in which it operates across legal, bureaucratic, and judicial domains.

For the analysis, a Problem-Centered Expert Interview approach (PCEI) (Döringer, 2021) was implemented, combining elements of the Theory-Generating Expert Interview (Bogner et al., 2018) and the Problem-Centered Interview (PCI) (Witzel & Reiter, 2014). Interviews were anchored around the central problem of how Turkey's reporting mechanism operates within the institutional domains of law, bureaucracy, and the judiciary, while remaining flexible to elicit unanticipated themes. The approach followed a dialogic-discursive structure, opening space for respondents to recount technical and procedural accounts as well as articulating their own frames of reference within broader political and organisational contexts.

The dialogic approach intrinsic to PCEI goes beyond one-way information extraction, situating experts and interviewers in more egalitarian terms as participants in a dialogue where factual and interpretative knowledge is co-produced through interaction. The integration of professional expertise with personal narratives within the dialogic structure of the interviews was especially revealing, as respondents drew on their own experiences, including personal victimization and anecdotes, to explain how the reporting system works and what its broader implications are. These first-hand accounts were especially valuable because they made visible the gap between formal rules and institutional practice. They helped illuminate how reporting operates in settings where implementation is shaped not only by written procedures, but also by informal hierarchies, political expectations, professional discretion, and institutional fear. Personal experiences, therefore, shed light on the internal logic of the reporting system, which would be difficult to access through technical and procedural explanations alone.

The PCEI is suitable not only for experts with formal decision-making authority but also for actors whose professional knowledge and interpretative practices shape a field of action (Döringer, 2021). The participants in this study often occupied both positions simultaneously. Trade unionists were themselves public-sector professionals, including lawyers, hospital staff, and school employees, and therefore combined organisational and policy-related influence with first-hand experience of how the reporting system operated in practice. Their expertise derived not only from their representative roles within trade unions, through which they could influence institutional responses and policy positions, but also from their direct involvement in the professional settings where reports were received, interpreted, and acted upon.

A similarly broad understanding of agency applies to the legal experts and civil servants in the sample. Drawing on Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level discretion and Rhodes's (2019) interpretive approach, the study treats agency as extending beyond formal policy-making authority to include the interpretative and discretionary practices through which institutional rules are implemented. Civil servants may not determine policy at the highest level, but they shape its enactment through decisions about how petitions are interpreted, routed, investigated, and answered. Lawyers, although not necessarily embedded within the organisational structure of public administration, exercise agency within judicial processes by interpreting legal rules, constructing arguments, and influencing how allegations are framed and evaluated. Across all three participant groups, expert knowledge therefore combined formal authority, professional discretion, representative experience, and practical familiarity with the reporting mechanism. The PCEI is particularly well suited to capturing this combination of explicit procedural knowledge and implicit interpretative understanding.

Interviewing experts offers valuable insights into how denunciations are implemented within the existing framework of governance. Yet, to map more precisely the institutional contours of the reporting mechanism, it is also necessary to examine the legal and administrative sources that enable and instrumentalize reporting. Accordingly, in addition to expert interviews, the meso-level analysis incorporates a targeted review of formal legal and policy texts, including relevant laws, presidential decrees, by-laws, and official publications, as tangible manifestations of the institutional design underpinning the mechanism. This component employs document analysis (O'Leary, 2017) to explore how the reporting mechanism is facilitated and structured within judicial, bureaucratic, and legal domains. The approach is informed by socio-legal perspectives, which hold that "social problems are conceived and ordered through law and legal ordering" and thus treat legal texts as active instruments of governance (Shaffer & Halliday, 2015, p.473).

To strengthen the reliability of the analysis, expert accounts were not treated as standalone evidence. Rather, they were triangulated with monitoring body reports, institutional evaluations, legal and policy documents, official publications, and the wider socio-legal literature on authoritarian legality, judicial discretion, and bureaucratic governance. This triangulation was especially important given the limited transparency surrounding CİMER and the broader reporting architecture. In the absence of comprehensive official data on how reports are processed, escalated, or translated into institutional action, combining expert testimony with documentary sources made it possible to reconstruct the reporting mechanism from multiple angles.

Drawing on expert interviews and a targeted analysis of legal and policy documents, the meso-level analysis uncovers the institutional logic of the reporting mechanism. It shows how institutional design not only advances authoritarian interests by producing repression, enabling co-optation, and legitimizing the process, but also contributes to the regime's performance claims. In this sense, the meso level crystallizes the authoritarian engineering embedded in institutions and practices while also shedding light on the scope and dynamics of citizen engagement. Because of the richness of the technical and procedural detail, complemented by personal experiences and anecdotes, the meso-level analysis occupies more space than the other levels and provides a vital bridge between macro-level ideology and micro-level practices.

6.5. Micro-level

Micro-oriented theories examine individual-level explanations, emphasizing personal attributes such as knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Haanpää, 2007). The micro-level is a realm where a range of psychological and social-psychological mechanisms interact to produce a specific combination of desires, beliefs, and perceived opportunities for action (Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1996). This level is often positioned as the "ground" in contrast to high politics, a dichotomy that frequently results in its dismissal as messy or less significant (Kalyvas, 2006).

This thesis adopts a perspective that situates the agency of ordinary citizens within the broader surveillance and denunciation apparatus, in line with existing scholarship. From this standpoint, citizens, endowed with a degree of agency, become political actors whose participation is indispensable for the state's ability to sustain its authority. In the case of mass denunciations, the micro-level is therefore not peripheral but integral, as it reveals the everyday dynamics that enable and reproduce the practice. Examining denunciations from the micro-level allows for the collection of rich data on individual behaviours, motivations, and

intra-community relationships. More importantly, it enables the analysis of how these localised actions interact with, and are shaped by, meso- and macro-level structures. In doing so, micro-level analysis helps bridge the gap between structure and agency, demonstrating how high-level political imperatives are enacted, contested, or reinforced through everyday interactions (Haanpää, 2007, p. 54).

Following Kalyvas (2006), this thesis approaches denunciations as a phenomenon driven by a demand–supply mechanism, in which the regime generates demand for information and participation, and citizens supply it through denunciatory practices. To fully understand this dynamic, a micro-level analysis is essential, not only for uncovering the ground-level dynamics of participation that sustain this supply, but also for revealing its wider societal consequences. This shows how far the system's reach extends in practice: how citizens are co-opted into engaging with the reporting mechanism, how they actively participate in the production of repression and are victimized by it, and how they contribute to legitimizing the denunciation system.

This thesis argues that the reporting mechanism is embedded within existing institutions and sustained by the subversion of their formal democratic and legal functions to facilitate denunciations. Yet the formal mechanisms represent only one dimension of a broader reporting ecosystem that extends beyond institutions into informal practices woven into the social fabric. A micro-level lens is therefore indispensable, as it captures dynamics that macro- and meso-level analyses alone cannot. By focusing on individual accounts, it reveals how state-led engineering resonates on the ground, shedding light on the marginalization of opponents, the incentives and motivations of reporters, and the normalization of denunciatory practices in everyday life. In this way, micro-level analysis not only deepens our understanding of the formal mechanism but also illuminates the broader culture of reporting that sustains it.

6.5.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The micro-level analysis investigates the dynamics operating at the individual level and examines how authoritarian strategies of repression, co-optation, and legitimation manifest in practice. As Gillham (2005) notes, semi-structured interviews are particularly suited to contexts where the key concepts and their interrelationships are relatively well understood, as they allow for both the discovery of new themes and systematic analysis of commonalities across participants. Accordingly, the interviews offer insight into three core aspects of the inquiry: (1) the political engineering underpinning the denunciation mechanism, which may surface in narratives of victimisation and reveal processes of marginalisation, exclusion, and discrimination (repression); (2) the varied motivations and rationales for using the system (co-

optation); and (3) attitudes toward the system as a whole, which shape perceptions of its legitimacy among citizens (legitimation). Beyond facilitating the identification of patterns and variations in people's accounts, semi-structured interviews also capture the diversity of individual experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and motivations, thereby revealing unanticipated dimensions of the phenomenon.

The micro-level analysis is not intended to be representative. Rather, it offers an interpretative account that captures the range and complexity of lived experiences. The findings of interviews, therefore, illustrate the ways citizens engage with and make sense of the reporting mechanism, rather than the prevalence of each experience. This level of analysis enables the exploration of aspects of denunciations that an institutional perspective alone cannot capture, such as the emotional, moral, and relational dimensions of participation and victimization. In doing so, it also allows unexpected themes to emerge, revealing meanings and consequences that exceed institutional explanations of the reporting mechanism.

6.6. Combining levels of analysis

This research adopts a multi-level analysis to examine mass denunciations in Turkey, recognising that social phenomena emerge through the dynamic interplay of institutional structures and individual agency (Haanpää, 2007). It integrates macro-level drivers of incentives and constraints with micro-level actions and interpretations, treating both as analytically complementary. Such an approach is necessary for understanding phenomena like denunciations, which arise precisely from the convergence of structural conditions and individual choices, a logic that follows Kalyvas's insistence on bridging macro- and micro-level forces in the study of denunciations. Unlike quantitative studies that seek to measure variables across levels, this thesis employs a qualitative, case-based design to explore how these dynamics unfold in an authoritarian hybrid context. This stance reflects a "weak realist, limited constructivist" (Reisigl, 2017, p. 48) position: informed by existing theoretical frameworks yet grounded in context-specific inquiry. In examining how authoritarian pillars and demand–supply dynamics operate in practice, the thesis not only engages with and substantiates existing insights but also advances conceptual refinements, such as responsive conditioning, that may inform future research on mass denunciations in hybrid authoritarian contexts. It examines how institutions shape behaviour (Anderson & Singer, 2008), while also recognising individuals as actors capable of influencing outcomes (Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996; Fulbrook, 2005; Kalyvas, 2006). In this sense, the multi-level, qualitative framework enables not only the analysis of interactions between structure and agency, but also the tracing of how these interactions aggregate into broader system-level effects, including the reproduction of authoritarian rule and processes of de-democratisation. The multi-level, qualitative framework

thus enables a more comprehensive account of denunciations as both products of structural conditions and expressions of individual agency.

This study explores the relationships between macro-, meso-, and micro-level dynamics through analytical interpretation, aiming to identify connections and generate concepts that illuminate the nature of denunciations in hybrid contexts. In doing so, it draws on the explanatory leverage of a multi-level strategy (Eulau, 1977, p. 48), as a means of deepening theoretical insight into how structural conditions and individual agency interact in such regimes. Accordingly, this research integrates three levels of analysis through the unifying lens of authoritarian strategies, repression, co-optation, and legitimation. At the macro level, guided by theory and literature, I examine how authoritarian governance shapes the rhetoric, politics, and ideology surrounding mass denunciations, focusing on discourse that generates repression, promotes collaboration, and legitimises inclusive and coercive measures. At the meso level, I investigate how these strategies materialise in laws, judicial practice, and bureaucratic arrangements, and how institutional mandates facilitate practices of denouncing, reporting, and petitioning. These findings will be read alongside macro-level insights to reveal how political discourse structures the institutional framework. At the micro level, drawing on data from both users and victims of the reporting mechanism, I explore individual behaviours and experiences within the petitioning system, interpreting them in light of macro and meso dynamics. By abductively moving between theory and data, the analysis seeks to map the contingencies of denunciation across these levels, showing how authoritarian strategies cascade from ideological framing, through institutional design, to individual practice, and how these practices, in turn, contribute to the normalization and reproduction of authoritarian dynamics within society.

Chapter IV: The Making of the Enemies

1. Introduction

This chapter opens the macro-level empirical analysis by examining the discursive construction of Turkey's denunciation landscape. The macro-level analysis focuses on how state discourse generates political demand for denunciations by constructing internal enemies, legitimizing their repression, and calling on citizens to participate in a collective struggle against them. It therefore asks how state actors ideologically and discursively justify denunciation as a necessary, moral, and legitimate practice, while also mobilizing societal participation in its reproduction.

The analysis shows that denunciations are framed not simply as instruments of surveillance or punishment, but as expressions of civic duty, national vigilance, and loyalty to the state. Through narratives of threat, betrayal, and collective responsibility, political discourse produces categories of danger and belonging that normalize the targeting of alleged adversaries and encourage citizens to align themselves with state priorities. In this sense, repression and co-optation are not separate discursive processes; they are connected through legitimating narratives that present exclusionary and punitive practices as necessary for protecting the nation and the state, while also framing citizen cooperation as a moral and civic obligation.

Using the triad of repression, co-optation, and legitimation as both analytical and thematic anchors, the macro-level analysis is developed across two empirical chapters. The present chapter focuses on enemy-mongering discourse and examines how repression is legitimized through fear-based narratives that construct internal threats and justify the targeting of alleged adversaries. The following chapter turns to collaboration-seeking discourse, analyzing how citizens are invited, encouraged, and morally positioned as participants in the denunciatory order. Collectively, these chapters show how state discourse constructs both the targets of denunciation and the subjects expected to participate in it.

This chapter begins by examining how political discourse was constructed, reconstructed, and adopted within a crisis-driven, reactionary framework. It shows how, in the face of a sequence of political crises, rhetoric became a central arena of repression through the discursive strategies used to target, frame, and securitize regime adversaries. In doing so, the chapter maps the macro-level conditions that help explain how a social environment emerged in which citizens came to surveil, denounce, and report one another on behalf of the state. At the same time, it shows how discursive repression was legitimized by embedding the struggle

against political opponents within broader narratives of national protection, existential threat, and civic duty. To this end, the chapter analyses political discourse between 2013 and 2016, a period marked by a series of crises that posed existential threats to Erdoğan's regime: the Gezi Protests of 2013, the corruption scandal of 2013, the general elections of 2015, and the coup attempt of 2016.

While the thesis treats all four crises as constitutive moments in the making of the regime's enemy discourse, the 2013 corruption scandal occupies a particularly decisive place in the genealogy of denunciations. The scandal introduced the narrative of the enemy from within, initiating a de facto witch-hunt against the Gülen movement by recasting a former ally as an internal, clandestine, and institutionally embedded enemy. This logic was later extended to the re-securitization of the Kurds, and after the failed coup attempt, it was transformed into a *de jure* campaign of state purification. In this process, the logic of hidden enemies expanded beyond alleged Gülenists to encompass a broader field of political opposition. In this sense, the "parallel state" narrative was central to the institutionalisation of denunciation because it rendered ordinary citizens, colleagues, and bureaucratic insiders necessary actors in the detection of concealed affiliations and disloyalties.

The analysis reveals a recurrent repertoire of crisis-driven narratives through which adversaries are criminalized, securitized, stigmatized, and excluded. It identifies a cyclical pattern of enemy-making that coincides with moments of political crisis: after each episode, new groups are designated as regime opponents and incorporated into an expanding field of suspicion. This process substantiates the collective struggle against internal enemies as a central political agenda. Although the pattern draws on pre-existing social cleavages, it continually broadens as the regime's perceived vulnerabilities shift. Enemy-making thus emerges as the central mechanism of discursive repression through which mass denunciations became politically intelligible and socially actionable. By framing selected groups and individuals as threats to the state, rhetorical strategies mobilized from above helped construct a culture of reporting, obedience, and civic vigilance.

The analysis further shows that fear-mongering operates in tandem with enemy construction to intensify the perception of threat. Conspiratorial narratives are cyclically reactivated and adapted to changing political contexts, amplifying imaginaries of danger around the "enemies of the state." In this way, enemy construction and fear-mongering work together as key instruments of discursive repression, shaping the state demand for denunciatory action. By framing opponents as existential threats to the collective whole, political discourse transforms conflict into a zero-sum struggle for the nation's survival and legitimizes surveillance, reporting, and punishment as acts of civic defence and loyalty.

Before turning to these analyses, the chapter begins with a brief account of the methodological approach.

2. Implementation of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)

This section outlines how the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is applied in this study, with particular attention to data collection, classification, sampling, coding, and the analytical and conceptual toolkit used in the analysis. It also summarizes the main findings by highlighting the key discourse topics, themes, and argumentation strategies, thereby preparing the ground for the empirical chapters that follow.

2.1. Data Collection and Classification

Critical Discourse Analysis pays particular attention to the language of power holders, as they possess the resources and means to shape discourse with their ideology and sustain their dominance. Within this tradition, the DHA narrows its focus to the political field, placing special emphasis on the language of political elites as key power holders. Wodak (2001) contends that elites not only shape public opinion and interests but also act as seismographs, registering shifts in public sentiment and group interests. This underscores the complex, reciprocal relationship between politics and society, which research must seek to clarify; discourse analysis offers one tool among many (p. 3).

Following this approach, the analysis concentrates on speeches delivered by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan between 2013 and 2016, first in his capacity as prime minister and subsequently as president. The selected timeframe captures a period in which the earlier consolidation of AKP power developed into a sharper personalist and authoritarian turn. Beginning around 2013, successive political crises were accompanied by the growing concentration of political authority around Erdoğan and the increasingly central role of his discourse in defining political threats, legitimate opposition, and national belonging. His election as president in Turkey's first direct presidential election in 2014 marked an important stage in this process, although the presidency did not yet formally control the executive under the parliamentary system. Erdoğan's dominance was further institutionalised in 2018, when the parliamentary system was replaced by the presidential system and executive authority was formally transferred to the presidency. Examining his speeches therefore provides a valuable lens for tracing the discursive dimensions of personalisation and autocratisation, as well as the political narratives through which popular denunciations were encouraged and justified.

2.1.1. Description of data

In DHA, discourses are analysed in relation to their "field of action" (Girnth, 2002), that is, the specific institutional and situational frame in which they occur. Identifying these fields enables the tracing of how discourses function across different settings and how they interrelate. Within the political domain, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) distinguish eight fields of action: 1) formation of public attitudes, 2) political executive, 3) party-internal formation of attitudes, 4) political advertising, 5) law-making, 6) political control, 7) international relations, and 8) inter-party formation of attitudes.

In this study, speeches are categorized into five action areas based on their institutional and political context. No speeches fell under the *law-making* category, and those delivered in the *international* field were excluded as irrelevant. An additional category (Code 5) was created for speeches delivered in local administrative meetings with Mukhtars[3]. While these could ordinarily be grouped under the *political executive* field of action (Category 2), they were treated separately because of their distinctive character and high frequency. Mukhtars, although part of the local administrative structure tied to the Ministry of Interior, differ from appointed officials such as provincial governors in that they are democratically elected during local elections, yet cannot be nominated by political parties. This unique status, combined with their strategic importance in the state's agenda, explains why Erdoğan formalized and routinized meetings with them at the presidential palace. These speeches are not only highly symbolic but also exceptionally rich as data sources, warranting their placement in a distinct field of action.

The type of occasions has been categorized under relevant fields of action:

[3] Mukhtars are elected village or neighbourhood heads. They are elected during local elections, but they are not nominated by the political parties.

Formation of public attitudes (Code1)	Political executive (Code2)	Party internal (Code3)	Political advertising (Code4)	Local-level administrative meetings (Code5)
Opening ceremonies	Parliamentary inauguration	Party congress	Party membership ceremony	Regular meetings with mukhtars in the presidential palace
National address	District governor meetings	Party group meeting	Post-election "Balcony address"	
Cultural events	Cabinet meeting press conference	Events/gathering/ receptions	Rallies	
Public addresses during domestic visits	Presidency evaluation meeting	Party provincial addresses		
Receptions/ dinners	Academic/institutional Inauguration	Party representative meetings		
Rallies	Professional/business general assemblies	Regular party evaluation and consultation meeting		
Meeting with groups (students/ professional groups)	Councils on various topics (law, family, etc)	Party municipality representatives meeting		
National celebrations/ ceremonies				
Public address in disaster zones				

Table 1: Events categorized based on the relevant field of action

2.1.2. Sampling

Meyer and Wodak observe that most CDA approaches offer no explicit guidance on sampling, with studies often relying on "typical texts." Yet what counts as "typical" in particular social circumstances usually remains vague (2009, p.33). To address this, the thesis employed a two-step sampling strategy that combined random and purposive selection. Before sampling, all speeches included in the dataset were categorized into five fields of action based on their institutional and political context (Appendix A, Table 1). Then, for the first-step sampling, one speech from each category was randomly selected from those delivered closest to key historical milestones, both before and after each event. This procedure ensured that the initial sample was not biased by the researcher's preference. Then, to complement the random selection, purposive sampling was applied to include additional speeches of contextual or analytical significance, specifically those most proximate to major political turning points. This combination of random and purposive sampling allowed for both representativeness across categories and depth in relation to historically significant moments. The aim is not to measure word frequencies or the prevalence of specific discourses, but rather to capture the range of discourse strands on repression, co-optation, and legitimation.

Accordingly, seventy speeches delivered between 2013 and 2016 were selected from the relevant fields of action surrounding the four historical milestones that define the time frame. For each milestone, 7–8 speeches were sampled across categories, both before and after the

event, drawing from multiple fields rather than treating each separately. This design enabled the tracing of how discourse topics were recontextualized over time and across various arenas of political engagement. The field of *public attitude formation* constitutes the largest portion of the sample, reflecting Erdoğan's frequent use of this setting, followed by *local-level administrative* meetings with mukhtars. Sampling decisions for each individual speech are detailed in Appendix B.

Field of action	Number of speeches
Formation of public attitude	22
Political executive	18
Local-level administrative (Mukhtar) meetings	15
Political advertising	9
Party-internal	6

Table 2: The number of speeches selected from the available field of action

Two platforms were used for data collection. The primary source was the official website of the Presidency of Turkey, which hosts transcriptions of nearly all presidential addresses. For speeches delivered at local and administrative party meetings, transcriptions were obtained from the official website of the Nation's Library, where they are published in book format.

2.1.3. Context and background

The analysis identified four major historical moments that epitomize episodes of political turmoil, driven by threats to the regime and subsequent crackdowns. Each of these moments produced "existential crises" (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016) for Erdoğan at a time when he was only beginning to consolidate his power and entrench his rule. In the face of these threats, the regime grew increasingly repressive, adopting strategies to silence opposition and tighten social control. Central to this process was the use of divisive populist rhetoric that polarized society into friends and foes, deepening antagonism between loyalists and dissidents. These milestones crystallize the points at which different dissenting voices and marginalized groups were recast as existential threats to the regime's survival (Table 3).

Incident	Time	Contextual notes
Gezi Protests	June 2013	Environmental protests against the demolition of trees in Taksim Square for a planned shopping mall escalated into nationwide demonstrations lasting 20 days, resulting in 4,900 arrests, 81 detentions, and 11 deaths
Corruption scandal	December 2013	Former ally and cleric Fethullah Gülen, along with his community, leaked phone recordings implicating Erdoğan in money laundering.
Parliamentary elections	June 2015	Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its parliamentary majority after the People's Democratic Party (HDP) passed the 10% threshold; subsequent deadly bombings, the collapse of peace talks with the Kurdish armed group PKK, and renewed elections followed.
Coup attempt	July 2016	A faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted a coup d'état against the state. State of Emergency followed.

Table 3: Historical milestones as chosen timeframe and contextual notes

2.2. Conceptual and analytical framework

2.2.1. Levels of analysis

This study applies the two-level analytical pathway of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). The entry-level analysis explores the main themes and topics that emerge in the texts. This stage is theory-led in its focus on identifying the discursive repression of political opponents and the discursive co-optation of citizens, yet it also incorporates an inductive dimension to capture context-specific topics. At this level, texts are coded according to their discourse topics without further linguistic or rhetorical examination, serving primarily to organize overarching themes and subthemes. The in-depth analysis then investigates the discursive and linguistic strategies used to construct and present these topics. For this stage, the study draws on the conceptual and analytical tools developed by DHA scholars, with particular attention to argumentation strategies that reveal how meanings, positions, and power relations are discursively produced.

2.2.2. Conceptual framework

The analysis of discourse is theory-led, structured around three overarching concepts central to authoritarian governance: repression, co-optation, and legitimation. Rather than treating these dimensions in isolation, the study adopts a relational perspective that highlights how they interact and co-produce one another in the context of denunciations. This framework allows tracing how discourse simultaneously excludes political opponents and incorporates

strategic actors. These twin processes of exclusion and inclusion operate as macro-strategies of repression and co-optation, reinforced through the legitimizing narratives.

At the discursive level, repression operates through strategies such as stigmatisation, intimidation, securitisation, discrimination, and criminalisation, which collectively function to demobilise opponents by exclusion. In contrast, co-optation works through the construction of in-group membership, the delegation of power and authority, the cultivation of vested interests in the regime, and the allocation of social status and prestige, thereby mobilising strategic actors by inclusion.

Finally, the analysis also attends to legitimation, which underpins both repression and co-optation. The study distinguishes between *pre-legitimation*, where discursive practices prepare the ground for exclusionary or inclusionary strategies, and *legitimation proper*, where such practices retrospectively justify them. At the same time, it recognizes that *argumentation* strategies, such as the use of *topoi*[4] and other justificatory frameworks, *claims*, and *fallacies*[5], operate within these categories, providing the concrete discursive means through which legitimation is articulated. Taken together, this framework allows capturing how the broader repertoire of authoritarian discourse, reinforcing repression, extending co-optation, and securing legitimation, shapes the context that produces popular denunciations. The conceptual framework is illustrated below:

[4] In DHA, topoi (singular: *topos*) are understood as the argumentative premises on which claims are connected to conclusions. They operate as the underlying reasoning principles—often implicit—that justify why a particular argument is valid and persuasive in a given context (Kienpointner, 1992). In political discourse, topoi function to justify a proposed action for a given problem through argumentation that portrays the measure as necessary or self-evident. For example, a *topos of threat/danger* justifies political action by invoking imminent risks.

[5] Faulty logic, a flaw in reasoning that make an argument misleading or invalid. Even if it sounds plausible, the conclusion does not logically flow from premises.

Discursive construction of exclusion vs inclusion	
Macro strategies of repression: Demobilisation by exclusion	**Macro strategies of co-optation: Mobilisation by inclusion**
Discursive repression of political opponents	Discursive co-optation of strategic actors for collaboration
Macro-discursive strategies of repression	**Macro-discursive strategies of co-optation**
. Stigmatisation . Intimidation . Securitisation . Discrimination . Criminalization	. In-group membership construction . Delegation of power & authority . Instilling vested interest in the regime . Allocation of social status & prestige
Legitimation & pre-legitimation of exclusion	**Legitimation & pre-legitimation of inclusion**

Table 4: Conceptual framework

2.2.3. Analytical toolkit

DHA offers a flexible set of conceptual and analytical instruments for investigating how power operates through language. Originally designed to examine the language of political elites, DHA is concerned not only with what is said but also with how it is said, and with the ideological effects produced in specific historical contexts (Wodak, 2001). Its central aim is to uncover how political actors use discourse to reproduce authority, justify action, and persuade audiences. Building on this tradition, the present study assembles an analytical toolkit that integrates several frameworks developed within DHA and related scholarship. This toolkit enables a broad analysis ranging from the examination of *argumentation* and *self/other representation* to the identification of *blame-shifting and avoidance*, *pre-legitimation*, *framing*, and *manipulation* strategies.

Argumentation strategies constitute the first component of the toolkit. In DHA, argumentation is analyzed through linguistic constructs such as *topoi*, *fallacies*, and *claims*, which function as the basic units of analysis. *Topoi* are pragmatic features of communication that serve purposes of justification, persuasion, and (de)legitimation. Rather than being fixed categories, they are context-dependent and emerge in relation to specific discursive aims. Argumentation may also rely on *fallacies*—forms of invalid or distorted reasoning—such as *false dilemmas*, ad *hominem attacks*, or irrelevant conclusions. Finally, *claims* embedded within arguments appeal either to normative rightness or to factual truth (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Taken together, these elements highlight how arguments are constructed, reinforced, or distorted in political discourse.

The *discursive self- and other-presentation model* focuses on how social actors are represented linguistically. DHA stresses that discourses not only include or exclude groups but also qualify them in positive or negative terms. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) identify several strategies for this purpose: *reference/nomination* strategies, construct in-groups and out-groups through membership categories, metaphors, or the use of specific verbs and nouns; *predication* strategies ascribe qualities and stereotypes through adjectives, collocations, or comparisons; *perspectivization* positions the speaker's stance and degree of involvement by means of deictics, metaphors, or direct/indirect speech; and *intensification or mitigation* strategies modulate the epistemic weight of propositions through hyperboles, diminutives, or verbs of feeling and thinking. Together, these strategies reveal how discourses shape identities, establish boundaries, and position actors in relation to one another.

Because political discourse often involves attempts to deny or displace responsibility, the toolkit also includes a framework for avoiding and shifting blame. Following van Dijk (1992) and Hansson (2015), this framework captures six strategies commonly used to evade accountability: (1) *act denial*, (2) *control denial*, (3) *intention denial*, (4) *goal denial*, (5) *mitigation or down-toning*, and (6) *turning the tables (blaming the victim)*. These strategies reveal how political actors seek to reframe events, minimize responsibility, or transfer blame onto opponents and outsiders. In addition, the study draws on a set of fallacies identified by Hansson (2015) that further illustrate how blame is shifted: *association fallacy* (guilt-honour by association), *ad hominem* (attacking the person rather than the argument), *false cause* (suggesting an unfounded causal link), *majoritarian rightness* (claiming something is true because most people support it), *projection/transference* (attributing one's own faults to others), and the *strawman fallacy* (misrepresenting an opponent's argument to refute it more easily).

The toolkit also incorporates the concept of *manipulation* as theorized by van Dijk (2006). Manipulation is defined as the discursive abuse of power, an illegitimate exercise of influence that operates against the best interests of audiences (p.360). Two forms are particularly relevant: (1) *short-term memory-based manipulation*, which distorts understanding or biases interpretation in ways that disadvantage recipients, and (2) *extensive group polarization*, which heightens divisions and exploits vulnerabilities such as strong emotions, limited knowledge, or subordinate status. By lowering resistance and fostering compliance, manipulation strategies show how discourses move beyond persuasion to domination.

The analysis also draws on *framing*, a communicative strategy that shapes how issues are presented and interpreted (Huckin, 1997). Frames function both as strategic acts and as analytical categories for examining discourse, revealing the strategic logic of power holders and the broader interpretive structures within which discourses are embedded (Sedlaczek,

2017, p.6). Building on Hansson's (2015) work on blame-shifting, this study focuses on two key frames while also incorporating context-specific ones that emerged from the material. In the *rescue narrative*, political leaders portray themselves as heroes, or sometimes victims, of contested events. In the *bad apple frame*, responsibility is displaced onto individual wrongdoers, invoking the proverb that "one bad apple spoils the barrel" (p.301). Although often used to deflect blame, these frames also function more broadly by reinforcing positive self-representation and signposting retribution for adversaries.

Finally, the toolkit incorporates the concept of *pre-legitimation*. Building on Krzyżanowski's (2014) notion of discursive construction as a pre- rather than post-factual process, the study treats *pre-legitimation* as a unit of analysis. This refers to moments when elements of the political agenda are introduced into the public arena, signposting justification before actions are taken. Focusing on pre-legitimation enables the tracing of how political actors prepare the ground for contested measures in advance, thereby shaping public acceptance before implementation.

In sum, this toolkit draws together complementary frameworks from the DHA tradition and scholarship. *Argumentation* and *self/other representation* expose the linguistic mechanics of persuasion and identity construction; *blame avoidance* and *framing* capture the narrative means through which responsibility is deflected; *pre-legitimation* highlights the strategies by which actions are justified in advance; and *manipulation* uncovers the cognitive and ideological effects of discourse. Together, these tools enable a comprehensive analysis of how political language constructs, defends, and consolidates power.

Steps of analysis and analytical tools are illustrated below:

Multi-level analysis				
	Step	**Aim**	**Key categories**	**Analytical tools**
1.	Entry-level (theme oriented)	Mapping out discourse contents & establishing boundaries between discourses	Discourse topics (theory-led & context dependent)	Discourses of/about: . political opponents . cooperation & collaboration . context-dependent topics
2.	In-depth level (strategy oriented)	Examination of in-depth, pragmatic features of discourse & their strategic aims	**Goals**	**Strategies**
			Positive self-negative other presentation	Reference/nomination-Predication- Perspectivisation-Intensification/mitigation
			Blame avoidance	Act denial-Control denial-Intention denial-Goal denial-Mitigation/downtoning-Scapegoating- Red herring
			Blame shifting	Association fallacy-Appeal to pity-False cause-Ad hominem-Majoritarian rightness-Strawman-Projection
			Frames	Rescue narrative-Bad apple-Context-dependent frames
			Argumentation	Topoi-fallacies-claims of truth-claims of normative rightness
			Cognitive manipulation	Short-term memory-based manipulation- Extensive group polarisation
			Pre-legitimation	Signposting (context-dependent)

Table 5: Analytical toolkit

2.3. Analytical strategy: Coding, steps of analysis, and summary of results

This section guides the reader through the coding process by outlining the strategies and logic applied in the two-step analysis. It begins with a description of *entry-level coding*, showing how emerging *themes and topics* are ordered hierarchically. It then explains the *in-depth level of coding*, illustrating how texts are coded into predefined and context-dependent discursive strategies. Following this, the section presents an overview of the distribution of discourse topics and themes from the entry-level coding, as well as the discursive strategies identified during the in-depth coding. The findings are visualized in NVivo through hierarchical coding structures and coding density, without numerical references. This choice reflects DHA's focus on identifying dominant themes and discursive patterns rather than quantifying word frequency. Given the size of the dataset, visualizations are included to aid interpretation. Snapshots of coding panels are included in Appendix E to illustrate the coding process.

In the initial coding phase, seventy speeches were analyzed through a coding logic centered on meaning. Accordingly, coding was primarily conducted at the sentence level, though sentence

clusters or full paragraphs were also coded when they conveyed a unified idea (Appendix E, Figure 5). Initially, discourse topics were identified as the concrete subjects explicitly addressed in the speeches. When several topics clustered together, they were grouped under a unifying code. Where broader, underlying ideas or messages emerged, these were coded as *discourse themes* and placed hierarchically above the relevant topics (Appendix E, Figure 1).

Some topics, however, remained standalone without being placed under a thematic umbrella. These acted as unifying labels, serving as empirical anchors whose salience would be diluted if they were forced into another category (Appendix E, Figure 2). Thus, in the master codebook, *descriptive* and *thematic codes* coexist in a flexible hierarchical system. While discourse topics capture the surface content of what is said, themes reveal deeper patterns of meaning that often cut across multiple topics. Both were coded hierarchically in NVivo to capture recurrence and interconnections across the dataset. The treemap visualization illustrates the results of entry-level coding, showing how some discourse topics are embedded within broader thematic categories, while others remain as standalone codes that function as central anchors in the dataset. For example, "the PKK" as a discourse topic is nested under the thematic category of "Enemies of the State". However, the "General Elections", as another discourse topic, remains a standalone code due to its centrality.

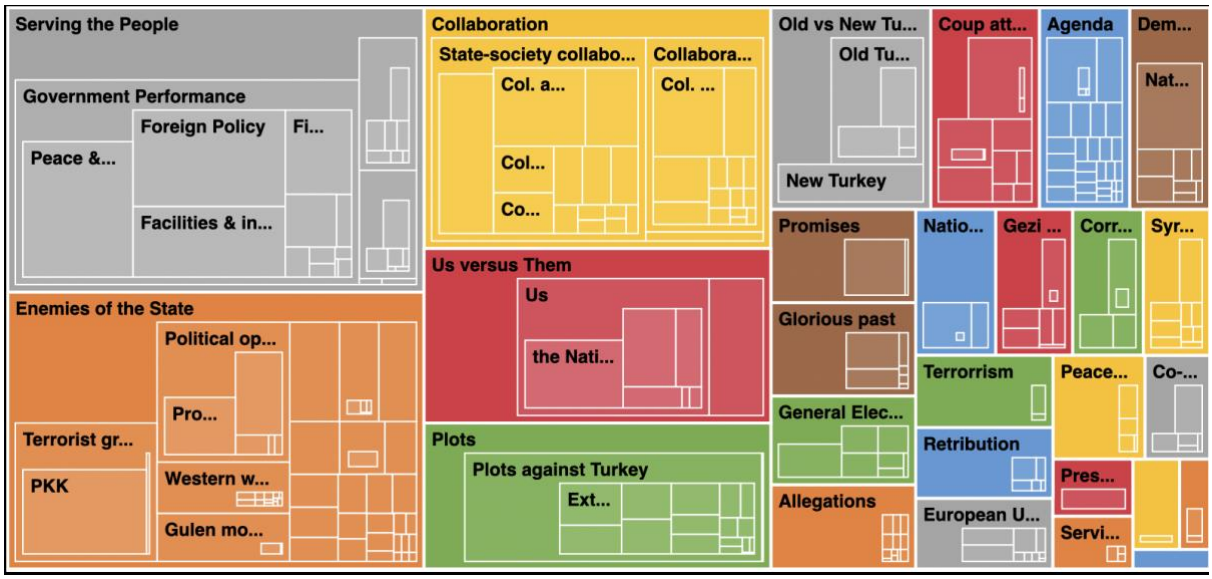


Figure 1: Discourse topics & themes and hierarchy of code based on coding density

In the second round of coding, the discourse topics and themes identified in the first stage were examined through discursive strategies drawn from the analytical toolkit. Unlike the entry-level coding, which followed an inductive logic, this stage was primarily deductive. Texts were coded at the sentence or sentence cluster level under the pre-defined relevant discursive strategy and its corresponding child categories. For example, the strategy of *positive self-*

representation contained four predefined subcategories: *reference, predication, perspectivisation,* and *mitigation*, to which sentences were coded deductively (Appendix E, Figure 3).

Some strategies in the toolkit combined predefined and context-dependent sub-units, requiring both deductive and inductive coding. For instance, *Argumentation* is such a discursive strategy encompassing both fixed subcategories (*Claims*) coded deductively and context-dependent subcategories (*Fallacies* and *Topoi*) coded through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (Appendix E, Figure 4).

2.3.1. Summary of results

The entry-level analysis focuses on *what is said*, identifying the dominant discourse topics and themes that emerge during the initial coding phase. The sunburst diagram (Figure 2) demonstrates the dominant discourse topics and themes identified in the sample during the initial coding phase. The dominant topics and themes are colour-coded and visualized individually. The sub-themes are not shown; however, they are visualized radiating outwards from a central point.

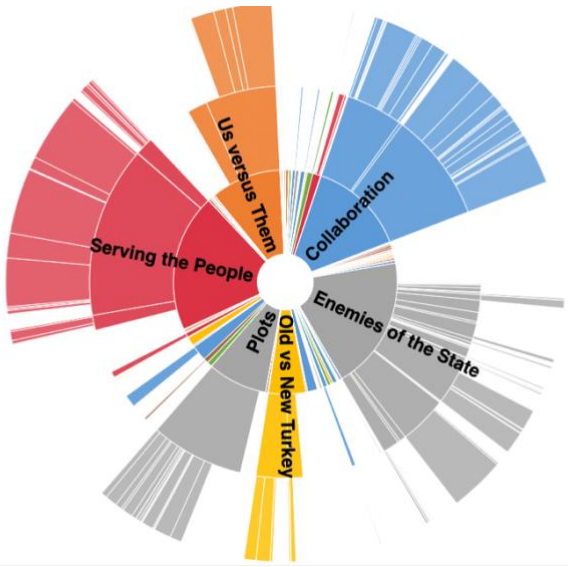


Figure 2: Discourse topics & themes based on coding density

Serving the People occupies a significant portion of the chart and is prominently displayed, indicating it is a dominant theme in the speeches. This is followed by *Enemies of the State,* which has a substantial presence in the chart, signifying its importance in the discourse. Another major theme, depicted in a considerable section, is *Collaboration*. The *Us versus Them* theme is highlighted prominently, suggesting a common narrative in the speeches. *Plots* is also a dominant discourse theme identified in the sample. This is followed by '*Old vs New Turkey,*' represented in the diagram, which is a slightly smaller section compared to the other themes.

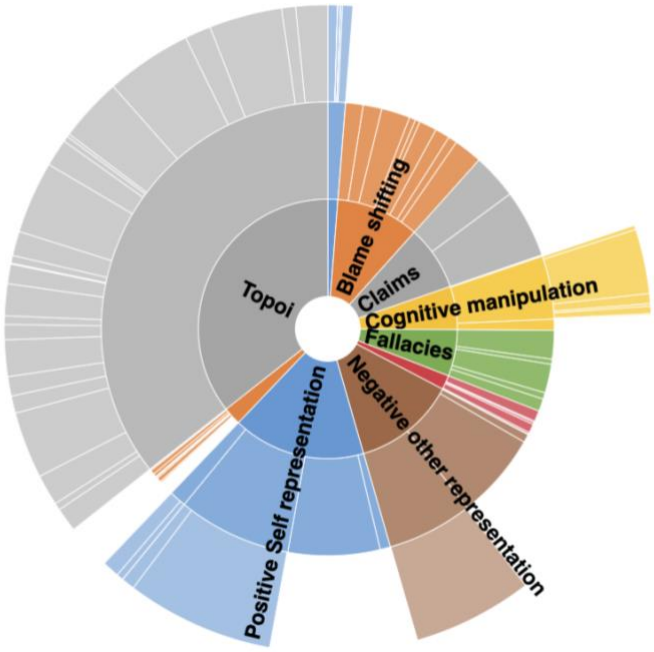


Figure 3: Discursive strategies based on coding density

The in-depth analysis focuses on *how things are said*, drawing on analytical units from the DHA toolkit to examine how discourse topics and themes are presented. The sunburst chart (Figure 3) visualizes the hierarchical organization of discursive strategies in the analysed speeches, categorizing them into primary strategies and their respective sub-strategies based on coding density. While *argumentation* constitutes the largest category overall, it is shown in its disaggregated form to reveal the internal variation between *topoi, claims*, and *fallacies*. This highlights the diversity of reasoning devices to justify actions, legitimize authority, and assign responsibility. The most salient *topoi—threat and danger, usefulness*, and *duty and responsibility*—illustrate how political discourse relies on these themes to legitimize measures and political actions. *Positive self-representation* and *negative other-representation* also feature prominently, reflecting the dual emphasis on self-promotion and denigration of others. Finally, *blame shifting*, *cognitive manipulation*, *pre-legitimation*, and *framing* demonstrate the additional techniques used to shape audience perception and justify political acts. Although *pre-legitimation* and *framing* are not labelled in the visualization, their underlying segments are visible, reflecting their analytical relevance.

The emerging topics, themes, and dominant discursive strategies identified in the analysis, as visualized in the sunburst diagram, informed the decision to structure the macro-level analysis around the overarching conceptual framework of repression, co-optation, and legitimation. Discursive exclusion is most prominently articulated through an *us-versus-them* narrative, materialized in the theme of *Enemies of the State*, which corresponds to the first dimension, *repression*. By contrast, discursive inclusion is achieved through the theme of *Collaboration*, advanced via the narrative of *Old vs. New Turkey* and the service-oriented rhetoric

captured under *Serving the People*. This reflects the second dimension, co-optation. Finally, both inclusion and exclusion are justified through conspiratorial narratives, as shown by the dominant theme of *Plots*, which underpins processes of legitimation. On this basis, the macro-level analysis is organized into two empirical chapters that trace exclusionary strategies of enemy-making and inclusionary strategies of collaboration-seeking, while examining the justificatory appeals that sustain both.

3. The making of the "enemy"

> 'Oh, my enemy, you are my voice and my speed.
> Day depends on night, and I, too, need you indeed.'
> (Recited by Erdoğan on 29 July 2016, quoting N. Fazıl Kısakürek)

3.1. Transformation of the political discourse in the face of social and political crises

Following Akkoyunlu and Öktem's (2016) periodization, the AKP's rule under Erdoğan can be divided into three phases preceding the consolidation of a more overt authoritarian turn. The first phase, from 2002 to 2007, began with the AKP's decisive electoral victory in 2002, which swept many established parties from the political landscape and marked the party's emergence as a reformist and pro-EU force. The second phase, from 2007 to 2011, followed the AKP's renewed electoral victory in 2007 and saw the party consolidate its position as the dominant actor in Turkish politics, particularly through the weakening of secularist veto players and the 2010 constitutional referendum. The third phase, beginning with the AKP's sweeping electoral victory in 2011, marked a sharper concentration of power and the onset of successive political and social crises, most notably the Gezi protests in 2013.

With the clarity of hindsight, Akkoyunlu and Öktem's phased perspective illuminates the authoritarian trajectory of the regime, highlighting key milestones in the AKP's movement from a reformist, moderate, pro-Western Islamic party to a populist, authoritarian, and hegemonic party that increasingly captured the state machinery (2016). The first two phases of AKP rule were marked by efforts to survive and establish the party as a legitimate actor within a political landscape still shaped by Kemalist tutelage embedded in the military and judiciary. During this period, the AKP confronted closure proceedings before the Constitutional Court, military scrutiny through the 2007 e-memorandum, and large secularist rallies in major cities. Yet by mobilizing support from liberal and progressive segments of society and by advancing constitutional reform, especially through the 2010 referendum, the AKP gained both an

institutional and psychological upper hand over military-judicial tutelage (Bali, 2010; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Rumpf & Akartürk, 2008).

The third phase of AKP rule was marked by successive political and social crises that tested the regime's resilience and deepened its authoritarian trajectory. The first major rupture came with the 2013 Gezi protests, which began as resistance to the redevelopment of Gezi Park but quickly expanded into a broader revolt against Erdoğan's increasingly majoritarian and socially conservative rule. Restrictions on alcohol sales and other interventions into lifestyle politics contributed to the mobilization of secular and urban opposition, while police repression turned the protests into a nationwide confrontation (Yörük & Yüksel, 2014). Only months later, the 17 December corruption scandal exposed the rupture between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement[6], transforming tensions within the former governing coalition into open confrontation. Freedom House notes that the split between Gülen supporters and Erdoğan burst into public view with the scandal, which unfolded through leaks, media coverage, and stories in Gülen-linked outlets (Corke et al., 2014a).

The crisis deepened in 2015, when the June parliamentary elections delivered another blow: for the first time since coming to power, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority after the pro-Kurdish HDP crossed the 10 percent threshold and entered parliament as a major opposition force. The HDP's success in crossing the 10 percent electoral threshold was a major factor in depriving the AKP of its parliamentary majority. Coalition negotiations failed during a period that also saw the collapse of the Kurdish peace process, renewed conflict with the PKK, and a series of major attacks. The repeat election of November 2015 then restored the AKP's parliamentary majority. This, according to Esen and Gümüşçü, was confirmation of Turkey's competitive authoritarian trajectory (2016). The most severe existential threat, however, came in July 2016, with the failed coup attempt attributed by the government to Gülen-affiliated officers. Its failure triggered an unprecedented purge, a two-year state of emergency, derogations from certain human-rights obligations, and extensive rule through emergency decree-laws that weakened ordinary procedural and judicial safeguards (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The coup thus marked the climax of this sequence of crises, crystallizing the regime's

[6] The Gülen movement is commonly characterized in the literature as an Islamist fraternal network organized around religious, educational, social, and business activities in Turkey and abroad, under the leadership of the US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen. Existing scholarship has also documented the movement's significant penetration of state institutions, with sympathizers and affiliates substantial influence within parts of the police, judiciary, and bureaucracy, alongside more contested allegations concerning the military (Albright et al., 2012; Yavuz & Koç, 2016)

de-democratization and functioning as a decisive turning point after which Erdoğan's repression expanded collectively against political dissent.

Among these crises, the 2013 corruption scandal occupies a particularly important place in the evolution of denunciations because it introduced the narrative of the enemy from within. While the Gezi protests positioned opposition largely as visible street dissent, the fallout with the Gülen movement produced a different enemy figure: the hidden insider allegedly embedded within state institutions and wider social networks. As Taş shows, Erdoğan redeployed the term "parallel state" after the 17 December corruption investigations to designate Gülen and the alleged network of his followers within the state, while subsequent efforts sought to transform this anti-Gülen campaign into state policy through National Security Council decisions in 2014, 2015, and 2016 (2018). At the same time, Erdoğan's description of the Gülen community as consisting of "faith at the bottom, trade in the middle, and treason at the top" reflected a layered construction of enmity. The movement was framed not only as a clandestine political actor within the state, but also as a broader social formation extending across religious, economic, professional, educational, and institutional domains. Although this rhetoric distinguished the wider base from the allegedly treasonous leadership, it also made affiliation, association, and proximity politically suspicious. This discursive construction was crucial because dissent could no longer be assessed only through public acts of opposition; it could also be inferred from past affiliations, professional networks, educational histories, and everyday relations.

This logic of hidden enmity was later leveraged and extended in the re-securitization of the Kurdish issue in 2015. As the peace process collapsed and conflict resumed, Kurdish political actors and their perceived sympathizers were increasingly framed not only as political opponents, but as internal threats connected to terrorism, separatism, and national disintegration. The enemy-from-within narrative therefore moved beyond the Gülen movement and became available as a broader repertoire for identifying domestic adversaries. By the time of the failed coup attempt in 2016, this logic had been further expanded and institutionalized as a de jure campaign of state purification. The search for hidden enemies was no longer confined to alleged Gülenists or Kurdish actors, but extended to a wider field of unwanted opponents whose affiliations, loyalties, and everyday associations could be rendered suspicious.

The literature has established existential insecurity as a catalyst for Turkey's de-democratization (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016), informing a growing body of work that demonstrates how insecurity, fear, and anxiety within the AKP regime generated various survival strategies, including the extreme securitization of political opponents (I. Yilmaz et al.,

2022, 2023; Z. Yilmaz, 2017). Building on this perspective, the study explores the regime's response to crises during its third phase in order to understand how existential insecurity shaped Erdoğan's enemy-making discourse and informed its subsequent shifts.

However, the study does more than reveal the regime's existential insecurity or identify enemy-making as a product of reactionary authoritarian discourse. It demonstrates how the extreme securitization of political opponents operated as the key mechanism that unlocked denunciations as a state policy. Accordingly, this chapter traces enemy-making both as a reactionary survival strategy and as the genealogy of denunciations. In this trajectory, Gezi transformed the main regime rival into a visible enemy: secular urban dissenters, liberals, and foreign-backed destabilizers. The 2013 corruption scandal created the hidden enemy: insiders, infiltrators, parallel structures, and former allies turned traitors. The 2015 elections re-securitized Kurdish politics by rebranding pro-Kurdish political support as terrorism. The 2016 coup attempt then legalised and institutionalised the hunt through emergency rule, purges, legal exceptionalism, and the expansion of suspicion to a broader field of opposition.

The following section examines the discursive construction of "enemies of the state" and traces its historical evolution across the selected timeframe. By situating Erdoğan's speeches within key political milestones, it highlights how each existential crisis sharpened ideological boundaries and deepened social divisions, designating particular groups and identities as adversaries. The section also traces how enemy construction operated alongside fearmongering, through appeals to conspiracies and discursive imaginaries that magnified threats. In this way, enemy-making emerges as a reactionary defensive strategy deployed in times of political turmoil. Crucially, it also reveals how the boundaries of suspicion gradually expanded from visible dissent to hidden affiliation, redefining the contours of the political landscape and creating the discursive conditions under which denunciation could be normalized as civic vigilance.

3.2. Enemy discourse in the aftermath of the Gezi Protests

3.2.1. Antagonization along the "formative rifts"

On the day the Gezi Protests began as a small environmental sit-in, Erdoğan addressed his party's parliamentary group, celebrating new restrictions on "addictive substances", alluding to alcohol. He framed the law as a gift to "Mehmet the Conqueror's generation," linking it to his project of raising a religious generation, while dismissing critics of the "alcohol ban" by insisting that it was not an attack on secular lifestyles. Within hours, the protests spread nationwide, uniting diverse groups in the largest anti-regime mobilization in the Republic's

history. The alcohol law became a symbol of broader authoritarian encroachment on secular life. Although it was not the sole cause, it was the last straw in mounting opposition to Erdoğan's Islamic agenda.

This reaction reflected a long-standing societal cleavage between secular and religious camps. Conceptualized as the "centre–periphery framework" by Şerif Mardin (1973), this divide positioned the secular, bureaucratic establishment and state elites at the centre, while religious and conservative groups were relegated to the periphery, constituting Turkey's "formative rift" (Somer, 2019). Even if the framework does not fully capture contemporary electoral divides (Wuthrich, 2013), Erdoğan draws heavily on it in his populist discourse, portraying himself as the champion of the marginalized periphery against a secular, bureaucratic centre represented by the CHP and allied elites.

Following the Gezi protests, Erdoğan cast the CHP as the principal perpetrator of the demonstrations. He framed the party as the political representative of the "centre," aligning it with elites, intellectuals, and media outlets to portray a unified collective mastermind behind the unrest. This imagined "centre" also encompassed the military, judiciary, and secular segments of society. By placing the CHP at the centre of blame, Erdoğan engaged in *transference*, a strategy of projecting one's own failures or responsibilities onto an opponent. The rhetoric constructs the scene as though the CHP was in power, attributing the unrest and instability to its alleged failing policies, thereby deflecting accountability from the government to the corrupt centre:

> These protests represent the failure of the CHP and its policies. These protests are the result of the chaos and disorder the CHP has tried to incite. When the time and place come, my people will hold the CHP accountable for all these provocations at the ballot box (Ankara, 11 June 2013).

To deflect criticism of interfering with the secular lifestyle, Erdoğan invoked the core dichotomy that pitted conservatives against seculars, a recurrent strategy in his enemy discourse. He positioned "the people" against "the significant others," assigning the former the task of punishing the CHP at the ballot box. Erdoğan's early enemy construction drew on a rhetoric of democracy while deploying a *straw man* strategy: by reducing the protests to mere "chaos and disorder," he misrepresented them as anti-democratic, while presenting elections as the only legitimate arena for accountability. In doing so, he simultaneously claimed the democratic high ground and cast his adversaries as undermining it.

Speeches delivered during the Gezi Protests provide tangible references to the elites, attacks on whom served multiple purposes for Erdoğan. Framed as the "crème de la crème" and the "privileged class," who were "few in number yet loud," elites were depicted as claiming

ownership of the state and imposing their lifestyle and ideals on society, an attempt crystallized in the Gezi protests:

> For 18 days, the violent actions undertaken have been an attempt by the minority to dominate the majority, by the privileged to reclaim their privileges from the disadvantaged, and by the elites to rule over the nation. We know those who cowardly, despicably, and immorally hide behind the facade of trees, the environment, and Gezi Park to pursue their own dirty agendas. We, along with our nation, are well aware of the interest lobby, the thieves of national will, and the upper crust who hide behind the guise of environmental concerns, as seen in Gezi Park (İstanbul, 1 June 2013).

By referring to the elites and members of the establishment as a "minority" attempting to seize power against the national will of the "majority," Erdoğan reinforces a membership categorization along the ideological lines of the "formative rift", solidifying his majoritarian understanding of democracy. He undermines the protests by portraying them as products of a "dirty agenda" conspiracy driven by an immoral pursuit of power. Dismissing the environmental concerns, he effectively shifts the blame through the *topos of danger* and an *appeal to conspiracy*.

Erdoğan's references to elites were particularly characterized by the *cognitive manipulation* technique of extreme group polarization, a discursive strategy that exploits the vulnerabilities of recipients, especially those of lower social status (Hansson, 2015). By repeatedly invoking the perceived contempt of elites toward ordinary people, Erdoğan sought to incite resentment in his audience:

> They say: 'We are educated, we are artists, we are writers, we are capitalists, we are privileged. We know everything, we understand everything. Our vote cannot be equal to that of a shepherd in Kayseri.' Yet these same people, who claim to represent 'the people,' demean this magnificent unity by calling them 'bottle-heads,' 'belly-scratchers,' 'sheep,' or voters who sell their ballot for pasta, flour, and coal (Kayseri, 21 June 2013).

Erdoğan's resort to an elite–people dichotomy functioned as a strategic discursive weapon. By attributing immorality to elites and portraying them as usurpers seeking to reclaim ownership of the state, he fostered hostility that consolidated his majoritarian narrative. In this way, attacks on elites served to delegitimize the protests while simultaneously legitimizing his own claim to embody and defend the popular will. The Gezi Protests thus became a pivotal moment when Erdoğan's rhetoric openly asserted his exclusive ownership of the state on behalf of the majority.

3.2.2. Discursive imaginaries: "interest lobby"

The Gezi Protests marked the onset of a cyclical pattern of enemy-construction in Erdoğan's discourse, in which conspiratorial imaginaries became embedded and repeatedly reproduced. "Interest lobby" is such a constructed imaginary enemy category that crystallized his populist narrative of a "corrupt elite." By weaving a narrative of financial conspiracy, Erdoğan

persistently claimed that the protests were orchestrated by an "interest lobby" profiting from economic instability through interest rates.

According to this framing, the wealthiest segments of society, those who profit from interest and financial speculation, enriched themselves by exploiting the people until the AKP's policies restored stability. As their profit diminished under this new order, they are cast as seeking to reintroduce instability and economic turmoil to regain their former advantages, thus becoming part of an "interest lobby" conspiring against the nation's prosperity. Erdoğan employs the *false cause fallacy*, suggesting that the Gezi protests erupted *because* Turkey was enjoying political and financial stability. The temporal coincidence is presented as evidence of a conspiracy, as though the protests could only be explained as an intentional attempt to sabotage prosperity:

> Right after these events, just as Turkey was soaring, these incidents began to emerge. Let no one be mistaken: using trees, the environment, or Taksim Gezi Park as excuses cannot hide the truth. They even compare the illegal occupation of Gezi Park to the Occupy Wall Street movement. But there the protest was against the billions of dollars the interest lobby earned effortlessly, while here, under the guise of leftism, they act as puppets of the interest lobby (Ankara, 11 June 2013).

From a discursive strategies perspective, the construction of the "interest lobby" as an enemy category is achieved through a range of rhetorical techniques. The term carries subtle Islamic connotations of *usury* (*ribâ*), framing it as morally corrupt and illegitimate. In this way, it reinforces the *us–versus–them* dichotomy while simultaneously anchoring another dominant theme in Erdoğan's discourse: the contrast between *Old and New Turkey*. By depicting the corrupt elite as the immoral "other," intent on exploiting the righteous and hardworking people through conspiracy, Erdoğan situates his leadership as the force that liberated the nation from this threat. Resorting to the *rescue narrative,* he repeatedly invokes the financially devastated Turkey his party inherited after the 2002 crisis, juxtaposing it with the political and economic stability he claims to have secured. This appeal to the collective memory of past traumas allows him to deflect responsibility for present unrest, attributing both past and current crises to the elites while dismissing environmental concerns as a façade masking ulterior motives. To heighten the persuasiveness of this narrative, Erdoğan escalates the scale of the threat by framing it as a transnational one:

> The same game is being played in Brazil right now... The symbols are the same... The posters are the same... Twitter and Facebook are the same... The international media is the same. They are doing everything they can to achieve in Brazil what they couldn't achieve in Turkey. It's the same game. The same trap. The same purpose... (Samsun, 22 June 2013).

Casting Wall Street as a reference point, Erdoğan also draws parallels to Brazil, situating Turkey's challenges within an imagined global conspiracy. This way, he transforms domestic

dissent into a manifestation of an external and coordinated assault, thereby legitimizing his defensive stance and reinforcing the need for unity under his leadership.

3.3. Enemy discourse in the aftermath of the corruption scandal

3.3.1. From a strategic ally to an arch enemy: The Gülen movement

The Gülen Movement emerged in the late 1960s as a loosely organised religious and social network centred on the teachings of Fethullah Gülen, as a grassroots "communitarian network of piety [cemaat]" (Yavuz, 2018, p. 19). Based on principles of Sunni Islam and fraternity, it developed an extensive national and international network of schools, media outlets, and business partnerships, accumulating significant capital and transforming into "an education-cum-media global movement [hareket]" (Yavuz, 2018, p. 19). While it denied political involvement in its early years, it faced scrutiny and prosecution from the secular Kemalist establishment, like other Islamic movements, including the National Outlook Movement from which the JDP/AKP emerged (Albright et al., 2012). Sharing a sense of victimhood vis-à-vis the secular establishment (Taş, 2018), the movement supported the JDP/AKP's rise, forming a strategic alliance that endured until its breakdown in 2012. During the years of alliance, the movement was widely associated as "a quasi-state actor" (Martin, 2022, p. 110), exerting influence within key sectors of the state, particularly the police, judiciary, bureaucracy, education system, and, to a more contested extent, the military. Yavuz and Koç (2016) describe this as more than an institutional presence, pointing instead to the movement's control over state institutions and its efforts to transform them from within through well-trained, educated, and competent bureaucrats. This occurred during what Watmough and Öztürk described as "a marriage of convenience" (2018), as both actors shared an interest in weakening the secular-Kemalist tutelary establishment.

Although tensions surfaced periodically, the decisive rupture began when Gülen-affiliated prosecutors launched investigations into top state officials, including the undersecretary of the National Intelligence Organization. Tensions intensified further in 2013 when the government moved to close private tutoring centres, which constituted an important recruitment and financial infrastructure for the movement. The conflict then erupted publicly through the December 2013 corruption investigations, where tapes documenting government corruption were leaked, implicating Erdoğan's inner circle. The 17 December operation resulted in the detention of dozens of bureaucrats, businesspeople, and relatives of government ministers. From that moment, the feud became public, and the Gülen movement was cast as the regime's archenemy and denounced in Erdoğan's discourse as an act of "treason."

3.3.2. The "Parallel State": A state within a state

The fallout with the Gülen Movement, which was an ideologically similar ally, had profound implications for Erdoğan and his already fragile regime. This betrayal not only shattered the alliance but also opened a new front of division that transcended the traditional secular–religious divide. More critically, it deepened the regime's sense of existential insecurity by exposing Erdoğan's vulnerability to actors who were widely believed, and increasingly officially alleged, to have developed influence within key state institutions, including the judiciary, security forces, bureaucracy, and military. To frame these internal enemies who wielded power from within, Erdoğan introduced the discourse of the "parallel state," casting them as an imminent and covert threat to the nation by highlighting two key features: infiltration and an attempt to topple the regime.

As the confrontation became public, Erdoğan swiftly launched a smear campaign, popularizing the term "parallel state" to describe Gülen followers and their alleged infiltration of strategic state institutions to hijack the state from within. In crafting this anti-Gülen narrative, Erdoğan drew on the concept of the "parallel state," coined by Robert Paxton in *Anatomy of Fascism* (2004); however, he used it differently from Paxton's formulation. Paxton used the concept to describe party organisations that existed alongside and reinforced the official state under fascism. Erdoğan instead applied the label to an allegedly clandestine and hostile network operating within state institutions. In his discourse, "parallel state" therefore functioned less in Paxton's original sense than as a pejorative synonym for a "state within the state."

This framing was consequential for the later normalization of denunciations. If the enemy was not only external or visibly oppositional, but hidden within institutions and everyday networks, then the state's information problem became central: alleged members, sympathizers, and collaborators had to be identified through traces of association, professional proximity, educational background, personal ties, and institutional history. The "parallel state" narrative, therefore, transformed suspicion into a political resource and created the discursive conditions under which reporting others could be framed as a necessary contribution to state security. This materialized in discourse:

> Unfortunately, there are such tools and dupes within the state. As the government, within the scope of our authority and fully adhering to the law, we will address this issue and are doing so. As a government that has fought against gangs, we will never allow new gangs, a state within the state, or parallel structures to form within the state (Ankara, 25 December 2013).

The rhetoric effectively leverages the *rescue narrative* as a *blame-shifting* strategy, underpinning a long-standing fight against illegality as the regime's core policy. Central to his discourse is the

portrayal of the movement as an illegal, gang-like structure, whose threat is magnified by framing it as part of a conspiracy orchestrated by a superior mastermind:

> In Turkey, a very dangerous organization has formed within some institutions, primarily the judiciary. This organization, through pressure, intimidation, and blackmail, is trying to take over the judiciary, seize control of other institutions, and commit an assassination against Turkey for the sake of international interests, following an organizational discipline (Ankara, 25 December 2013).

Although Turkish state authorities did not formally classify the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation until May 2016, two months before the failed coup, Erdoğan's discourse had long portrayed it as unlawful, conspiratorial, and threatening to state security. By depicting its activities as part of an organized plot to "assassinate" Turkey, he signalled the movement's outlawing in advance, thereby pre-justifying the state's subsequent witch hunt. The scale of the danger is amplified by a touch of conspiracy, presenting a dual nature of the threat, which is both internal, from infiltrators, and external, orchestrated by those managing it from afar, implicitly referring to the US-based leader, Gülen, and his global network. The narrative claims that by attacking Erdoğan, this network created chaos and disorder to serve its purposes:

> Let my people know this, let my people see this. This dirty game is being played against a Great Turkey. This scheme is organized against a New Turkey. This dirty game is not against us, not against the government, not against the AK Party, but directly against the nation, the country, the national will, and national sovereignty. This is an attempt to discredit politics. It is an effort to disregard the people's choices and sideline the nation (Ünye, 21 December 2013).

The narrative functioned to deflect attention from corruption allegations, even when supported by leaked recordings of his own phone calls. Fearmongering replaced accountability through *false equivalence* and *dichotomy fallacies*: corruption claims were reframed not as evidence of government misconduct but as part of a larger attack on Turkey itself. Within this logic, only two mutually exclusive explanations were possible: either the charges were an assassination attempt against the nation or they were not, leaving no room for critical scrutiny. However, Erdoğan's framing of the corruption scandal as an attack on Turkey, rather than on himself, is a discursive strategy that goes beyond mere blame-shifting. By consistently portraying any attack on him as an attack on Turkey, Erdoğan underscores the notion that he embodies the country and its interests, which he has strengthened since coming to power. Thus, attacking him is equated with attacking Turkey's interests, as these are inseparable in his narrative.

Erdoğan's persistent claim that he embodies the national will is central to his democratic rhetoric, serving as a quick rebuttal to any criticism or attack on his regime. By representing the true will of the "silent masses," he portrays his actions as reflecting the desires and will of the nation, thus equating an attack on him with an attack on the nation. This *false equivalence*

allows Erdoğan to effectively frame the corruption scandal as a "coup," reinforcing the idea that democracy is under threat. Although the actual coup attempt did not occur until 2016, the discourse surrounding the Corruption Scandal framed it as such, creating the perception of a continuous assault on democracy:

> During this one-and-a-half-month period, as you have all witnessed, the gravest, most severe, and most immoral coup attempt against our democracy was undertaken. Let me state from the outset: December 17 has gone down in Turkey's history of democracy and law as a dark stain. In its preparation, implementation, and the support it received from both inside and outside, the December 17 conspiracy has surpassed all other coup attempts and stands recorded as a betrayal of the nation, the state, and democracy (Ankara, 14 January 2014).

The discourse frames the 17 December Corruption Scandal as a coup attempt orchestrated from both inside and outside, a betrayal of the nation, the state, and democracy. It is depicted as an attack even graver than past military coups. Through *false equivalence*, *appeals to conspiracy*, and *intensification*, Erdoğan amplifies the threat, extending it beyond himself to encompass the wider public. Most importantly, he engages in *cognitive manipulation* by likening the scandal to the military coups that have long scarred Turkey, thereby invoking collective memories of past traumas to strengthen his narrative. Erdoğan advances the coup narrative by effectively juxtaposing the judiciary and the people:

> If there is a positive aspect to this event, it is that our entire nation has clearly seen what an organization aspiring to be a parallel state can do once it infiltrates the state (…) Yes, during this process, it became evident that a judicial coup was attempted in Turkey, orchestrated with internal organizational logic and hierarchy, aiming to transfer sovereignty from the people to the judiciary. We opposed this, and we will continue to oppose it (Istanbul, 4 January 2014).

Accordingly, as members of an "illegal parallel state" that aspires to rule the country from behind the scenes, the Gülen-affiliated prosecutors carried out a "judicial coup" with the ultimate goal of transferring sovereignty from the national will to the judiciary. The coup narrative helps Erdoğan shift the perceived threat and danger from the regime itself to the people and their will, revealing his discursive skills in creating enemies, sowing fear, and effectively deflecting blame while employing democratic rhetoric.

3.3.3. Discursive imaginaries: "alliance of forces" and "interest lobby"

The 2013 corruption scandal exposed allegations extending beyond domestic money laundering, implicating senior political figures and the state-owned Halkbank in an international sanctions-evasion controversy (B. F. Scott, 2019). Leaked materials alleged that Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab had bribed senior figures and used Halkbank to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran, a scheme later examined through U.S. prosecutions involving Zarrab and Halkbank executives (Scott, 2019). The scandal also marked a decisive rupture in the Erdoğan–Gülen alliance, bringing the power struggle between the AKP and the

Gülen movement into public view (Tee, 2021; Yavuz & Koç, 2016). Erdoğan subsequently framed the investigation as a coordinated conspiracy by domestic and external actors, a narrative that became central to the construction of the "parallel state" enemy discourse (Corke et al., 2014b; Yavuz & Koç, 2016). With prosecutors later framed by the government as part of the Gülenist 'parallel state' initiating the case and U.S. courts later amplifying it, the scandal bore all the hallmarks of a plot against Turkey, offering Erdoğan a ready platform for his allegations:

> Let me underline this in bold: this is an international plot, a scheme rooted abroad. Gangs formed within the state have been utilized as tools and subcontractors, while local collaborators and pawns, acting as proxies for global powers, have served as instruments in this conspiracy (Ünye, 21 December 2013).

At the core of the conspiracy are the claims of an alliance between external and internal forces in their hostile plans against Turkey. Additionally, there is an alliance among the internal enemies, who unite around their corrupt agendas:

> I would like to bring to your attention... Those who could never have been imagined coming together are now in alliance with each other. There is a dirty alliance in politics. There is a dirty alliance among organizations. This dirty alliance within Turkey is acting on orders and instructions from their international masters (Ünye, 21 December 2013).

The alliance-of-forces narrative amplifies perceptions of threat and danger by depicting an imagined coalition of local and international actors plotting against Turkey. Erdoğan's rhetoric further extends this by constructing a shared conspiracy frame that unites diverse crises, the Gezi Protests and the Corruption Scandal*,* under a single logic. Even though they exposed the regime's fragility, generating sustained tension for Erdoğan within the same year, these crises simultaneously became valuable discursive resources for his enemy-making project. He strategically wove them into an overarching narrative of state enemies, merging adversaries from across society into a single, coherent conspiracy. In his account, both events were orchestrated by external powers unsettled by Turkey's rise, who activated domestic collaborators to advance their dark aims:

> The forces disturbed by Turkey's stable growth, decisive reforms, transformation into a global power, economic expansion, and the fostering of unity by ending terrorism have targeted our noble journey by using their internal pawns. Just as the Gezi events were disguised under the guise of trees, parks, and the environment, the December 17 conspiracy was disguised under the guise of corruption (Ankara, 29 December 2013).

According to Taş (2018), these allegations were rooted in tensions with the Gülen movement, whose media withheld support during the Gezi protests, making it convenient for Erdoğan to link them to later conspiracy narratives. Here, Erdoğan employs the *false cause fallacy* by portraying the December 17 corruption scandal as a direct continuation of Gezi. The mere temporal sequence is presented as causal: because the Gülen-affiliated media did not side with the regime during Gezi, they are implicated as architects of the former and the latter incidents.

Framed as an alliance of hostile forces, this discourse amplified the sense of existential threat while deflecting attention from both corruption and the grievances underpinning Gezi.

Through the narrative of the *alliance of forces*, Erdoğan also effectively scapegoated the political opposition. By the time the Gezi protests and the Corruption Scandal erupted, the secular establishment, long entrenched in the military and judiciary, had already been neutralized. Yet its perceived threat persisted in Erdoğan's discourse, regularly resurfacing whenever an enemy was needed and serving to demonize its political representative, the Republican People's Party (CHP). In the post-corruption context, Erdoğan frequently cast the CHP as part of an alliance of hostile forces:

> Pay attention, my dear brothers and sisters... Forces abroad have set things in motion... Political parties, as if following orders, aligned themselves with this corrupt alliance. Who could have imagined that the CHP would stand in solidarity with these corrupt forces? (Manisa, 28 December 2013).

By lumping the CHP into the "corrupt alliance," Erdoğan not only delegitimized his main political rival but also reinforced the narrative of united forces aligned against his regime, linking together diverse actors from politics, the media, and the business world, including the nationalist MHP, Gezi protestors, left-wing organizations, and even terrorist groups, all allegedly collaborating with the Gülen movement and international conspirators. This discourse is marked by a *false dichotomy*: criticism of the government, even regarding documented misconduct such as corruption, is reduced to a binary choice: siding either with "us" or with "them." By accusing the opposition of complicity in the corruption plot, Erdoğan deflected blame, positioned himself as a victim of a conspiracy (*turning the tables* fallacy), and expanded his repertoire of enemy-mongering.

While the Corruption Scandal exposed a vast bribery network with international ramifications, including a court case in the United States against a Turkish bank, Halkbank (B. F. Scott, 2019), Erdoğan reverted to his familiar strategy of deflecting blame by reactivating the narrative of the "interest lobby," which he first introduced during the Gezi Protests only months earlier. Yet this time, the narrative evolved into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whereas earlier references depicted the lobby as an abstract and loosely defined conspiracy linked to external forces, during the corruption scandal, it took on a more concrete form with identifiable actors and tangible consequences. Erdoğan now framed the conspiracy as orchestrated abroad and executed by domestic collaborators within the judiciary. In this framing, the "interest lobby" became the driving force behind the scandal, allegedly seeking to undermine Turkey by targeting its state bank:

> They are targeting this bank—our successful, public, national bank. And this issue is more international than domestic. Why? Because this bank hinders the interest lobby, disrupts the chaos lobby, and threatens the enemies of Turkey. As long as Allah grants us life and breath, my friends

> and I will, without fear or hesitation, continue to share this truth. Our people, with their insight and wisdom, already see the game being played, but we will continue to expose it and remind them (Ünye, 21 December 2013).

To further cover up Halkbank's role in the Corruption Scandal, the conspiracy brings the U.S. to the table, not only to deflect blame but also to capitalize on widespread anti-American sentiment:

> Turkey's progress has unsettled some. A growing, New Turkey has disturbed the interest lobbies, the blood lobbies, and the war lobbies. Now these lobbies—the interest, blood, terror, and chaos lobbies—seek to destabilize our country, to carry out operations within it, and to halt the blessed journey of this noble nation (Manisa, 28 December 2013).

Erdoğan's references to lobbies producing "chaos, war, and blood" implicitly allude to the United States as a principal antagonist, which, allegedly, opposed Turkey's success. Within this narrative, the U.S. is depicted as collaborating with Fethullah Gülen, who lived under its protection, in a joint effort to destabilize Turkey. The corruption scandal's link to U.S. sanctions provided Erdoğan with a convenient platform to claim that Washington was orchestrating economic and political operations to undermine Turkey's stability.

3.4. Enemy discourse after the General Elections of 2015

3.4.1. Re-securitization of the "usual suspects"

Erdoğan's response to the Gezi protests and the Corruption Scandal was to criminalize and securitize perceived actors. Yet strikingly, the Kurds, who were long treated as the "usual suspects" in Turkish politics (I. Yilmaz et al., 2023), were absent from this enemy-making discourse even though the members of the pro-Kurdish party actively supported the Gezi protests. This omission reflected an ongoing de-securitization process initiated by the 2009 *Democratic/Kurdish Opening*, which, alongside EU accession reforms, aimed to normalize Kurdish identity and improve cultural and political rights. The launch of the Peace Talks with the PKK further reinforced this conciliatory approach, enhancing Erdoğan's popularity among Kurdish voters. This support was crucial, as Erdoğan sought a parliamentary majority to push through the presidential system, and the pro-Kurdish HDP had little chance of surpassing the 10% electoral threshold. In this context, demonizing the Kurds would have been politically counterproductive.

This dynamic shifted dramatically with the protests of October 2014, where Kurdish citizens, at their political representative, the HDP's call, mobilized against the government's inaction toward ISIS's assault on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani. The protests, which left forty-six people dead, provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to re-securitize the pro-Kurdish HDP. During his election campaign, he adopted a narrative, accusing the party of inciting violence and acting as the political wing of the PKK:

> These people are still being controlled by militants and have not laid down their weapons. Remember, on October 6-7-8, didn't one of these co-leaders incite people to take to the streets? Fifty people died, all of them Kurds, both the victims and the perpetrators. So how can they claim to represent my Kurdish citizens, my Kurdish brothers? This is the real issue (Sivas, 4 June 2015).

By linking the HDP directly to the PKK, Erdoğan sought to delegitimize the party while maintaining a distinction between the HDP and Kurdish citizens, whose electoral support he still courted. In this way, the Kobani protests became instrumental in justifying the re-securitization of the HDP, undermining its rising influence and countering its opposition to Erdoğan's presidential ambitions, while simultaneously reaffirming his claim to represent the broader Kurdish electorate.

In the pre-election period, marked by a renewed securitization trend, Erdoğan adapted his rhetoric to undermine the HDP. While the Kobani protests were instrumentalized for this purpose, they were not the only pretext. Erdoğan also drew heavily on religious discourse, portraying the HDP as both anti-Islamic and a threat to social cohesion by saying:

> They want to abolish the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Who says this? The party which is backed by the terrorist organization. Can a nation live without religion? (Van, 14 May 2015).

In this way, he accused the party of hostility toward religion, claiming it sought to abolish compulsory religious education, close Imam Hatip[7] schools, and eliminate the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

The "terror-backed party" label was reinforced by an even more provocative allegation rooted in discursive imaginaries: that the HDP, as the PKK's political extension, promoted *Zoroastrianism*[8] as its official faith. Erdoğan claimed that party leaders were indoctrinated in PKK camps and sought to impose alien values on Kurdish society:

> Both the terrorist organization and the party that operates under its shadow are imposing their own concepts, worldview, and lifestyle, trying to manipulate and damage the spirit and essence of my Kurdish brothers. Their worldview and lifestyle do not belong to this region or this nation at all (Ankara, 23 March 2015).

By distorting facts and attributing a fabricated religious agenda to the HDP, Erdoğan appealed to the religious sensitivities of Kurdish voters. This rhetorical move reflected a calculated attempt at *cognitive manipulation*, discrediting the HDP while maintaining his appeal among the broader Kurdish electorate, whose support was still essential for achieving his main political goal: a parliamentary majority to introduce the presidential system.

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[7] Imam Hatip schools are a type of secondary and middle school in Turkey that combine a standard curriculum with vocational Islamic education. Erdoğan received his secondary and high school education at Imam Hatip schools.

[8] An ancient monotheistic religion rooted in the Middle East, which is considered as the native religion of Kurds before they converted to Islam.

Yet the election results proved him wrong. Having already lost the support of the Gülen network, Erdoğan had counted on Kurdish votes to secure the constitutional majority needed for the presidential shift. To his surprise, however, Kurdish voters overwhelmingly supported their own party, the HDP, which for the first time surpassed the 10% electoral threshold to enter parliament. The outcome revealed that Kurdish voters were not co-opted despite the Peace Talks and democratization initiatives; instead, they asserted their political agency through the HDP. Realizing this, Erdoğan shifted his discourse to blame the Kurds, revealing his resentment over the fact that they were not co-opted:

> We have rejected policies of denial, repudiated policies of assimilation, and discarded policies of suppression. We have loved all of God's creations for the sake of the Creator, without making distinctions. Why? Because our Creator commands it. This love is not for power, position, money, or wealth; it is a requirement of our faith. And that's what we've done. But they did not understand this and stubbornly refused to see it (Ankara, 26 August 2015).

The rescue narrative embedded in the rhetoric reflected Islamic logic, rooted in advancing Kurdish people's democratic rights and liberties, driven by a religious imperative rather than principles of universal rights and liberties. Democratization with the Kurdish opening was a religious act, based on an Islamic understanding of love and goodwill, to which the Kurds did not respond accordingly:

> We must remember the dark days when our nation was burdened by policies of denial, repudiation, and assimilation. Thirteen years ago, when we came to power, was there not a state of emergency? And didn't we lift it within a month? We did. Our citizens asked for this, and we delivered. They wanted television broadcasts, and didn't we launch 24-hour broadcasts? We did. Didn't we allow propaganda in their own language? We did. Didn't we establish university institutes? We did. (…) Yet despite ending such discrimination, why does the killing of our young people continue? Let me tell you why: they are striving to divide our country (Ankara, 19 August 2015).

This narrative of ingratitude was persistently invoked to explain the recurrence of the violence. Underscored by a *false dichotomy* rooted in black-and-white thinking, the rhetoric blurred the possibility of other explanations of why Kurds voted for the HDP, and why the violence resumed. According to this logic, despite all positive efforts of the regime, these can only be explained by deeper, ulterior motives aimed at dividing the country by Kurds, to whom violence is attributed as a whole.

In an intensifying dose, this rhetoric on violence became intertwined with a rapidly deteriorating political environment in the post-election period, which was marked by political uncertainty and escalating violence: Negotiations to form a coalition government failed, resulting in new elections scheduled for November 2015. Meanwhile, the Peace Talks halted, and conflicts with the PKK resumed. Explosions in several prominent cities left hundreds of people dead. Additionally, urban warfare erupted in southeastern Kurdish cities, lasting for months and resulting in thousands of casualties and the displacement of Kurdish people. Having lost his parliamentary majority in June, Erdoğan framed the violence and economic

turmoil as the inevitable consequence of political instability, saying: "The upcoming election on November 1st is crucial: it will be a choice between stability and instability" (Ankara, 26 August 2015). With a *false dichotomy*, he effectively leveraged the instability narrative to advocate for new elections, *pre-legitimizing* it as the only path to restore order

Upon realizing he could not garner Kurdish votes, Erdoğan turned to the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), forming a strategic partnership that pushed him to adopt a harder nationalist line. Within this new alliance, Erdoğan launched a fully-fledged re-securitization of the Kurds. Central to this discursive shift is deflecting the blame to the PKK and the HDP for the resumption of violence, which ultimately led to the end of the Peace Talks:

> As part of the Peace Process, we have taken all necessary steps, risking everything. It was this brother of yours who initiated this process. But unfortunately, they did not comply. Those who did not recognize the Peace Process took to the streets and began to spread terror. They ruthlessly continued this violence. The terrorist organization and its supporters, by engaging in acts like blocking roads and burning vehicles, have shown that their true intentions are not the peace and prosperity of the nation (Ankara, 26 August 2015).

The shift in the discourse is marked by attribution of violence to the HDP and by actively portraying it as the extension of the PKK, which together pose a threat to peace and security with their separatist ambitions that they aim to achieve through violence. It is alleged that, despite skilfully concealing their intentions, deceiving the state by pretending to seek peace during the Peace Talks, their true motives were revealed with the Kobani protests. Capitalizing on this, Erdoğan accused the HDP of inciting violence that not only derailed the Peace Talks but also led to subsequent bomb attacks in Suruç and Diyarbakır, effectively weaving distinct incidents:

> Weren't these the ones who ruthlessly drove my Kurdish brothers into the streets on October 6–8? The victims were Kurds, and the killers were Kurds. Are these not supposed to be the representatives of the Kurds? What a lie. They are neither honest nor sincere—they feed on blood and death, and shamelessly try to blame Suruç on the National Intelligence Organization and me. You are the ones behind all these schemes! The same game was played in Diyarbakır, and the same in Suruç; then they shamelessly tried to pin the blame on us (Ankara, 26 August 2015).

By linking the HDP to a chain of violent events, Erdoğan portrayed the party as inseparable from the PKK and as the principal threat to peace and security, thereby justifying its re-securitization and delegitimizing it vis-à-vis Kurdish voters.

3.4.2. Discursive imaginaries: "alliance of forces"

Conspiracies were central to the re-securitisation of Kurds, shaping discourse both before and after the June elections. Initially, Erdoğan's rhetoric criminalized the HDP, reintroduced the PKK as a central terrorist threat after a period of absence in discourse, and extended securitization to the broader Kurdish population. Within this trajectory, he advanced a conspiratorial narrative in which the HDP, the Gülen movement, and the CHP had allegedly

joined forces against the regime. By highlighting the Diyarbakır Municipality as part of this alliance, Erdoğan implied that public resources were being channelled into a collective plot against the state:

> While we were fighting the parallel structure with all our might, they forged alliances and struck deals with it behind the doors of the Diyarbakır Municipality. In Istanbul, they joined hands with elitists who have long insulted, provoked, and tormented my Kurdish brothers and sisters. Today they stand so close to the CHP—the very party that inflicted every cruelty on my Kurdish brothers and sisters—that they might as well share the same headquarters. In the public squares, they now speak in the same tone and language as the party that once championed denial and rejection. United, they have abandoned their responsibilities and devoted themselves solely to attacking the government with lies and misinformation (Van, 14 May 2015).

While suggesting that unlikely partners had abandoned their differences to conspire against the regime, the narrative skilfully employs *cognitive manipulation,* appealing to the vulnerabilities of the audience by invoking past grievances of Kurdish mistreatment by the CHP. This conspiratorial framing reinforced the image of a united front working to destabilize Turkey, while also exploiting historical distrust to strengthen Erdoğan's argument and undermine the HDP as the political representative of Kurds. More importantly, by making the Diyarbakır Municipality part of the united front, he *pre-legitimized* the bill, which was about to pass, to dismiss the democratically elected mayors in Kurdish cities.

Only days before the elections, Erdoğan broadened this narrative to include the PKK, portraying it as part of a larger coalition aimed at undermining the state. Linking the Gülen movement to the PKK, he incorporated the scandal over intercepted intelligence trucks allegedly carrying weapons to Syria into the same conspiratorial frame:

> It's not just this; the treacherous network in Pennsylvania (the Gülen movement) has also allied with the blood merchants in Kandil, the PKK, joining forces in this coalition. We see their pictures side by side in the newspapers. Those who were thought never to come together are now united. The treacherous network, known as the parallel structure, complains about us to the world over the aid we sent to the Turkmen in Syria and receives the greatest support from these groups (Sivas, 4 June 2015).

By subsuming criticism of foreign policy into the broader "alliance of enemies" conspiracy, Erdoğan framed opposition to his Syria policy as equivalent to siding with terrorists. This move deflected blame for arms aid to the rebel forces in Syria while amplifying the existential threat posed by the coalition of enemies.

Erdoğan's resort to conspiracy narratives reflects a calculated rhetorical strategy aimed at amplifying fear in response to changing temporal dynamics. At the core of the securitization of the June elections was the issue of violence. Before the vote, Erdoğan cast violence as confined to the Kurdish population, allowing him to maintain support while the Peace Process was ongoing. After the HDP's electoral success, however, the narrative shifted:

violence was now depicted as a national problem, affecting all citizens. Conspiracies of separatist plots further magnified this sense of danger:

> Dark forces have never stopped trying to disrupt Turkey, to squander our achievements. They are constantly plotting how to divide us, how to fragment us, and how to sow discord among us, but they will not succeed (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

By framing violence as a national threat, Erdoğan effectively widened the scope of fear and reinforced the portrayal of Kurds as the usual suspects by readapting the separatist narrative. This discursive reframing not only justified a more aggressive security policy but also laid the rhetorical groundwork for the subsequent re-securitization of politics and the resumption of conflict with the PKK.

Erdoğan's conspiratorial narrative also served to criminalize the broader societal support for the Kurds and their political representative, the HDP. By the time of the June elections, the HDP had evolved from a narrowly pro-Kurdish movement into a broader left-wing party that appealed to secular citizens, intellectuals, academics, journalists, and other marginalized groups. Under the charismatic leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş, its growing influence posed a serious challenge to Erdoğan's dominance. The Kobani protests further amplified this threat, as many of these influential voices publicly condemned state violence. In response, Erdoğan launched direct attacks on academics and intellectuals, branding them as traitors aligned with the HDP through an *association fallacy*:

> Now, 200 so-called intellectuals have published a statement. These are not intellectuals; they are darkness personified. How can those who support the mentality responsible for the deaths of 50 people be called intellectuals? How can those who seek to darken the future of this country be called enlightened? (Sivas, 4 June 2015).

Erdoğan's framing relied on a *false dichotomy* and *ad hominem attacks*, casting critics of the regime as siding with violence and against the nation. It further employs the *straw man fallacy*, misrepresenting the stance of the academics by portraying them as pro-violence, while in fact they were opposing it. This antagonistic language was further intensified through appeals to nationalism, reflecting Erdoğan's fear of the influence intellectuals might have on society and seeking to mobilize the public against them. Therefore, his rhetoric imposes a dilemma, forcing them to take sides:

> Now I address you, so-called intellectuals: are you with those who seek to create an alternative to our flag, or are you with our flag? If you have even an ounce of courage, come out and declare this as well, so that the nation can see who you truly are and where you stand (Sivas, 4 June 2015).

Attacks on intellectuals, journalists, and academics were intensified when the Peace Process came to an end. Erdoğan not only blamed the PKK and the HDP for renewed violence, justifying the state's fight against terrorism, but he also criminalized any critical voice as an "alliance with terrorism", declaring these parties accountable for the bloodshed. His discourse

was marked by *ad hominem* attacks and treachery claims, including the use of the Quranic term *belhum edal*—"lower than animals"—to refer to immorality shown by academics and journalists. More importantly, Erdoğan's framing of academics relied heavily on the *bad apple frame*, underpinning an imminent need to eliminate them and thus signalling a crackdown, by openly *pre-legitimizing* retribution for their support of terrorism:

> The so-called intellectuals and columnists who support this betrayal are equally responsible for every death… This rootless, immoral, and heartless group… should not think they will get away with their actions. Our nation will undoubtedly teach a deserved lesson to this 'belhum edal' group (Ankara, 19 August 2015).

Erdoğan further alleged that intellectuals and columnists were organically tied to the PKK and its political branch, the HDP, accusing them of sharing responsibility for bloodshed, reinforcing the charge of complicity. In hindsight, this rhetoric foreshadowed concrete action: hundreds of academics were later dismissed, subjected to criminal investigations, and even imprisoned on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda. The discursive vilification of intellectuals thus laid the groundwork for their mass purge and judicial harassment.

The enemy-mongering discourse continued at full speed in the pre-coup period, shaped by the political tensions surrounding the 2015 elections. Urban warfare in Kurdish cities and the lifting of HDP MPs' parliamentary immunity dominated the agenda, reinforcing the full securitization of the Kurdish movement. The PKK, its alleged political branch the HDP, and their supporters remained Erdoğan's most persistent targets, consistently portrayed as existential threats to the nation. As in earlier periods, this discourse followed the pattern of an "alliance of forces" narrative, linking the PKK, the HDP, the Gezi protests, and the Gülen movement into a broader conspiracy. What distinguished the pre-coup phase, however, was the growing emphasis on Western involvement. The enemy narrative was increasingly framed within a conspiracy that tied domestic unrest to external plots orchestrated by Western powers:

> Members of the party backed by the terrorist organization (referring to the HDP) travel abroad more than they do within our country, and they hold many more meetings abroad than they do here (…). For some time now, both the terrorist organization and its affiliated party have been trying to bring the events in the region to international platforms (…). With incredible shamelessness, immorality, and dishonour, they try to blame the state for their wrongdoings to gain the upper hand (Ankara, 23 June 2016).

This anti-Western turn served to expand Erdoğan's enemy narrative while deflecting criticism of state violence during the urban warfare in the southeast. As international concern over human rights abuses grew, he accused the HDP of conspiring with Western actors to tarnish Turkey's image and undermine its sovereignty.

3.5. Enemy discourse after the failed coup

The failed coup attempt did not inaugurate the regime's discourse on the Gülen movement as a clandestine threat; rather, it confirmed and radicalized a narrative that had been developing since the 2013 corruption scandal. What changed after July 2016 was the legal and institutional status of this discourse. The "parallel state" narrative, previously used to frame the movement as an embedded enemy within the judiciary, police, bureaucracy, military, education sector, media, and civil society, was transformed into an official security doctrine. The coup attempt, therefore, provided the regime with the justificatory ground to convert a de facto witch-hunt into a de jure campaign of state purification.

3.5.1. Framing coup as a siege: Blessing in disguise

When the coup was attempted, it, in a way, fulfilled all the prophecies put forward by Erdoğan, materializing not only the enemies but also the alleged schemes plotted against Turkey. Having solid grounds on which he could effectively base the threat and danger, Erdoğan crafted a narrative where he framed the coup as an attack and siege attempt on the country, unprecedented in terms of the scale of the threat it posed, targeting not only the regime but also the entire country:

> In previous betrayals, the primary target was usually us directly, or the government we led. This time… our people were directly targeted with their lives, blood, and existence. Our country was targeted, our democracy was targeted. Yes, we must name it correctly: on July 15, Turkey faced not only a coup attempt but also a series of terrorist acts and a covert invasion attempt (Ankara, 29 September 2016).

The coup was described as an attack not only on democracy but also on the people, which amounts to a terrorist act due to the means of violence. Threatening the very lives and existence of the nation, it is distinct from other treacheries committed against the regime itself. However, the coup attempt also stands out from other betrayals because of its nature: it was an attempt to invade the state altogether. He said:

> July 15 was an attempt to occupy the last piece of land remaining from the territories that shrank to one-fifth between 1912 and 1923. Our nation did not surrender this land to them (29 August 2016).

The siege narrative is further reinforced by conspiracies that portray the coup attempt as the continuation of the plans to capture the Turkish land during World War I. *Topos of geography* has been a persistent discursive strategy in Erdoğan's rhetoric to frame threats, particularly regarding the separatist ambitions of the PKK and HDP, reinforcing the notion that Turkey's territorial integrity is in danger. With the coup attempt, this geographical logic was elevated to its most dramatic form, characterizing the event as an invasion of Turkish territory itself. The

discursive strategy of *cognitive manipulation* is used to evoke fear by capitalizing on collective memory.

Even though it was portrayed as an "invasion", "occupation", and "siege", the coup attempt is also paradoxically described as a "blessing in disguise", a recurring theme in Erdoğan's rhetoric, used to frame political crises not as setbacks but as opportunities in the state's struggle against its opponents. This frame first surfaced during the Gezi Protests and the 2013 Corruption Scandal, where crises were reinterpreted as moments of revelation, exposing those who opposed the regime. However, the same frame was later extended to 2016, where the coup was portrayed as a historical milestone in which all the treachery and hostility culminated, fleshing out all the schemes plotted against the regime, the ultimate effort to capture the state through illegitimate means. Yet even this existential threat was reframed as providential, providing an opportunity to unmask hidden enemies and their ulterior motives:

> I see July 15 as a misfortune that is worth a thousand lessons. We have 241 martyrs and 2,194 wounded veterans from that day, but I praise Allah for giving us this opportunity. I believe that from this, Turkey will win, our nation will win, and we will move forward into the future with a new beginning (Ankara, 1 September 2016).

The "blessing in disguise" frame reflects more than Erdoğan's ability to turn crises into opportunities; it functions as a form of *pre-legitimation* for the crackdown on the regime's opponents. Since Gezi, Erdoğan has sought to narrate political turmoil as evidence of existential threats, thereby normalizing the idea that repression is both necessary and inevitable. The coup attempt, by seemingly fulfilling earlier prophecies and bringing alleged conspiracies into action, became the regime's own "Reichstag Fire moment" (Scheppele, 2018): a dramatic event that provided the ultimate justification for intensifying the fight against "enemies of the state" and for deepening a polarized us–versus–them logic, where failure to align with the regime would be a costly choice. Erdoğan said:

> During and after the July 15 coup attempt, Turkey, to a great extent, has seen and recognized its friends, enemies, supporters, adversaries, and especially those lurking in the shadows (Ankara, 1 September 2016).

The statement constructs the coup attempt as a moment of political revelation. By claiming that Turkey had come to recognize its "friends," "enemies," "supporters," "adversaries," and especially those "lurking in the shadows," the discourse presents July 15 as an event that made hidden enmity visible. This framing is central to the post-coup expansion of repression. The coup attempt is not narrated simply as an attack on the government, but as proof that clandestine enemies had already penetrated the state and society. In this way, the rhetoric transforms what began after the 2013 rupture with the Gülen movement as a *de facto* witch-hunt into an all-encompassing campaign of state purification, aimed at unmasking hidden

enemies, identifying alleged affiliates, and legitimizing their exclusion from institutional and social life.

3.5.2. From "parallel state" to a terrorist organization: FETÖ

The day after the failed coup, Erdoğan immediately identified the Gülen movement as the perpetrator, accusing its affiliates within the military of attempting to topple the regime. Referring to the coup as "a gift from God," he vowed to cleanse the state of its members and declared the network a terrorist organization (Marsin, 2016). Yet the discursive construction of the Gülen movement as a terrorist threat had begun much earlier, when the regime sought to "turn the anti-Gülen campaign into state policy" (Taş, 2018, p.7). The National Security Council first listed the movement as an illegal organization in October 2014 and, by May 2016, explicitly labeled it a terrorist group under the name "Parallel State Structure" (PDY) (Venice Commission, 2016). Around the same time, Fethullah Gülen was placed on the Ministry of Interior's domestic terrorist watchlist with a red notice. While the official designation used "Parallel State Structure," Erdoğan and pro-government media popularized the term "FETÖ," which soon became widely adopted.

By the time the coup occurred, the shift from "parallel state" to "terrorist organization" was well underway. The failed coup did not introduce but rather consolidated this narrative, accelerating its spread across society. Erdoğan further strengthened this framing by retroactively situating FETÖ's origins in the 1980s, portraying it as a clandestine network that had infiltrated the military and state institutions for decades, deceiving society with a "double life" in almost Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde fashion:

> FETÖ devoted all its power, resources, and time to a strategy of seizing the state. They infiltrated the Turkish Military in the 1980s and 1990s. For 30 years, these individuals lived double, even multiple lives, constantly practicing deception and hypocrisy to mislead others—hardly the sign of a healthy state of mind. This pathological structure mobilized its members in the police and judiciary during the events of December 17–25, and on July 15, it acted again, this time through those disguised as soldiers within the Turkish Armed Forces (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

By tracing its roots back to the 1980s, Erdoğan sought to shape public perception of FETÖ as a long-standing organization that infiltrated the military. The narrative retrospectively connects the corruption investigations engineered by affiliated members within the judiciary and security as part of the previous attempts to fulfill the ultimate goal of the organization: capturing the state from within. While these earlier warnings had not fully convinced the public, Erdoğan presented the coup as the violent culmination of FETÖ's long conspiracy, the moment that finally revealed its true terrorist nature. Situating the coup within this retrospective framework, he said:

> To be frank, we completely saw the dark side of this structure on December 17-25. However, it seems we couldn't convey our message to anyone (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

Reactivating the *rescue narrative* in this way, Erdoğan positioned himself as both the foresighted leader who had long warned the nation and the ultimate defender who saved it from betrayal. This discursive move reinforced his legitimacy and justified the subsequent widespread purges.

The shift from parallel state to FETÖ is consequential for the politics of denunciation. It converted an alleged affiliation with a formerly tolerated religious-social network into a matter of national security. The problem facing the regime was not simply how to punish visible coup plotters, but how to identify allegedly hidden sympathizers, affiliates, and collaborators across state institutions and social life. In this context, denunciation became a practical solution to an information problem produced by the "parallel state" narrative: it allowed the state to mobilize citizens, colleagues, neighbors, and bureaucratic insiders in the identification of concealed enemies, as will be discussed in preceding sections.

3.5.3. Discursive imaginaries: "alliance of forces" and "reshaping the Middle East"

Similar to previous milestones, the post-coup political rhetoric was characterized by a proliferation of discursive imaginaries. By elevating the Gülen movement to the status of a terrorist organization, Erdoğan reinforced the "alliance of enemies" narrative, discursively lumping disparate groups together in what critics popularly describe as a "cocktail of terrorist organizations" (Diken, 2015). In this narrative, Turkey is besieged by multiple terrorist threats:

> As you know, Turkey has been combating the separatist terrorist organization PKK since 1984. Similarly, various organizations like DHKP-C… continue to pose a serious threat. With the Syrian crisis, we have faced the menace of ISIS… Most recently, on July 15, we confronted the bloody face of the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ)… All these terrorist organizations are allied in their underlying hostility towards Turkey (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

Here, four groups—PKK, DHKP-C, ISIS, and FETÖ—are linked in a shared project of destabilizing the state. DHKP-C, a Marxist-Leninist party little mentioned previously, was suddenly folded into the narrative, while FETÖ was retroactively assigned a long-standing history, and ISIS was cast as a by-product of the Syrian conflict. By grouping them together, Erdoğan discursively produced a unified front of terrorism. To increase persuasiveness, he invoked the *topos of truth*, insisting on evidence of collaboration:

> There are numerous statements, documents, and information about the deep collaboration between the PKK and FETÖ, and even between the PKK and ISIS… (Ankara, 29 September 2016).

Moreover, through the *false cause fallacy*, he framed the PKK's escalation of attacks after July 15 as a continuation of the failed coup, thereby deflecting responsibility for the Kurdish conflict onto the supposed alliance of forces:

> The fact that the separatist organization (PKK) increased its activities following July 15th was accurately identified by our people and the local population as an attempt to continue the failed coup through the PKK (Ankara, 29 September 2016).

This narrative was recontextualized across speeches to collapse the distinction between coup and terrorism. By portraying the coup as merely the latest "phase" of terrorism, Erdoğan naturalized the continuity between different crises, framing them all as part of the same existential struggle:

> July 15 was… a coup attempt… But the incident is not limited to this; it is also an attempt to advance the outcome sought through the armed actions of the PKK and ISIS… In other words, this attempt is also a terrorist act (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

This narrative bore all the hallmarks of conspiracy, spreading fear and exaggerating threats by not only reframing the coup as an act of terrorism but also linking it to other terrorist organizations under the broader *alliance of forces* trope. This fearmongering extended the conspiratorial logic of the coup, portraying it as part of a larger, coordinated master plan directed against Turkey:

> We also know very well that all terrorist organizations operating in our country, including the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization, are products of certain projects and have been unleashed upon us with specific goals (Ankara, 19 July 2016).

Checking the fundamental tick boxes of Erdoğan's conspiracy frames, this narrative not only connected the terrorist organizations to one another but also situated them within a larger "project". While this is a common way of framing enemies in his rhetoric, what was distinctive after the coup, however, was the claim that this project had a clear geopolitical aim: reshaping the Middle East. In the following weeks, Erdoğan expanded the narrative in parallel with his foreign policy agenda in Syria and Iraq:

> Those who seek to block Turkey's participation in the Mosul operation are the same ones disturbed by our efforts in Syria. They tried the same tactic during the refugee crisis, directing three million migrants from Syria and Iraq to our country in the hope we would collapse under the burden. When that failed, they placed their hopes in terrorist organizations. ISIS and the PYD-YPG are pawns of the same forces, just as the PKK and FETÖ play their assigned roles within Turkey. Ultimately, the issue is the restructuring of the region (Ankara, 19 October 2016).

With this conspiracy, Erdoğan leverages various discursive strategies. By placing terrorist groups, migration influx, and regional conflicts under a single "masterplan," Erdoğan framed the coup as one episode in an international plot orchestrated by unnamed Western powers. This vagueness was strategic: it effectively signalled a heightened threat with an all-encompassing conspiracy; allowed Erdoğan to deflect criticism of the EU migration deal by framing refugee flows as part of a wider geopolitical plot and pre-justified military involvement in Syria and Iraq as necessary defensive measures. Most importantly, the "masterplan" narrative transformed the coup into evidence of a global conspiracy, thereby

legitimizing both domestic crackdowns and foreign interventions as part of Turkey's resistance to Western domination.

3.5.4. Activating the Reichstag Scenario: Collective crackdown on dissent

Scholars agree that the Gezi Protests marked a historical milestone, when the division between the "righteous people" and the "significant others" was explicitly inscribed in political discourse (Çınar, 2020). Erdoğan cast the protests as a confrontation between true representatives of the nation and those who "claimed ownership of the state", whom he put into *friends and foes* camps:

> I want to state openly to both friends and foes: if anyone in Turkey believes sovereignty belongs to them, they must abandon this illusion. Those who see themselves as the sole owners of Turkey must give up this idea (Ankara, 11 June 2013).

This framing laid the groundwork for an increasingly antagonistic discourse. This polarization was most starkly captured in his remark during the early days of the Gezi Protests, when he said:

> At this moment, at least half of the country—whom we are struggling to keep at home by force—are on our side. (İstanbul, 3 June 2013)

Here, the narrative divides society into two irreconcilable sides, and popular support is invoked as a warning. Loyalists are portrayed as potential enforcers against dissenters, seen as a threat to national unity.

The year 2016 constituted another milestone, pushing this division to an extreme, securitizing anyone who did not align with the regime. At the historic rally held in Yenikapı after the coup, Erdoğan declared the rally a litmus test, making support for the regime synonymous with loyalty to the nation:

> At this point, the lines are clear: on one side stands the Republic of Turkey with its institutions, political parties, and segments of society; on the other side stand the terrorist organizations exploiting ethnicity, religion, and ideology, along with the dark forces behind them. Everyone who stands by their state, nation, truth, and justice is here today at Yenikapı. Some members of these organizations await their fate in court, some are serving prison sentences, and others have already given their final account in the grave. We also know well the powers behind them, and when the time comes, we will hold them accountable (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

Indicating more than a linguistic division between *friends and foes*, this historic call openly imposed a *false dilemma,* forcing people to take sides. In this black-and-white scenario, those who failed to align with the regime were discursively positioned alongside coup plotters and terrorists. The rhetoric left no space for neutrality or criticism. More importantly, Erdoğan signalled retribution, warning that adversaries would face prison, trial, or even death. However, the vows for retribution were not limited to the designated coup perpetrators:

> While we seek accountability from the coup plotters and their internal and external supporters, we will pursue justice, not revenge… We will not hesitate for a moment to crush FETÖ, PKK, ISIS,

> DHKP-C, and YPG… any terrorist organization that poses a threat to the survival of our country and nation (Ankara, 29 July 2016).

Delivered one week after the declaration of the State of Emergency on July 21st, Erdoğan's speech made it clear that the state's fight against its enemies would extend beyond the coup plotters and their supporters to include a broader battle against any terrorist entities operating within or outside the country. Here, the State of Emergency, through which the gravity of the situation was registered, officially provided the psychological and legal foundation for this extensive campaign against "all enemies of the state." The sense of existential peril was further heightened through the "alliance of forces" rhetoric, which bundled diverse groups into a single "cocktail of terrorist organizations" threatening Turkey's territorial integrity and survival:

> We have 780,000 square kilometres of homeland. No one can dare challenge us on our own land, and those who do will pay the price. Whether PKK, FETÖ, ISIS, PYD, or YPG—come all of you; by God's will, you will not overcome this nation. Let every terrorist organization know this well (Ankara, 10 August 2016).

In this way, Erdoğan's discourse transformed earlier ideological divides into a securitized, us-versus-them confrontation, pre-legitimizing both the suspension of normal politics and the expansion of repressive state powers. Crucially, the post-coup discourse also generalized the logic first developed against the alleged "parallel state": the search for hidden enemies was no longer confined to Gülenists, but extended to Kurds, leftists, secular opposition actors, dissidents, and other groups cast as part of a broader terrorist-conspiratorial front.

4. Patterns in enemy-mongering

This chapter traced the discursive shifts in Erdoğan's rhetoric during moments of existential crisis, each of which became a historical milestone in Turkey's trajectory of autocratization. At the core of these shifts was the construction of enemies, the most dominant product of crisis-driven discourse. The pattern that emerges is one in which the social and political actors implicated in each incident were designated as enemies of the state, serving as part of Erdoğan's defence mechanism.

The Gezi protests crystallized anti-regime sentiment among secular groups and were framed through Turkey's formative rifts, with western-oriented elites, the judicial and military establishment, and their political representative, the CHP, cast as arch enemies. The Corruption Scandal initiated a feud with the former ally, the Gülen movement, reframing it as Erdoğan's new nemesis. The 2015 elections marked the re-securitization of Kurds and the HDP, restoring their "usual suspect" status as enemies of the state. Finally, the 2016 coup attempt consolidated the Gülen movement as the ultimate adversary and transformed the

earlier "parallel state" narrative into a legally and institutionally actionable campaign of purge, while framing the crisis as a collective fight against a broader coalition of hostile forces.

Across these milestones, Erdoğan's rhetoric not only securitized specific groups but also wove them together into a conspiratorial "alliance of forces." Narratives presented these disparate groups of CHP, Gülenists, Kurds, and others as a united front, often reinforced with references to external actors such as the West, all allegedly working toward the same goal of undermining the regime. Across the crisis sequence, the number of enemy categories changed, their status evolved depending on the political conjuncture, and the risk they posed was amplified through shifting narratives. Most importantly, however, the problem of identification became embedded at the heart of enemy-making, transforming the nature of suspicion itself: enemy-making moved from visible dissent to hidden affiliation, from public opposition to alleged institutional embeddedness, and from political disagreement to existential betrayal. This shift created the discursive conditions under which surveillance, reporting, and denunciation could be framed as necessary tools for detecting concealed enemies. This is illustrated in the next chapter.

The discursive strategies employed in this enemy-mongering were equally crucial. *Blame-shifting* and scapegoating transferred responsibility onto adversaries, while *fallacious* reasoning and conspiratorial framing distorted facts and heightened polarization. Appeals to fear, coupled with *cognitive manipulation*, magnified perceived threats, while false dichotomies and dilemmas narrowed the space for criticism or alternative perspectives. Together, these strategies reinforced authoritarian consolidation by entrenching polarization, delegitimizing opposition, and normalizing extraordinary measures in the name of defending the state.

Collectively, these findings illustrate how enemy construction operates as a core mechanism of repression at the macro level, casting oppositional groups as existential threats and narrowing the boundaries of legitimate political action. At the same time, crisis-driven narratives of national security and collective survival in the face of an alleged united enemy front reveal how repression is simultaneously legitimized, transforming the marginalization of these groups into a moral imperative. In this way, the analysis demonstrates how repression and legitimation are co-produced through political discourse during moments of crisis. The next chapter explores how this logic converges with discursive co-optation through the concept of the social contract, showing how society is mobilized around the regime's repressive agenda and how this process is underpinned by legitimating narratives.

Chapter V: Establishing the Social Contract: The Discursive Co-optation of Society

1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined discursive repression constructed through narratives of "enemies of the state," showing how these exclusionary strategies were legitimized through conspiratorial appeals that amplified the threats attributed to these groups and reframed them as matters of national security. Building on this analysis of enemy-mongering, this chapter examines how the regime's discourse transformed the identification of hidden enemies into a collective civic duty, thereby co-opting society into the state's broader witch-hunt that involved surveillance, reporting, and political cleansing. Anchored in key historical milestones, the analysis explores how discourse is strategically crafted to enlist both influential actors and the wider public in collaborating with, and advancing, the regime's political project, particularly in moments of crisis, and how this mobilization is simultaneously legitimized through crisis-driven appeals to unity, duty, threat, and shared purpose.

The analysis reveals that political discourse constructs a kind of social contract between the regime and the Nation, mobilizing it to safeguard state interests, advance political objectives, and ensure regime resilience. Central to this process is the construction of the Nation as a supreme moral and political authority, whose agency and judgment are invoked to legitimize state actions and justify widespread collaboration as both necessary and virtuous. These narratives crystallize in collaboration-seeking appeals that accompany the regime's witch-hunt, where enemies are catalogued, surveillance and reporting are delegated to citizens and local actors, and purges are framed as not only necessary but legitimate measures of collective defense. Alongside this, the discourse also reveals incorporation through both rewards and recognition: the Nation is symbolically elevated as a sovereign authority and promised material benefits through the rhetoric of service, while key actors are co-opted through symbolic rewards such as recognition, delegated authority, and career advancement. These are mechanisms that both incentivize participation and legitimize their alignment with the regime.

Within the broader argument of the thesis, which highlights the demand–supply mechanism underpinning the proliferation of denunciations, this chapter traces the political demand side, showing how collaboration against designated enemies is mobilized and justified in discourse, and how expectations of surveillance and citizen reporting are embedded within these co-optative appeals. In doing so, it demonstrates how co-optation is discursively legitimized through narratives that frame participation as necessary, moral, and aligned with national duty.

By framing collaboration as a civic duty and loyalty as a transactional exchange of rewards, recognition, and moral validation, discourse enlists both citizens and strategic actors into the regime's surveillance apparatus. In doing so, it helps the regime address the dictator's dilemma by securing cooperation in identifying and confronting adversaries.

2. The Nation with capital "N": Constructing unity and justifying collaboration

The analysis reveals that references to the Nation—with a capital "N"—run through the three dominant themes: *Us versus Them*, *Serving the People*, and *Collaboration*. In the dichotomy of *Us versus Them*, the Nation constitutes the "Us," framed not in ethnonationalist terms but with strong Sunni Muslim undertones, positioned squarely against the designated enemies of the state. Within the discourse of service, crystallized in the theme of *Serving the People*, the Nation is placed at the center, with governance defined as an act of servitude to it. Finally, in the theme of *Collaboration*, the Nation again occupies a central role, underpinning the discourse of state–society unity and collective responsibility. Here, the Nation is discursively constructed as the regime's strategic ally, mobilized in its struggle against adversaries.

In Erdoğan's rhetoric, the Nation is constructed as an entity endowed with agency, willpower, and sound judgment. These qualities elevate it above the state and position it as the ultimate source of political authority. This vision is crystallized in his recurring invocation of the "national will," presented as the essence of democracy. Through a master–servant dynamic, the regime casts itself as accountable only to the Nation, while simultaneously presenting the Nation as the force that authorizes retribution against those deemed traitors or adversaries.

A key dimension of the *Nation-with-capital-N* discourse is the strategic deployment of "national will" as a political tool. From the onset of Erdoğan's rise to power, the Nation has held a central place in his political discourse, framed as the backbone of democracy and the ultimate legitimate power holder, which, however, was subordinated by the tutelary establishment that stripped it of authority for decades. Erdoğan said:

> It has not been acknowledged that the nation has its own ideas, its own voice, and its own discernment; it has not been taken into consideration at all (Ankara, 3 December 2013).

The rhetoric refers to the *rescue narrative*. Erdoğan repeatedly portrayed himself as the leader who restored the Nation's rightful authority, inaugurating a "New Turkey" where its voice was sovereign and free of guardianship. This narrative was strategically invoked during moments of political threat, framing attacks on his regime as direct assaults on the national will, thus serving as a tool to rally citizens to defend democracy on its behalf. As he declared after the Corruption Scandal:

> The Old Turkey and its habits have been left behind in history, never to return. In the New Turkey, sovereignty belongs to the nation; the say belongs to the nation; the decision belongs to the nation; and the authority belongs to the nation. I call on all 76 million citizens to stand up for their will, to defend democracy, and to unite as one heart against these ugly attacks on our country (Ankara, 29 December 2013).

Beyond this rhetoric of sovereignty, the Nation was also symbolically inscribed into public life as the rightful owner of state institutions and spaces. This was reflected in the rebranding of public projects as belonging to the Nation, from the Nation's Library and Nation's Gardens to the Presidential Palace, officially renamed the Nation's House. The Gezi protests brought this symbolic claim of ownership into open political declaration. From this moment on, Erdoğan repeatedly emphasized that it was the Nation, rather than secular elites, opposition groups, or external forces, that held rightful ownership of the state. He made this explicit in his 2014 municipal election victory speech:

> Today, the nation has disrupted the game, broken the trap, and given the betrayal networks the answer they deserved at the ballot box. The message from this noble nation is loud and clear. Through the vote, the nation has declared to Turkey and the world: 'We are here, and the Turkish nation is unbeatable.' The nation has said: 'We are the owners of this country. The nation will not bow; Turkey will not be defeated' (Ankara, 30 March 2014).

The call to defend the national will has been a recurring theme in Erdoğan's speeches, a narrative he has repeatedly leveraged to navigate through crises. By fusing the survival of his regime with the sovereignty of the Nation, Erdoğan positioned himself as the embodiment of the national will. This framing not only deflected political threats but also entrenched the idea that defending democracy meant defending his leadership.

Alongside the discourse of the "national will," Erdoğan repeatedly reinforced the Nation's supremacy through the language of service. In the analysis, *Serving the People* emerged as a dominant theme across Erdoğan's speeches, used to frame a wide range of achievements, from political reforms to economic development, as acts of service to the Nation[9]. Around this theme, Erdoğan crafted a *master–servant* narrative to reinforce the authority that the Nation inherently possesses. In this discourse, the raison d'être of the state lies in the exercise of the Nation's will, and governance is legitimate only when it serves it. Erdoğan presents his leadership as restoring this principle:

> We have transformed the Presidency from a position serving as a guardian of tutelage into one that serves the Nation. We have always said this: 'We are not here to be masters of our people, but their servants, and we are the servants of our nation.' This is because we derive our power not from this or that centre but directly from our nation. Therefore, our responsibility is also to our nation (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

[9] Not surprisingly, Erdoğan's speeches delivered at opening ceremonies were compiled in eight volumes under the title *To be a Servant, not a Master*.

At the heart of the master–servant frame lies a narrative of state rebuilding. Erdoğan consistently portrays his rise to power in 2002 as the moment when the AKP inherited a failed state marked by crisis, instability, and dysfunction, and restored it through service, stability, and prosperity. Yet this rebuilding is not presented as complete; rather, it appears as an ongoing national project, culminating in his "2023 Objectives." In this narrative, national prosperity remains conditional on political continuity, and any disruption to Erdoğan's rule is framed as a threat to stability and growth itself. The servant-of-the-people narrative therefore functions not only to celebrate delivery, but also to warn that the regime's interruption would endanger the achievements made in the name of the Nation. By equating his leadership with continued service provision, Erdoğan turns performance into a shield against political challenge. This logic became especially explicit after the AKP lost its parliamentary majority in June 2015. To *pre-legitimize* repeating the elections, he mobilized the *master–servant* theme through a *false dilemma*: either his rule would safeguard stability and service delivery, or instability would prevail.

> Look, we had 13 years of stability in this country, didn't we? No coalitions—just stability. And see where we started, where we have come today. We tripled, quadrupled, even quintupled, and our investments are clear for all to see: in education, healthcare, transportation, justice, security, and agriculture. Yet alongside these achievements, there were those disturbed by Turkey's progress. Are they still around? Yes. And there are still those working to sow division and bring divisiveness into Turkey. That is why I believe the upcoming November 1 election will be a choice between stability and instability. We must work hard for this (Ankara, 26 August 2015).

Another central dimension of the discourse built around the Nation is the narrative that elevates it to the role of ultimate arbiter. Erdoğan's rhetoric personifies the Nation as a moral and legal authority with the capacity to judge, punish, and deliver ultimate justice. Framed as the supreme arbiter, the Nation becomes the authority before which both the regime and its adversaries must be held accountable. Following the Corruption Scandal, Erdoğan invoked this narrative to emphasize that legitimacy rests not with external institutions but with the people themselves:

> On March 30, we will once again stand before the nation. We will be accountable to our people and put ourselves to the test before them. If we are doing wrong, we will receive their warning, and if we are doing right, we will receive their confirmation at the ballot box (Ankara, 14 January 2014).

The rhetoric relies on a *majoritarian fallacy*. Elections are presented as the ultimate test through which the Nation delivers its verdict, transforming popular support into the highest form of accountability. In this framing, electoral victory does not merely renew political authority; it is used to neutralize allegations of corruption by suggesting that the ballot box has already judged the regime innocent. The Nation's judgment is therefore mobilized both to legitimize the government and to delegitimize its adversaries, with popular will elevated above legal scrutiny and institutional accountability. In moments of crisis, this portrayal of the Nation as

the ultimate arbiter becomes especially strategic: it allows Erdoğan to present the regime's agenda as the Nation's own verdict and to foreshadow retribution against political opponents as the fulfilment of popular will. This pattern resurfaced before the 2015 elections and again after the coup attempt:

> Those who rely on power centers outside the nation, especially terrorist organizations and parallel structures, and who engage in perception operations through them, will not escape being held accountable to the nation and the law……Whoever cannot call July 15 a coup and cannot condemn it is also part of the coup attempt—or at the very least, a willing supporter… [They] will not escape accountability… ultimately to our entire nation (Ankara, 1 October 2016).

Here, accountability is no longer framed as a legal or institutional process alone, but as a moral-political judgment delivered on behalf of the Nation. By placing "terrorist organizations," "parallel structures," and those who refuse to condemn July 15 within the same field of culpability, Erdoğan expands the category of betrayal and authorizes punishment in the name of both law and popular will.

Together, these narratives construct the Nation as the supreme source of legitimacy, embodying the will that empowers governance, the master to whom leaders remain accountable, and the ultimate arbiter of loyalty and betrayal. These narratives serve multiple roles in the discourse. It consolidates a majoritarian understanding of democracy by equating his leadership with the sovereign will of the people, while simultaneously shielding his regime from criticism: attacks on Erdoğan are reframed as assaults on the Nation itself. Thus, the Nation is leveraged both as a defensive shield for the regime and as an active force legitimizing its struggle against enemies, reinforcing the alignment between Erdoğan's rule and the sovereign authority of the people.

2.1. Constructing the Nation as an ally

Besides the discourse that elevates the Nation to the supreme authority, Erdoğan's rhetoric also constructs the Nation as the regime's most reliable ally. Endowed with wisdom, foresight, and agency, the Nation is portrayed not only as the authority that legitimizes governance but also as an active partner in defending and advancing the regime's agenda. There are three narratives at the heart of this strategic alliance: collaboration is framed as a civic duty; it is framed as a struggle against hostile actors; and the Nation is cast as an army that is mobilized as a collective force. Through these narratives, the Nation is presented as an indispensable collaborator in the regime's survival and struggles.

At the heart of the discourse that constructs the Nation as an ally is the cultivation of collaboration as a duty of citizenship, presented as a reciprocal obligation for the regime's service. This pattern emerges clearly in the analysis, where *Serving the People* and *Collaboration* appear as two of the six most significant discourse themes and are consistently paired in

Erdoğan's rhetoric. Service functions as a form of political currency: because the regime claims to have empowered and served the Nation, the Nation is expected to respond with loyalty, participation, and support. This exchange crystallizes in the theme of *state–society unity*. Crucially, collaboration is justified primarily through the *topos of duty and responsibility*, reinforced by appeals to *usefulness, threat,* and *danger*. Participation is therefore framed not merely as voluntary support, but as a civic obligation in the face of threats.

Within this logic, the regime's claimed empowerment of the Nation becomes the very basis of the Nation's responsibility to align with and defend it. Erdoğan's rhetoric presents *state–society unity* as one of the key achievements of his rule, embedding it within a broader *rescue narrative* in which tutelage was dismantled and the agendas of the state, politics, and society were brought into alignment. The underlying message is that empowerment entails responsibility: because the Nation has been elevated as the rightful owner of politics, it must also act as the regime's ally in protecting this political order. Erdoğan makes this point explicit in the following statement:

> For the first time in Turkey, the realm of politics has expanded this much. The agenda of our nation, including the presidency, has intertwined with the state's and politics' agenda more than ever before (…). We have overcome every form of tutelage one by one with the support of our nation (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

This point is strongly emphasized to deflect criticism of corruption. In a rally called "In the Service of the Nation", Erdoğan said:

> The Old Turkey, along with its habits, has been left to history, never to return. In the New Turkey, sovereignty belongs to the nation; the word belongs to the nation, the decision belongs to the nation, and authority belongs to the nation. I call on each of our 76 million citizens to stand by their will, to defend democracy, and to unite as one heart against these ugly attacks on our country (Ankara, 29 December 2013).

The rhetoric redefines citizens not as passive masses, but as active participants whose will, discernment, and agency are indispensable to governance. Collaboration thus becomes the expected mode of state–society relations, framed as necessary for thwarting enemies, defending democracy, and advancing the shared project of rebuilding the state. This narrative is advanced through Erdoğan's repeated emphasis on the Nation's role in overcoming threats and dismantling conspiracies. By attributing past victories against tutelage, plots, and crises to the active participation of the Nation, the discourse presents collaboration as both historically proven and politically necessary. Erdoğan makes this state–society alliance explicit by crediting the Nation with exposing and defeating a series of alleged schemes:

> You shattered the scheme behind the Republic rallies... You dismantled the plot behind Ergenekon... You foiled the plan of those who said, 'I won't let you elect a president, I'll shut down your party.' You broke the game behind the Council of State attack. You thwarted the scheme behind the Reyhanlı attack... (Kayseri, 21 June 2013).

Once collaboration is framed as a civic duty that affirms unity between state and society, the discourse takes a further step: the Nation, as a strategic ally, is mobilized against hostile forces and positioned at the front line of the regime's struggle with its adversaries. This pattern is clearly reflected in the analysis. Calls for collaboration in Erdoğan's discourse crystallize around the narrative of state–society unity against plots and terrorism. They are overwhelmingly justified through references to *threat and danger—chaos, violence, illegality, hostility*, and *abuse*. The stakes of this struggle are framed in existential terms: peace, security, territorial integrity, national will, the economy, religion, and values are all portrayed as under constant siege by the conspiracies of "dark forces." Turkey's rapid progress is presented as the very reason for this hostility, provoking adversaries allegedly determined to halt its rise. Through this framing, the discourse prepares the public for a collective struggle, presenting unity, solidarity, and collaboration as civic duties in the face of existential threat.

At the heart of this mobilization lies references to the *War of Independence*, a frame invoked as a powerful analogy of collective struggle against adversaries. The past becomes a lens through which the threats at present are amplified, and the society is called to wage a new struggle for independence alongside the regime. This frame not only rallies support but also shifts blame, recasting political opposition as part of an existential battle against the nation itself. The narrative follows a cyclical pattern; after each milestone crisis, Erdoğan reactivated this frame. Following the Gezi Protests, he declared:

> Dark forces have never ceased in their efforts to unsettle Turkey and squander our achievements. They do not want a Turkey that is strong economically, politically, or militarily; they cannot tolerate it. They plot to divide us, to tear us apart, to turn us against each other—but they will not succeed. This nation, which rose from its ashes in the War of Independence, now continues that same journey, growing ever stronger (Ankara, 12 August 2013).

Similarly, when the Corruption Scandal broke out within the same year, Erdoğan framed it as another independence struggle:

> This is the Independence Struggle of the New Turkey. Those who have plans for Turkey will see their plans fall apart. The interest rate lobby will receive its final blow from Turkey. Without falling into despair or giving in to pessimism, we will fight resolutely while keeping our spirits high (Ankara, 25 December 2013).

Shortly before the coup attempt, while addressing the NGOs to align them with the regime's political agenda, Erdoğan used the same framing. Warning against groups that were "disguised as NGOs" yet acted like "Armenian terrorists, the PKK, and the Gulen network", he made a call to loyal civil society organizations for solidarity through a similar independence narrative:

> In our fight against terrorism, in the challenges we face with various countries, and in reaching our 2023 goals—in short, in every phase of our Struggle for Independence—we need this strong solidarity (Ankara, 21 June 2016).

The discourse built on narratives of collaboration and mobilization escalated further when Erdoğan militarized the Nation itself, casting citizens not merely as supporters but as soldiers of the "third army" in the regime's struggles. This became particularly pronounced around the 2015 general elections and their aftermath, a turning point in Erdoğan's rhetoric that marked a sharp shift from peacebuilding to militarism. Before the vote, he had presented the peace process with the PKK as one of his government's major achievements. After the June 2015 election, however, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority when the pro-Kurdish HDP crossed the 10 percent electoral threshold and entered parliament as a major opposition force. Coupled with Kurdish gains in Syria and growing regional instability, this electoral setback accelerated Erdoğan's turn toward the language of security, defence, and war. From this point on, militaristic discourse became increasingly dominant. To *pre-legitimize* military action at home and beyond, Erdoğan glorified fighting and martyrdom, presenting them as both religious duty and patriotic responsibility. Martyrdom was no longer described simply as sacrifice, but as the highest honour and spiritual obligation of every citizen. In this rhetoric, national identity was bound to religious faith:

> For our faith, martyrdom is the greatest honor, the highest rank. Every child of this homeland, who eats its bread, drinks its water, and breathes its air, has the courage to face death without hesitation when needed (Ankara, 8 June 2016).

The 2016 coup attempt deepened this shift. Erdoğan's appeal for collaboration, extending beyond mere societal support to mobilizing the nation for a collective fight, one in which "fight" is meant literally, and the nation itself is framed as an army:

> Turkey is not just an army of 570,000 people but an army of 79 million, and we march forward with this strength (Ankara, 1 September 2016).

The rhetoric cast people as an army, ready not only to defend the homeland and fight enemies at home and abroad, but also ready to die:

> O nation, will you ever accept slavery and humiliation? Are we ready to die? Are we ready to move forward? With God's will! (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

The discursive framing of the "nation as the army" is also used to *pre-legitimize* Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman ambitions of expanding into former territories. To psychologically prepare society for cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq, Erdoğan similarly capitalized on the narrative that cast the nation as the "third army" ready and willing to fight, with references to people taking to the streets on the night of the coup. Emphasizing religious faith as the fundamental driving force behind defending one's homeland, he blended patriotism with spiritual duty to justify military action:

> We must believe this: the expansion or contraction of the front lines is a matter of faith. In this country, we sustain one million people, including soldiers and police. But beyond that, with God's will, it was the nation itself that declared on July 15: 'I am here.' Since this nation has said 'I am

> here,' no front is too vast for us. Therefore, we will continue our struggle there as well (Ankara, 8 September 2016).

Woven into the rhetoric of state–society unity, the Nation is elevated from a passive bystander to a strategic ally of the regime. The quote expands the meaning of the "front" beyond soldiers and police by presenting the Nation itself as a force that declared its readiness on July 15. In this framing, collective participation becomes a matter of faith, duty, and sacrifice. The Nation is therefore mobilized against regime adversaries and positioned as responsible for safeguarding the state's survival. In its most aggressive form, this rhetoric militarizes citizenship itself, recasting ordinary citizens as an army ready to fight, sacrifice, and participate in the regime's struggle for survival.

2.2. Collaboration with the witch-hunt

The theme of collaboration features prominently in Erdoğan's speeches addressed to diverse audiences, including the general public, state officials, local actors, celebrities, and international partners. Regardless of audience, these speeches are overwhelmingly constructed around a language of collective action, emphasizing its inherent value, appealing for cooperation, and praising existing efforts.

While most references stress state–society collaboration, partnerships with figures such as celebrities, local governors, and other influential groups are also highlighted. Across contexts, collaboration is cast as both a duty and a responsibility essential to the functioning and protection of the state. Yet Erdoğan's targeted appeals to strategic actors reveal a more calculated dimension. By enlisting key groups whose support is politically valuable, collaboration becomes part of a broader campaign against regime opponents. Calls for unity are thus framed as essential to national security and stability, but in practice, they function as an invitation to join the state's witch-hunt, mobilizing influential actors in the crackdown on adversaries by explicit calls to monitor, surveil and report them.

This section demonstrates how appeals to collaboration evolved alongside the regime's changing enemy narratives. The construction of the Gülen movement as an enemy embedded within state cadres made collaboration appear necessary because the threat was imagined as hidden inside ordinary institutions, professional networks, and social relations. Over time, this logic of concealed enmity was extended to other adversarial groups, including Kurds, leftists, and other marginalized actors, transforming the search for enemies into a broader field of suspicion. As the boundaries of enmity expanded, institutional actors such as judges, local governors, public servants, and bureaucrats were increasingly called upon to participate in detection, reporting, and purification. Collaboration was therefore framed not merely as

support for the regime, but as an institutional duty to help expose and remove hidden enemies from the state and society.

2.2.1. *"Know your enemy": Discursive appeals to confront adversaries*

A central element of Erdoğan's discourse on state–society collaboration is the use of narratives that mobilize allies against perceived enemies. Collaboration is framed not only as solidarity but as active confrontation, with citizens urged to align with the state in distinguishing between *friends and foes*. In this way, the rhetoric of collaboration becomes inseparable from enemy discourse and is instrumentalized to advance the regime's broader political "witch-hunt." Erdoğan employs it both to vilify adversaries and to rally strategic groups to help neutralize or marginalize them, framing this alignment as a civic duty.

This approach is particularly evident in Erdoğan's appeals to key actors such as the Mukhtars. Drawing on *Kutadgu Bilig*, an 11th-century didactic poem on governance, he underscores the responsibility of supporting allies and abandoning foes in the face of threats, while implicitly warning of the costs of non-compliance:

> In Kutadgu Bilig, the duties of the state towards its people are listed, as well as the obligations of the people towards their country—and this is very significant. Do you know what the foremost duty is? It is to recognize the friends of the country as friends, and its enemies as enemies. We must grasp this truth. As long as every citizen recognizes the country's friends as friends and its enemies as enemies, it will be impossible for structures like the parallel treason network or the separatist terrorist organization to take root in these lands (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

Discourse that cultivates the idea of the enemy in the public imagination extends beyond a simple *friends–foes* dichotomy and actively enlists adversaries through a catalogue of concrete examples:

> Are there those of corrupted blood among us? Of course there are. And our nation gives them the lesson they deserve. Sometimes it is the terrorist who fires bullets at his own state and nation. Sometimes it is the so-called intellectuals and academics who publish declarations of support for them. Sometimes it is a member of parliament who carries weapons to terrorists in his car or offers them his home. And sometimes it is a deputy in Germany who accuses his own country of genocide (Ankara, 8 June 2016).

By listing specific categories of "traitors," this rhetoric constructs enemies along the sociopolitical boundary that maps dissent onto Kurdish identity and those associated with it. The invocation of *kanı bozuk*, a phrase carrying racist undertones of "bad stock" or "corrupted blood", is an allusion to Kurds, casting them as inherently disloyal and morally tainted. However, Erdoğan pre-emptively "clarifies" the expression *bad stock*, reframing it as a moral rather than biological category to neutralize its racial connotations:

> Of course, when I say "bad stock," I am absolutely not referring to any biological defect or, least of all, to racism. In our culture, the expression refers to a character who harms their own nation or society, someone who insists on committing wrongful acts. What does it matter biologically what

> nationality the terrorist who points a gun at this country belongs to? In our eyes, that person is a bad stock (Ankara, 8 June 2016).

Adopting the racist expression "bad stock," Erdoğan redefines the "enemy" as "someone who harms his own nation, who insists on engaging in wrongful deeds." While the term historically implies a biological division, he mitigates its overtly racial connotations, reframing it in moral terms, thereby assigning the Nation the responsibility of confronting such figures. However, Erdoğan's discourse reinforces ethnic polarization in the national imagination, legitimizing repression by portraying an entire group as biologically and morally compromised.

Enemy-construction in political discourse extends beyond targeting so-called illegal structures and their affiliates. It encompasses a broader campaign of mass marginalization aimed at influential groups critical of the regime. Erdoğan's address to celebrities exemplifies this agenda: the *friends and foes* dichotomy he invokes is further characterised by fostering in-group rivalry within the celebrity community:

> We are sadly witnessing a group in our country that claims to be artists or intellectuals, yet shows open hostility towards their own nation. They exert pressure and influence over much of the art and sports community. Blinded by hatred, they try to lynch our artists with national values for their honorable stance. (…) My request is this: never allow these circles to pressure you. Whenever you can, expose their true faces; when you do so, you will see that our nation stands with you in all its strength and sincerity (İstanbul, 19 June 2016).

The analysis shows that beyond simply constructing a membership divide around the *us-versus-them* framework, the discourse represents a more aggressive approach by actively pitting groups against one another with clear imperatives. By emphasizing the pressures imposed on celebrities by regime critics, the rhetoric pushes further, encouraging allies to take direct action and confront the adversaries. This strategy fosters internal conflict and rivalry, ensuring that regime supporters are not passive bystanders but active participants in marginalizing and confronting those labelled as enemies.

2.2.2. Information problem

Since the 2013 Corruption Scandal, the information problem has been central to Erdoğan's discourse. Due to the leaks, orchestrated by Gülen-affiliated officials in the security services and judiciary, the network was framed as a treacherous force infiltrating state institutions. In response, Erdoğan launched a campaign to expose and dismantle these "traitors from within," presenting their identification as a matter of national security. By 2015, as Kurds and pro-Kurdish actors were increasingly recast as adversaries, this logic of infiltration expanded to include them as well. Kurds, Kurdish politicians, and their supporters were folded into the same narrative of internal threat, portrayed not only as political opponents but as actors whose identification required scrutiny. This culminated after the 2016 coup attempt in an even

broader category of supposed infiltrators, intensifying the discourse of an "identification problem" that demanded constant vigilance and exposure.

The information problem crystallizes particularly in Erdoğan's addresses to the Mukhtars, where appeals to collaboration are framed as a response to the difficulty of detecting hidden enemies. In these speeches, infiltrators, whether FETÖ, PKK, ISIS, or others, are portrayed as interchangeable components of a larger scheme against Turkey, requiring constant vigilance:

> We must strengthen ourselves against treacherous networks that can infiltrate everywhere, from our Armed Forces and judiciary to our Police Force and intelligence agencies, and from our schools to our hospitals. Whether this treacherous network is PKK, FETÖ, or ISIS, it makes no difference. The names, cadres, and rhetoric of these organizations may change, but the fact that they are enemies of the Turkish nation and the Turkish State never changes (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

Here, infiltration is framed as a persistent and diffuse threat that cannot be neutralized through formal legal action alone. Because the enemy is imagined as mobile, concealed, and embedded across ordinary institutions, its detection requires collective responsibility from both the state and society. The mobilization of Mukhtars is especially significant in this regard. Their grassroots position makes them valuable intermediaries between the state and local communities, enabling them to observe neighbourhood dynamics, gather information, and report suspicious persons or activities. Their role became even more critical during the trench wars in Kurdish-populated southeastern cities, where the detection of militants, collaborators, and logistical networks was framed as requiring local knowledge. Referring to the trench wars, Erdoğan stated:

> Digging up streets to block traffic, setting up explosive traps, cutting off roads to threaten people, burning and destroying vehicles, obstructing road construction and dam projects... Can you even imagine such things? My dear Mukhtar brothers, your duty at this point is crucial. You are the representatives of the state in the most remote neighbourhoods and villages. You are mukhtars, elected by the people, not appointed officials (…). It's important that our mukhtars fulfil this responsibility effectively. A mukhtar must reflect the free will of the people and, as the name suggests, be the voice that brings that will to the top (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

Here, Erdoğan invokes the Mukhtars' democratic legitimacy as elected representatives of the people, but converts this legitimacy into a responsibility to serve as conduits between local communities and the state. Their authority is presented not merely as representative, but as communicative and supervisory: they are expected to transmit the people's will "to the top" and to ensure that local threats are detected before they materialize. In practice, this function extends beyond democratic representation. It positions Mukhtars as local intermediaries in the monitoring and reporting of their communities on behalf of the state. Through this discourse, the information problem is reframed as a shared duty: identifying infiltrators, collaborators, and suspicious activities before they cause harm. As both elected community figures and

representatives of the state, Mukhtars are thus constructed as crucial allies in the regime's broader campaign to expose and remove hidden enemies.

2.2.3. Cultivating reporting: demand for surveillance & monitoring

Following the re-securitization of Kurds after the 2015 elections, Erdoğan's discourse increasingly promoted proactive vigilance, outsourcing surveillance to local actors as part of the state's unofficial witch-hunt. This was most evident in his addresses to Mukhtars, whom he repeatedly asked to be the "eyes and ears of the state." The narrative was often couched in the language of community solidarity with references to door-to-door visits, welfare checks, and even religiously framed examples from early Islamic history:

> I want to see you just like Khalifa Omar. You know how he would listen at doors, checking if there were any sounds, if anyone inside was crying? (Ankara, 8 June 2016).

This rhetoric casts neighborhood surveillance as a moral and religious duty, drawing on Islamic exemplars and attributing these responsibilities to mukhtars. By invoking the image of a religious figure who "listens at doors," Erdoğan normalizes local monitoring as part of everyday governance, positioning mukhtars as figures expected to "go door-to-door, leaving no household unchecked."

However, the political function of this moralized surveillance becomes unmistakable during periods of intensified conflict with the PKK. What is framed as a religious and ethical obligation is, in practice, mobilized for security purposes. As the state escalated its crackdown on Kurdish cities, Erdoğan underscored the centrality of intelligence gathering to this campaign and directly enlisted Mukhtars to serve as local informants, emphasizing their intimate knowledge of residents and neighbourhoods:

> The separatist organization [PKK] and its party [HDP] have failed to fulfil their responsibilities. Instead, through constant exploitation and provocation, they have chosen violence and oppression. At this point, the state must continue its operations with determination and perseverance, uncovering what is in every house through intelligence and thorough investigations. And I expect support from our mukhtars in this regard. I know my mukhtar knows who lives in each house, who they are, and what they are doing. You will report this calmly and properly to the district governor, or if necessary, to the governor or police chief. We will work together in solidarity. You know these things well (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

Just days later, amid trench warfare in Kurdish cities, Erdoğan's rhetoric escalated further, amplifying the pressure and urging Mukhtars to take sides:

> There is a choice to be made: either 'I stand with my state' or 'I stand with the terrorist organization.' If in a village, town, or district, terrorists can move freely among the people, it means the local population is not doing its part. (…) Shouldn't a Mukhtar know who lives in each house in his neighborhood or village? Shouldn't he know whether someone is a terrorist or not? Yes, he should. And once he knows, he must report it to the nearest security force or police station (Ankara, 19 August 2015).

The rhetoric urging mukhtars to take sides explicitly conditions loyalty on aligning with the state by providing intelligence about "who is who." In this logic, loyalty becomes synonymous with surveillance, while failure to monitor one's community is framed as complicity with terrorism. In doing so, Erdoğan transforms the ostensibly administrative role of mukhtars into an instrument of security governance, casting them as informal informants of the regime.

This logic of turning state officials into informants extended into the post-coup landscape. Once the previously unofficial witch-hunt became formal state policy aimed at purging allegedly affiliated individuals from public institutions, Erdoğan assigned local governors a similar role, charging them with monitoring their districts as the "ears and eyes of the state". Addressing local governors, Erdoğan said:

> As the highest-level representatives in our 81 cities, the governorates and their connected institutions have a great responsibility to act as the state's hands to grasp, feet to walk, eyes to see, ears to hear, and heart to feel in each city. If the governorates do not perform their duties properly, it's like losing a vital limb, just as a person becomes disabled, the state's machinery will start to stumble and falter (Ankara, 8 September 2016).

This rhetoric underpins Erdoğan's effort to cultivate a form of surveillance embedded within the administrative apparatus. Through the personalization of power, governors are recast not as bureaucratic officials operating within institutional mandates, but as extensions of the leader's embodied authority, agents responsible for sensing, monitoring, and reporting on the social body of the nation.

This effort to cultivate monitoring and surveillance was not merely rhetorical. It was also supported by concrete administrative mechanisms that normalized reporting as a routine function of local governance. Central to this effort was the Mukhtar Information System (MUBİS), launched by the Ministry of Interior on 5 February 2015 and designed to enable mukhtars to submit requests, opinions, suggestions, and complaints electronically, while allowing these submissions to be followed and reported through the system. Officially, the platform was presented as a tool to facilitate communication between mukhtars, central ministry units, governorates, municipalities, and relevant institutions. In this sense, MUBİS was framed as an instrument of administrative responsiveness and service delivery (T.C İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2015)

Yet the system should also be read within the broader framework of state information gathering. Because MUBİS feeds into the Ministry of Interior, which oversees key policing and security institutions, it renders grassroots information electronically traceable, reportable, and measurable. This dual function is visible in later official rhetoric. In a 2025 speech, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya described MUBİS as a platform through which mukhtars' requests, suggestions, and complaints are rapidly directed to governorates, municipalities, and

relevant institutions. He emphasized that the system makes these submissions "traceable, reportable, measurable," and framed this as evidence that "President Erdoğan's vision has been institutionalized" by shortening the distance between the state and the neighbourhood and strengthening trust and communication (Anadolu Agency, 2025). This framing presents MUBİS as a tool of responsive governance. At the same time, its institutional location, data-routing capacity, and reporting functions also position it within a broader administrative infrastructure for monitoring local society.

Although the government presented MUBİS as an instrument of responsiveness and service delivery, the system should also be read within the broader framework of state information gathering. Because MUBİS feeds into the Ministry of Interior, which oversees key policing and public-security institutions, it created an administrative channel through which grassroots information could be routed into the state's security apparatus. Its timing is analytically significant. MUBİS became operational in February 2015, after the government had introduced a new security bill in November 2014 and before the Domestic Security Package was passed in March 2015. The bill itself followed the October 2014 Kobani protests and was criticized for expanding police and provincial governors' powers, including by allowing governors to instruct police to focus on particular crimes and perpetrators(Human Rights Watch, 2014; Zeldin, 2015). Read against the post-Kobani security climate and alongside Erdoğan's simultaneous calls for mukhtars to report "who is who" in their neighbourhoods, MUBİS can be understood not only as a tool of administrative responsiveness, but also as part of a broader infrastructure through which local knowledge became available to state monitoring and security governance.

Discursively, however, Erdoğan framed the system as a symbol of collaboration and mutual trust. By citing numbers of applications and resolutions, he presented himself as directly overseeing communication between mukhtars and the state, reinforcing his model of "direct presidency." In this way, a tool of intelligence gathering was rebranded as an instrument of responsiveness, embedding surveillance into everyday governance under the guise of partnership:

> The genuine rapport between us and our mukhtars deepens with each meeting, growing stronger and more meaningful. These gatherings, which bring together the President and the Mukhtars—the state's grassroots representatives—are yielding positive results for our country and our nation. I hope the Mukhtar Information System has become an important platform for conveying your requests directly to the Ministry and from there to the relevant institutions. We are already seeing results, and this gives me great satisfaction (Ankara, 1 December 2016).

The demand for intelligence was not confined to formalised structures like the MUBİS. In a speech to governors after the coup attempt, delivered as he briefed them on purging public-sector employees, Erdoğan urged them to conduct the state-led purges meticulously and

without yielding to pressure from ministers or MPs. He further encouraged them to bypass the conventional chain of command and report any issues directly to him, even when those issues concerned ministers or MPs:

> My dear friends, if there are such pressures from MPs or ministers, or anything of that sort, you can speak to the Minister of the Interior or to our Prime Minister. My phones are open 24 hours; you can reach me anytime, or you can simply come. My phone has no hours, and I expect the same from you. When I call a governor at 1 am, at 2 am, at 3 a.m. … perhaps some of you have received such calls and thought, 'Is this a time to be called?' None of my governors should ever say this—they cannot. A governor's duty is not from 9 in the morning to 6 in the evening; it is 24 hours. When we work with this mindset, the state becomes a state; otherwise, we continue living like a tribe (Ankara, 8 September 2016).

The expectation of surveillance emerges from Erdoğan's broader effort to cultivate absolute loyalty, erode institutional boundaries, and personalise governance, an approach that extends beyond officials to society at large. Paradoxically, governors are instructed to reach him informally, through his personal phone and outside regular working hours, with this direct access presented as essential for the proper functioning of the state. At the same time, Erdoğan reminded governors that intelligence about their own conduct reached him through citizen complaints, creating a dual dynamic in which governors became both informants and targets of surveillance. He said:

> My dear friends, from time to time, I receive certain complaints from our citizens. What are they? They say: 'Our governor looks down on us, he is not humble, and it is very difficult to reach him.' … I do not think any of our governors would deserve such complaints, but clearly there is or has been some problem somewhere, because these complaints reach me even when I visit those provinces (Ankara, 8 September 2016).

The speech illustrates Erdoğan's effort to cultivate a culture of informing at every level of governance, echoing practices associated with Sultan Abdülhamid II's reliance on networks of informants (Koloğlu, 2005). By enlisting diverse actors as informants, Erdoğan delegates the responsibility of monitoring to them while recentralizing the flow of information around himself. Surveillance therefore becomes personalized: actors are expected to monitor others on behalf of the leader, while remaining aware that they too are being monitored through complaints, superior oversight, and direct presidential scrutiny. This creates a recursive logic of surveillance in which officials and citizens become both watchers and watched, reinforcing loyalty, discipline, and dependence within the regime's governing apparatus.

Discursively, Erdoğan's appeals to governors contrast sharply with those to Mukhtars. Addresses to Mukhtars, who are elected locally without political party nomination, are marked by cooperative rhetoric, with the democratic mandate highlighted as the root of their responsibility. This is because the regime does not have total control over them. However, in Erdoğan's discourse, governors are presented as extensions of central state authority and are personally addressed as actors expected to implement the government's priorities continuously

and effectively. They are expected to be on duty "24 hours a day." The distinction highlights the hierarchical structure of his governance and the centralization of surveillance under his direct command.

However, Erdoğan extends the logic of reporting beyond state officials, blending it with patriotism to mobilize wider segments of society. When addressing businessmen, for instance, he strategically framed informing as both a duty and a responsibility, assigning even non-officials a role in monitoring and reporting perceived enemies:

> You may have friends or acquaintances from these circles. You must expose them. You must report them to our prosecutors and the police. Why? Because this is our patriotic duty. You must come forward as complainants and report them… Wherever it leads—10 thousand, 20 thousand, 100 thousand—we will do it. We are obliged to cleanse this. And I trust you will purge this organization, with all its elements, from among you (Ankara, 11 August 2016).

This call for reporting delineates the contours of the emerging witch-hunt and reflects Erdoğan's ambition to transform a state-led campaign into a popular one in which every citizen is expected to participate out of patriotic duty. Addressed specifically to businessmen and urging them to exclude Gülen-affiliated individuals from their circles, the call also signals a significant shift: the state's purge is no longer confined to public institutions but is extended to the private sector, which is now expected to mirror state actions. As later chapters show, this logic would shape workplace practices more broadly, with individuals dismissed from private companies in accordance with the state's expanding logic of purging.

2.2.4. Demand in collaboration with purges

The post-coup political landscape was marked by a large-scale campaign of emergency dismissal, institutional cleansing, investigation, and exclusion across public institutions and parts of the private sector. Following the declaration of a state of emergency in 2016, the government mobilized all available legal, bureaucratic, military, and security resources to purge the state of those deemed enemies, particularly those connected to or affiliated with illegal organizations. However, a *de facto* "witch-hunt" had already begun shortly after the Corruption Scandal, a term Erdoğan explicitly used in May 2014 while addressing his party members regarding his relocation of Gülen-affiliated prosecutors:

> They keep talking about the fight against the parallel structure turning into a witch hunt. If relocating those who have betrayed this country is considered a witch hunt, then yes, we will carry out this witch hunt—make no mistake about it (Afyon, 11 May 2014)[10].

[10] The analysis identified a striking instance of ex post censorship in the official presidential speech archive. The expression in question was not simply removed from the archived text; it was replaced with wording that reversed its original meaning. This retrospective alteration points to an effort to sanitize the official record after delivery. The original wording could nevertheless be recovered through contemporaneous media coverage of the speech (Yılmaz & Çetin, 2014), allowing the analysis to cite the statement as it was initially made.

What began as the removal of officials tied to the Gülen movement soon expanded to include Kurds and their supporters following the collapse of the Peace Talks. In a speech delivered during a meeting with security forces just a month before the coup attempt, Erdoğan revealed the state's plans for an impending crackdown on its enemies. He marked the legislation passed to remove the immunity of the HDP MPs as a crucial step in this broader campaign, for which all available resources to combat its adversaries were mobilized:

> If a law is needed, we will pass it; if an administrative action is required, we will take it. (…) I have discussed the necessary work on this issue with our Prime Minister and ministers, and I have seen that they are taking action and striving to address it (İstanbul, 16 June 2016).

The same speech went further, outlining the operational specifics of the planned crackdown, providing a roadmap of the state's approach, reinforcing the message that all branches of law enforcement and security were expected to fully align with and execute the government's broader agenda, which entailed purging the state of its enemies:

> Another pressing issue is the organizations that pose as civil society groups, both at home and abroad, but in reality serve terrorist organizations. We must swiftly establish the mechanisms to end their activities. Anyone in public institutions found to have ties to separatist terrorists must be identified, dismissed from service, and subjected to legal proceedings.
>
> Teachers recruiting for terrorist organizations, healthcare workers delivering medicine to terrorists, or civil servants spreading propaganda—these distortions are unacceptable. The state cannot feed, with its own resources, those who work against it. For this reason, regulations concerning civil servants must undergo thorough reform. Likewise, all public activities in the region—from social assistance to investment—must be comprehensively reviewed and reorganized (İstanbul, 16 June 2016).

The speech lays out the contours of the planned purge in explicit terms, presenting it as a coordinated, state-wide operation. Erdoğan frames the identification of groups "posing as civil society organizations" and of public-sector workers allegedly linked to terrorist organisations as an urgent responsibility requiring full collaboration across all branches of the state. The rhetoric takes the form of an imperative: anyone in public service with purported ties to separatist actors must be identified, dismissed, and prosecuted. This extends beyond individuals to the broader governance structure in the southeast, where Erdoğan calls for suspending or reorganising all public activities, from social assistance to investment. These measures are justified through the claim that "the state cannot feed those who work against it," thus legitimising both individual purges and the collective withdrawal of state resources from Kurdish regions.

Shortly before the coup, in June 2016, Erdoğan delivered a series of speeches that revealed his persistent effort to communicate the *de facto* witch-hunt to diverse strategic audiences with growing urgency. Critics were cast as targets, retribution was foreshadowed, and alignment

with the regime was strongly emphasized. In a speech, he attacked the academics who are critical of the regime, saying:

> Yesterday, some people issued a statement, supposedly to warn us. You see them defending so-called professors who insult their own people, so-called academics who act as militants for terrorist organizations, and journalists. But it is my right and duty to expose the rotten ones in their ranks. (…) The days when your empty shots somehow hit the mark are long gone. This nation no longer heeds you, your words, or your statements. If you continue to wage war against the nation's values, its history, its culture, and its representatives, you will be consumed by your own bitterness (İstanbul, 22 June 2016).

Here, Erdoğan targets the Academics for Peace[11], accusing them of betraying and insulting the nation by siding with terrorism and violence. By labelling them "rotten ones within the ranks," he delegitimised their professional status and signalled the prospect of punitive action. Invoking the "bad apple" frame, he recast dissenting academics as corrupt elements that must be removed to protect the integrity of the whole, thereby justifying impending purges as both necessary and morally imperative. Also, he relied on the *friends–foes dichotomy*, which not only defined group membership but also prescribed acceptable behavior, implicitly warning of punishment for those who failed to conform.

This framing was also applied to NGOs portrayed as corrupt elements contaminating civil society:

> There are structures that, under the guise of civil society organizations, harbor hostility toward their own country and nation. But our people clearly see who works for their benefit and who pursues malicious deeds, and they judge this well. We all witnessed the fate of the treasonous network known as the parallel state structure. Once it gathered the largest, strongest, and most widespread civil society organizations under its roof, but when its betrayal was exposed, it shattered like a glass palace. (…) There are important lessons in this for anyone with reason, conscience, and morality (Ankara, 21 June 2016).

Here, Erdoğan applies the same logic used against academics to NGOs, casting suspicion on their activities and framing them as harmful to the nation. The narrative implicitly targets human rights organizations that document state violence, recasting their work as treasonous rather than as advocacy. By drawing a *false equivalence* between these groups and the Gülen movement—presented as having once been the "largest" and "strongest" civil society actor before its alleged betrayal—Erdoğan delegitimises independent NGOs and primes the public to view them as potential threats. This rhetorical strategy not only erodes their credibility but also constructs a moral justification for their marginalisation or closure.

[11] Established in 2012, Academics for Peace is an initiative by Turkish academics who came together to campaign for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. After signing a declaration called "We will not be part of this crime!", hundreds of signatories were dismissed from their jobs and many of them underwent criminal prosecution (BAK, 2025)

Together, the quotes highlighted so far reveal a *de facto* witch-hunt, one carried out through discourse, partial legislation, pressure, and informal directives. After the coup attempt, with the declaration of the state of emergency, this logic was formally codified, transforming the *de facto* campaign into a *de jure* purge through presidential decrees, which legalized mass purges of anyone who is in "contact or affiliated with terrorist groups". As part of this legalized campaign, Erdoğan issued direct orders to governors to remove suspected FETÖ and PKK supporters from public service, presenting the measures as swift but lawful. To *pre-legitimize* them, he drew on historical precedent, citing the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of officials after German reunification, saying:

> Do you know what the plan was during the reunification of East and West Germany? To remove 2 million state officials. In the end, they dismissed 600,000 people from public service. Why? To build the Germany we see today. We, too, must take whatever steps are necessary, and we are obligated to do so. In which realm? In the realm of law, right now, the judiciary is working on it (Ankara, 26 October 2016).

The narrative presents the purges as an unavoidable necessity. To enhance persuasiveness, Erdoğan simultaneously appeals to the *topoi of history, law,* and *national security*. Through these frames, he seeks to normalise mass purges as both principled and essential, and an ordinary administrative process with established historical precedent. By emphasising that the judiciary is "working on it," the rhetoric anchors the purge within the legal realm, reinforcing its appearance of legality and adherence to due process.

2.2.5. Demand for retribution

Retribution is at the heart of the discourse surrounding the state's witch-hunt, consistently resurfacing during moments of crisis in a cyclical pattern. A recurrent strategy here is *transference*: Erdoğan frames retribution not as the regime's agenda, but as the will of the people, with the state merely tasked with carrying it out. In this way, the call for punishment is legitimized as a democratic demand rather than an act of political vengeance. This call intensified after the coup attempt, reaching its peak at the rallies held immediately afterward:

> This state has both the power and the tradition to mete out the punishment deserved by those who point guns at it, who shoot their fellow citizens, who roll tanks over their people, who rain bombs on them with F-16s, or who open fire from helicopters. Rest assured: the blood of our martyrs will never remain on the ground. The glorious democratic resistance of our nation in the rallies will be honoured by fulfilling its demands to the fullest (Ankara, 23 July 2016).

These statements, marked by a very aggressive and vengeful tone, exemplify how retribution was assured and portrayed as a popular mandate, rather than a state-driven agenda. The rhetoric escalated further during the series of "Democracy and Martyrs Rallies," where the state's agenda for a comprehensive crackdown became explicit. At the massive Yenikapı rally, before hundreds of thousands, Erdoğan framed the reinstatement of the death penalty as *"the people's demand"* and openly pressed parliament for support, saying:

> Since sovereignty unconditionally belongs to the people, and you have called for the death penalty, the authority to make this decision rests with the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Once our Parliament makes such a decision, the next step is clear. If it's ratification, I'm telling you in advance that I will approve such a decision from Parliament (Ankara, 7 August 2016).

The argument hinged on sovereignty: if sovereignty belongs to the nation, and the nation demands capital punishment, then both parliament and the presidency are obliged to deliver. To normalize the idea, Erdoğan reminded the crowd that Turkey had capital punishment until 1984 and cited countries like the United States, Japan, and China, where it still exists. By framing execution as both democratic and internationally legitimate, Erdoğan projected his own desire for retribution onto the will of the people.

The same discursive strategy was redeployed to mobilize strategic actors, particularly the members of the judiciary, for swift action for retribution, saying:

> FETÖ had already been condemned in the hearts of our people. What our law enforcement and judiciary are doing now is simply turning that moral condemnation into formal justice. Since the world revolves around justice, it is the duty of our judges, prosecutors, and lawyers to ensure it is delivered in the most perfect way possible. Let us speed up this process and swiftly reach a conclusion within the framework of the law…As I always say, delayed justice is not justice. Therefore, we must quickly make our decisions so that those who deserve punishment can receive it without delay (Ankara, 1 September 2016).

This speech was delivered at the inauguration of the Judicial Year in September 2016, at a moment when the post-coup purges and prosecutions were rapidly expanding. Erdoğan praised law enforcement and the judiciary for transforming the public's "moral condemnation" of FETÖ into "formal justice," while urging judges and prosecutors to deliver punishment swiftly. The formulation is significant because it collapses the boundary between popular sentiment and legal judgment: FETÖ is presented as already condemned by the Nation, leaving the judiciary to formalize that verdict through legal procedure. Retribution is therefore *pre-legitimized* not as political vengeance, but as the fulfilment of popular will and judicial duty. By invoking the maxim that "delayed justice is not justice," Erdoğan further frames speed as a moral and legal responsibility, turning urgency itself into a justification for accelerated punishment.

Erdoğan's effort to mobilize strategic actors and society at large for a collective project of retribution was channelled most powerfully through the rhetoric of the "Yenikapı spirit," a term associated with the mass post-coup rally held in Yenikapı Square on 7 August 2016. Surrounded by representatives of major political parties, except the HDP, which was not invited, as well as prominent public figures and celebrities, Erdoğan staged a spectacle of national unity. The rally presented him as the leader capable of bringing together political and social forces against the coup plotters. The "Yenikapı spirit" quickly became more than a reference to the rally itself. It evolved into a politically charged discourse of urgent

mobilization, demanding unwavering solidarity with the regime and alignment with its post-coup agenda.

Erdoğan strategically invoked this "spirit" to pressure state institutions to join the collective mission of purging traitors:

> I also expect representatives of other institutions to set aside tactics of tension and accusations and act in accordance with the spirit of unity demonstrated on August 7th in Yenikapı. Now more than ever, our nation needs unity, solidarity, and togetherness (Ankara, 1 September 2016).

The rhetoric rests on a *false dilemma*: institutional actors are expected either to align with the Nation and its leadership or to be seen as obstructing national unity. Through this framing, Erdoğan transforms the "Yenikapı spirit" into a disciplinary demand placed on state institutions, requiring them to abandon criticism, hesitation, or procedural resistance in the name of unity. Popular anger is thereby fused with state policy, pre-legitimizing retribution as both a democratic duty and a national imperative. In this formulation, "justice" becomes difficult to distinguish from revenge, as state institutions are called upon to fulfil what is presented as the people's demand for punishment.

3. Discursive incorporation through rewards, recognition, and narratives of duty

In the discourse aimed at soliciting support and securing co-optation from the broader public and strategically important actors, strategies of rewards, promises, and aspirations emerged. Our analysis reveals that material and non-material rewards constitute a significant dimension of the discursive co-optation of various stakeholders, aligning them with the regime's political agenda. These incentives are also deployed to garner legitimacy for the regime. While the service rhetoric was leveraged as political currency to reward the general populace for their support and to cultivate loyalty to the regime, the discourse employs more nuanced and calculated approaches to co-opt strategic actors into the regime's political project.

3.1. Rhetoric of service as political currency: Rewarding the general populace

The analysis shows that the *formation of public opinion* is the dominant field of action in Erdoğan's speeches, many of which were delivered at the inaugurations of infrastructure projects or similar events. These speeches are overwhelmingly marked by a rhetoric of *serving the people,* where promises and achievements such as new roads, bridges, hospitals, or services, are highlighted to underscore the regime's output legitimacy. Yet this rhetoric serves a deeper function. By presenting grand projects as rewards, Erdoğan ties material benefits to political loyalty, framing "service" as both a means of delivery and a demand. Tangible achievements

are used as currency to solicit collaboration and support, aligning the regime's political agenda with the people's interests. In this way, the discourse of *serving the people* not only legitimizes the regime's performance but also mobilizes the public behind its broader goals in a transactional fashion.

The analysis reveals a clear pattern: before seeking public backing for his political agenda, Erdoğan often foregrounds material rewards, including infrastructure projects, public services, budget increases, and reconstruction promises. This strategy is particularly visible when he addresses strategically important constituencies in politically significant regions. At election rallies in Konya, an AKP stronghold with a conservative base and high voter turnout, Erdoğan highlights government achievements before directly appealing for support. In doing so, he links tangible benefits to political loyalty, reinforcing the connection between the regime's service delivery and public endorsement:

> Let me remind you of the New Metropolitan Municipality Law. Starting from March 30, even the most remote settlements in Konya will receive services from the Metropolitan Municipality. From now on, our Mayor will be responsible not only for the central districts but for all of Konya. This means faster, higher-quality, and more extensive services. We are also increasing the municipality's budget… I am confident that our service approach in Konya will advance even further (Konya, 17 December 2013).

Erdoğan's "good news" for Konya went beyond its upgrade to metropolitan municipality status. More significantly, he announced an increase in the city council's budget and linked this promise to the expectation of strong electoral support. This pattern of converting service delivery into political loyalty was not limited to regime strongholds. It also extended to the Kurdish southeast, where material promises took a different but equally strategic form. During the trench wars, a violent conflict that caused extensive destruction across several Kurdish-majority towns, Erdoğan promised government-led reconstruction of the region:

> The situation that has emerged from the [military] operations in 11 districts and 1 city will not remain as it is. Our relevant ministers have already begun infrastructure work in these areas. With God's help, these places will be transformed into something even more beautiful than before. Every necessary step will be taken (Ankara, 23 June 2016).

In this context, reconstruction was not presented as a neutral obligation of the state toward citizens affected by conflict. Rather, it was embedded in a security narrative that contrasted the destructive terrorist organization with the restorative state. Erdoğan repeated the promise to rebuild the war-torn Kurdish region across several speeches, while also urging the residents of the conflict-affected Kurdish regions to distance themselves from the PKK as an implicit condition of peace, recovery, and state support:

> The terrorist organization burns, destroys, and ravages. The state, by contrast, builds, constructs, and revives. A terrorist organization can be rendered incapable through decisive measures, but if the people of the region do not distance themselves from it, it will recover and regain strength. We have seen many such examples in the past (İstanbul, 16 June 2016).

The narrative establishes a stark contrast between destruction and renewal. Erdoğan frames the terrorist organization as the sole source of devastation, while portraying the state as the agent of reconstruction, order, and progress. At the discursive level, this framing performs two functions. First, it displaces responsibility for the destruction away from state military operations and places it entirely on the terrorist organization. Second, it presents alignment with the state as the only viable path to peace, security, and prosperity. In this way, reconstruction becomes politically conditional: the promise of material recovery is tied to the expectation that Kurdish citizens distance themselves from the PKK and align with the government's security agenda.

Overall, these examples show how the service and delivery discourse turns material rewards into political currency. In loyal strongholds such as Konya, infrastructure, budgets, and public services are used to consolidate electoral support. In conflict-affected Kurdish regions, reconstruction promises are used to encourage compliance, distance citizens from the regime's adversaries, and rally support for the state's security objectives. Across both contexts, Erdoğan's rhetoric converts service provision into a reciprocal political exchange: the regime delivers benefits, and citizens are expected to respond with loyalty, support, and collaboration.

3.2. Enlisting the influential: Incorporation of the strategic actors

Erdoğan did not limit his political currency to securing mass support; he also sought to bind key strategic groups to his political agenda through calculated discursive co-optation. This effort operated not only rhetorically but also symbolically. Presidential receptions at the palace, which is rebranded as the Nation's House, were emblematic of this strategy. There, Erdoğan hosted security forces, governors, mukhtars, members of the judiciary, families of martyrs, NGOs, celebrities, and sports figures to communicate his vision, projects, and policies in person. For state officials, attendance formed part of hierarchical expectations surrounding presidential events, while invitations to influential public figures carried considerable symbolic and political pressure. In this sense, the gatherings could operate as mechanisms of incorporation, publicly associating attendees with Erdoğan and his political agenda.

Erdoğan's speeches to these groups provide valuable insights into his political agenda. His rhetoric is carefully crafted to strategically incorporate key actors, tying them to the regime and aligning them with its objectives through various persuasive strategies. A dominant theme across these appeals is collaboration in the fight against terrorism and regime opponents. In particular, the discourse emphasizes the need for unity in countering political opponents, who

are framed as a threat to national security. Unlike his appeals to the general public, which often highlight tangible rewards like infrastructure projects or services, Erdoğan's addresses to these strategic groups rely heavily on non-material forms of co-optation. This includes delegating power and authority, offering symbolic influence, and instilling a vested interest in the regime's continuity. Through this strategy, Erdoğan seeks to secure their loyalty and ensure their participation in his broader political projects.

3.2.1. Delegation of power and authority

Situated at the lowest level of Turkey's administrative structure under the Ministry of Interior, Mukhtars are elected heads of villages or urban neighbourhoods and constitute the most local point of contact between residents and the administrative system. Although they are regulated and supervised within the wider framework of the Ministry of Interior, they differ from centrally appointed governors and district governors because they derive their authority from local election. Their election coincides with local elections however, they run for office independently rather than as nominees of political parties, which limits the regime's direct control over them. Their institutional and electoral independence is precisely what makes them valuable targets for cultivation: unlike appointed officials, they cannot be controlled through routine bureaucratic channels. This strategic importance is reflected in Erdoğan's sustained attention to them. Based on the number of speeches delivered to mukhtars and the depth of information he communicates in these meetings, the analysis confirms that they are among the most crucial actors targeted by the regime. Erdoğan has made a significant effort to establish close ties with them, securing loyalty and collaboration in various matters, particularly in the fight against adversaries. Since 2015, he has regularly hosted Mukhtars from across the country at the Presidential Palace, where he delivers speeches that extend beyond local governance to national and international issues. Beyond rhetoric, their perks and status have been expanded, and they are structurally tied to the highest levels of government through mechanisms such as the Mukhtar Information System (MUBİS), which connects them directly to ministries and even the Presidency.

These meetings embody a highly symbolic tradition, reflecting Erdoğan's personal history with the office of Mukhtar[12]. Through these routinised gatherings, mukhtars are elevated as key

[12] In 1998, Erdoğan was convicted and banned from politics after reciting a poem during a speech in Siirt, a ruling that emerged within the broader climate of the 28 February process and military–judicial tutelage. He served four months in prison in 1999. In the aftermath of the decision, the headline "He can't even be a Mukhtar" became emblematic of the establishment's attempt to end his political career. Following his release, Erdoğan distanced himself from the Milli Görüş/Refah tradition and, together with reformist figures from that movement, founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. Although the AKP won a landslide victory in the 2002 elections, Erdoğan remained legally barred from entering parliament or becoming prime minister (Purvis, 2002). His political ban was lifted after legislative changes, enabling him to win a parliamentary

allies in governance, where Erdoğan frequently invoked the infamous headline from his political ban*, "He can't even be a Mukhtar",* to underscore his personal triumph over the establishment. That the tradition began in 2015, the year Erdoğan launched his *de facto* witch-hunt, is no coincidence: his addresses to mukhtars provide rich insights into this campaign and reveal their role as central actors in it.

The rhetoric directed at Mukhtars is distinctively crafted to bind them to the regime. They are treated not just as local administrators but as indispensable intermediaries between the state and society. Erdoğan "consults" them on issues such as the extension of the state of emergency, solicits their help in promoting the presidential system, and channels their requests and grievances through a platform designed specifically for them. This approach reinforces their privileged role in his governance model, making them both partners in policymaking and conduits for consolidating regime authority at the grassroots.

Discourse that constructs Mukhtars as strategic allies is marked by the delegation of power and agency to them:

> Our mukhtars are not appointed officials; they are elected by the will of the people. And those who are elected stand above those who are appointed. At the top of this pyramid is the President, chosen directly by the people's vote. The affection and cooperation between us are vital for the country's peace, development, and progress. Those who fail to grasp the strong bond between us and our mukhtars are, in truth, disturbed by our relationship with the people (Ankara, 26 August 2015).

Erdoğan recurrently invokes the broad mandate and democratic legitimacy Mukhtars possess as locally elected officials, reinforcing their allegiance to the regime. This strategy enhances mukhtars' sense of empowerment and responsibility, ensuring their active participation in the state's broader political and administrative goals.

References to democratic legitimacy form a dominant pattern in Erdoğan's overall rhetoric. Having himself risen to power through elections repetitively over the years, he consistently presents legitimacy as the core of political authority, even when justifying undemocratic practices under the guise of serving the "national will." In this context, mukhtars' authority as elected representatives is emphasized as both local and national: they embody the people's will in their communities while bearing responsibility for the state's objectives. By binding their local mandate to his own presidential mandate, Erdoğan symbolically fuses local governance

seat in the 2003 Siirt by-election, the same province where the speech that interrupted his political career had been delivered (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2026).

with the presidency, positioning mukhtars as indispensable allies in sustaining regime legitimacy.

In the context of the witch-hunt, Erdoğan's discourse on delegating power and authority that is framed in terms of democratic legitimacy became especially pronounced when seeking Mukhtars' support in counter-terrorism efforts. During the resurgence of conflict with the PKK, he justified renewed military action by citing violent acts and simultaneously stressed Mukhtars' duties in preventing them, positioning them as key grassroots actors:

> Digging up street corners to block traffic, laying mines and traps on roads, threatening people, burning vehicles, and obstructing construction projects—these are the actions we face… That is why your duty, my esteemed mukhtar brothers, is so heavy at this point. You are the representatives of the most remote neighborhoods and villages of this state. You are elected, not appointed. And in my view, the elected always stand above the appointed—know this well. You must fulfill this duty faithfully. The mukhtar should carry the free will of the people directly to the top, as the very name 'mukhtar' implies (Ankara, 12 August 2015).

Here, Erdoğan contrasts Mukhtars as elected local representatives with appointed civil servants in order to elevate their political significance. By emphasizing that they are "elected, not appointed," he presents them as authentic carriers of the people's will and therefore as actors with a distinct democratic mandate. This appeal to their representative status is strategically important: it allows Erdoğan to enlist Mukhtars in the state's security agenda not merely as administrative intermediaries, but as legitimate voices of local communities. Their proximity to neighbourhoods and villages is thus reframed as a political resource, making them critical partners in identifying threats, transmitting information upward, and safeguarding national security. This role becomes even more explicit in Erdoğan's addresses to Mukhtars from the Kurdish-populated southeast, where he directly called for their support in the state's fight against terrorism:

> I know that many of our mukhtars were threatened about today's meeting. Some wanted to come but were intimidated; others were unable to attend. But who is a Mukhtar? Are they a civil servant? No, a mukhtar is elected. Just as the people elect the President, a mukhtar is also chosen by the people. The elected are always superior to the appointed. All who believe in democracy see it this way. But those who do not believe in democracy say, 'I appointed you, so you will do as I say.' And isn't that the same as those who point guns at people? These are the ones who burn schools, set hospitals on fire, and destroy our mosques. We are here together to fight against them, and we will wage this struggle side by side (Ankara, 19 August 2016).

By equating his own election with that of Mukhtars, Erdoğan anchored their authority in the same democratic legitimacy he claimed for himself. He contrasted this with the coercion of the PKK, which he alleged intimidated Mukhtars from attending the meeting, portraying them as enemies of democracy. Through this framing, Mukhtars were cast not only as local administrators but as defenders of democratic principles and crucial allies of the state. More importantly, Erdoğan used this appeal to delegate authority beyond their formal mandate, encouraging Mukhtars to take the initiative in countering regime opponents. Empowered both

discursively and practically through surveillance, intelligence gathering, and advocacy for the presidential system, Mukhtars were transformed into active agents of the regime's broader witch-hunt.

3.2.2. *Instilling a vested interest in the regime*

In addition to the delegated power and authority, another strategic rhetoric surfaced in the speeches addressed to Mukhtars, marked by the instillation of a vested interest in the regime. Combining self-interest with reminders of duty and responsibility, the rhetoric invokes career aspirations for Mukhtars, highlighting the long-term tenure through which they can enjoy the stability and continuity:

> What matters is that you never forget how you got here, what your duties are, and what your goals must be. Presidents serve only two terms—but you face no such limit. You can continue as long as you say, 'I have the strength to carry on.' Among the mukhtars who come here, there are some who say, 'I have been a mukhtar for 30 years' (Ankara, 4 May 2016).

In this narrative, Erdoğan encouraged mukhtars to view their roles as stable and enduring by contrasting term-limited political offices with the potentially indefinite tenure of Mukhtars. Citing examples of long-serving Mukhtars, he underscored the personal and community benefits of extended service, while simultaneously reinforcing the expectation that they remain committed to their responsibilities over time. This rhetoric seeks to cultivate loyalty by linking mukhtars' career prospects to the regime's continuity, thereby tying their personal ambitions to supporting and upholding the current government. Erdoğan went further, however, by suggesting that the position could also serve as a stepping stone to higher political office:

> Dear friends, entering Parliament is within reach for every mukhtar. I firmly believe that those who win the people's affection and trust—especially mukhtars from large neighborhoods—have a strong chance of becoming MPs. You must strive for this. You are politicians: Mukhtars represent the most fundamental level of politics and the cornerstone of democracy. Democracy begins with you. A democracy without mukhtars is incomplete; it rises with you. I believe the efforts of my mukhtar brothers will strengthen and elevate Turkey. For this, we must join hands and act in solidarity… As you heard in the recent presentation from our Ministry of Interior, we are now providing forms to strengthen this connection. Through them, mukhtars who once struggled to reach the district governor will be able to contact ministries directly, with the ministry's new unit following up on your requests (Ankara, 10 March 2015).

In this speech, Erdoğan deploys the rhetoric of democratic legitimacy, portraying Mukhtars as essential politicians and the cornerstone of democracy. By elevating their role in both local and national politics, he inspires them to view their position with greater ambition while fostering loyalty to the regime. Crucially, he connects this political aspiration to collaboration: after suggesting that mukhtars could advance to Parliament, he emphasizes solidarity and draws attention to the recently established Muhtar Information System, through which their requests could be transmitted to and followed by the relevant authorities. In this way, Erdoğan

strategically blends the language of democracy with practical governance mechanisms to both motivate and secure the cooperation of Mukhtars.

4. Patterns in discursive co-optation and justification of collaboration

If Chapter IV showed how the figure of the hidden enemy became a central mechanism of enemy-making after the fallout with the Gülen movement, and how this logic was strategically extended to other adversaries, Chapter V has shown how the task of identifying that enemy was redistributed to society through narratives of duty, loyalty, and national survival. Building on this, the chapter examined the discursive co-optation of both strategic actors and the broader public into collaboration with the state, along with the narratives that justified this process, as reflected in Erdoğan's rhetoric.

The analysis reveals how discursive co-optation operates in tandem with repression, based on complementary principles of inclusion and exclusion: while adversaries are vilified and marginalized, supporters are co-opted, empowered, and tasked with advancing the regime's agenda. At the discursive level, this inclusion is cultivated through strategies of empowerment and loyalty-building, conveyed through positive self-representation, emotional appeals, and moral validation. Crucially, these appeals are sharpened by the negative representation of opponents, drawing on past traumas and societal vulnerabilities to consolidate allegiance. Collaboration is repeatedly justified through conspiratorial narratives that amplify perceptions of threat and danger, framing participation as a duty and responsibility of citizenship.

Together, these strategies allowed the regime to consolidate control, strengthen its authority, and maintain power during the witch-hunt. By rewarding loyalty, criminalizing dissent, and legitimizing both through conspiratorial appeals, the discourse functioned simultaneously as a tool of repression, co-optation, and legitimation. In doing so, it entrenched a social contract of collaboration in which the Nation was positioned as both the regime's ally and its instrument.

5. Conclusion for macro-level analysis

The macro-level analysis consists of two empirical chapters that examine political rhetoric through a crisis-driven framework, focusing on how key historical turning points shaped and transformed the discourse. It identifies two central macro-discursive mechanisms, supported by a third, that together illuminate the political engineering behind mass reporting and its broader cultivation in society as part of the regime's reactionary authoritarian response. The first mechanism is enemy-mongering, through which certain groups and individuals are framed as threats to the state. The second is collaboration-seeking, through which the state

appeals to citizens and key actors to join the fight against these perceived enemies. These two mechanisms are reinforced by fear-mongering, which intensifies both the perception of threat and the urgency of collective action, thereby encouraging greater participation in the state's efforts. Crucially, the analysis shows that political rhetoric and its key mechanisms evolved in relation to the nature of each political crisis, particularly through the fallout with the Gülen movement. This rupture played a key role in reshaping crisis-driven discursive mechanisms by transforming the nature of suspicion itself: attention shifted from explicit dissent to hidden affiliation, and from public opposition to alleged institutional or social embeddedness. This shift amplified the perception of threat and foregrounded the problem of identification as central to collaboration, extending the logic of the anti-Gülen campaign to a broader field of regime opponents.

The enemy-making mechanism is defined by the principle of exclusion (repression) and operates through an overarching enemy narrative aimed at political opponents. This narrative is reinforced by constructing those perceived threats as morally and ideologically suspect others through the macro-discursive strategies of stigmatization, criminalization, and securitization. The central logic informing this enemy-mongering is the figure of the "hidden insider," first introduced through the discourse of alleged Gülenist infiltration, then extended to re-securitize Kurdish opposition, and later diffused to other marginalized groups, including leftists and secular actors. By keeping enemy-making flexible and dynamic, the regime could recalibrate the enemy narrative across different political conjunctures and justify increasingly repressive measures. This adaptability enabled it to broaden or narrow the scope of who was labelled an enemy depending on the need to legitimize its actions through appeals to threat, danger, and collective security.

The second macro-discursive mechanism, collaboration-seeking, is built around the principle of inclusion (co-optation). Aimed at mobilizing strategic actors in line with the regime's political agenda, this mechanism is achieved through a narrative centred on state–society collaboration. It is further reinforced by macro-discursive strategies of material and non-material co-optation. This discourse involves the distribution of goods and services, the delegation of power and authority, and career aspirations to those who align with the regime. By rewarding loyalty and cooperation, the regime cultivated a network of supporters who were incentivized to actively participate in the regime's crackdown on its opponents.

In the context of the hidden-enemy narrative, collaboration-seeking did not simply invite citizens to support the state in abstract terms; it redistributed the task of detecting hidden enemies to society, framing vigilance, reporting, and denunciation as forms of patriotic participation. These rewards and symbolic recognitions also serve a legitimating function,

framing collaboration as both beneficial and morally justified. In doing so, collaboration became a driving force behind the regime's efforts to suppress dissent, strengthening its grip on power.

More importantly, the analysis reveals that a third mechanism, fear-mongering, has been instrumentalized to legitimize both enemy-making and collaboration-seeking. Through this mechanism, the audience is discursively conditioned to accept political narratives that portray certain groups as enemies and thus justify their exclusion and repression, while simultaneously being encouraged to participate in co-optative forms of collaboration with the regime on the grounds that such participation is necessary for national security. This conditioning is legitimized through macro-discursive strategies such as conspiracy theories, constructed imaginaries, and cognitive manipulation, which tap into episodic memory and past traumas. The fear-mongering mechanism operates with a strong psychological component, so much so that political discourse itself amounts to a form of conditioning, which this thesis conceptualizes as "authoritarian conditioning." In doing so, it not only manipulates perceptions and fosters compliance but also legitimizes both repression and collaboration, further entrenching the regime's control over the narrative and deepening societal alignment with its agenda.

Chapter VI. Reporting Mechanism as the Machinery of State Repression

1. Introduction

This chapter begins the meso-level analysis by examining how the political demand for denunciation is institutionalized through legal, judicial, and bureaucratic mechanisms. While the previous macro-level chapters showed how state discourse constructed internal enemies and legitimized citizen collaboration in the witch-hunt, this chapter turns to the institutional arrangements that facilitate such participation. It asks how denunciations are solicited, processed, and translated into instruments of repression through the everyday functioning of state institutions.

The chapter argues that reporting operates as a dispersed yet embedded machinery of state repression. It is not located in a single institution or reducible to one formal platform. Rather, it takes shape through a network of judicial, bureaucratic, administrative, and digital channels that collect, transmit, process, and act upon accusations. In this architecture, denunciations do not simply move from citizens to the state as isolated pieces of information. They are absorbed into institutional routines, translated into legal and administrative categories, and converted into consequential outcomes such as investigations, disciplinary measures, dismissals, prosecutions, or social exclusion. Through this process, denunciations become institutionalized as routine instruments of control, enabling the state to pursue designated adversaries, discipline dissent, and consolidate authoritarian governance.

Focusing on the judiciary and bureaucracy, the chapter examines how institutions are mobilized to solicit citizen reports, enforce repression, and routinize the targeting of alleged opponents. The analysis shows that judicial engineering, selective interpretation of law, and bureaucratic routinization worked together to embed denunciation within ordinary institutional procedures. In doing so, these institutions translated the boundaries established in political discourse into concrete practices of investigation, punishment, exclusion, and compliance.

The chapter proceeds as follows. After outlining the methodological approach, including sampling, data collection, and coding, it analyses how legal and administrative structures operationalized reporting as a mechanism of repression. It then shows how the judiciary and bureaucracy operate together to transform denunciations into a normalized component of authoritarian statecraft.

2. Implementation of Expert Interviews

2.1. Combining technical knowledge with individual accounts

The meso-level analysis focuses on understanding the operational mechanisms of the broader reporting system within judicial and bureaucratic domains. This requires detailed procedural and technical insight across institutions in order to understand how the system is designed, activated, and sustained, and how it facilitates high levels of citizen engagement. Such insight is especially necessary because the reporting mechanism is not fully transparent or reducible to formal rules. Its operation is shaped by discretionary practices, informal expectations, ad hoc institutional responses, and politically conditioned interpretations that cannot be captured through documents alone.

The analysis examines how institutional capacity is mobilized to repress regime opponents and co-opt citizens by addressing grievances, while simultaneously maintaining legitimacy through the language of democratic procedures, legality, and responsiveness. The inquiry is therefore both theory-led and theory-generating: it is informed by existing literature on authoritarian strategies, while also exploring the distinctive institutional dynamics of mass denunciations in hybrid regimes.

Problem-centred expert interviews (PCEI) (Döringer, 2021) provide an appropriate methodology for this dual inquiry. On the other hand, their flexible, problem-centred format creates space for expert narratives, professional reflections, and first-hand accounts, which are crucial for capturing the implicit and practice-based dimensions of the reporting system. This is particularly important in a context where implementation is opaque, official statistics are limited, and institutional practices are surrounded by discretion. In this way, PCEI supports the testing of theoretical insights while also facilitating the discovery of new patterns and mechanisms specific to the Turkish case.

2.2. Sampling and description of participant cohorts

Interviews were conducted with twenty-two participants drawn from the legal field (eight), the bureaucracy (ten), and trade unions (four). The legal cohort included legal experts, both academics and practicing lawyers. The bureaucracy group consisted of staff responsible for handling petitions in their respective CİMER units, including two hospital staff members, two school principals, the head of the disciplinary board in the provincial health directorate, the staff lawyer of the provincial directorate, personnel from the provincial tax office, two ministry staff, and one staff member from the prosecution office. Trade union participants were selected from individuals holding administrative roles in the education, health, and

municipal sectors. The sample included participants from Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Bursa, Kırklareli, Kütahya, Diyarbakır, and Mardin. While İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and Bursa are large metropolitan cities characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity, Diyarbakır and Mardin are predominantly Kurdish- and Arab-populated, whereas Kırklareli and Kütahya, located in the western region, are ethnically more homogenous and predominantly Turkish. Most interviews were conducted in person, while five were carried out via Zoom.

All participants approached during walk-in interviews agreed to take part, as did those reached through referrals. While no one declined participation, I acknowledge that had there been any individuals unwilling to be interviewed, they might differ from those who agreed. This potential self-selection bias could shape the perspectives reflected in the data, and therefore, the conclusions drawn should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully representative.

Expert interviews	Cohort 1 (Legal)	Cohort 2 (Bureaucracy)	Cohort 3 (Trade Unions)
	Legal experts (3)	Hospital staff (2)	Educational union Representative (1)
	Legal practitioners (5)	School staff (2)	Health Union representatives (2)
		Prosecutor's office (1)	Municipality union representative (1)
		Provincial health directorate (2)	
		Provincial tax office (1)	
		Ministry legal branch (1)	
		Ministry logistic branch (1)	
Total int.	**8**	**10**	**4**
22			

Table 6: Distribution of expert interviewees by sectoral cohort, indicating their professional roles and institutional affiliation

2.3. Interview questions and the structure

Interview questions were designed to capture both the procedural and technical, as well as the narrative and thematic, dimensions of participants' input. This dual objective was achieved through a deliberately flexible approach, which allowed us to shift emphasis between technical detail and personal narratives in response to the dynamics of each interview, given the sensitivity of the research topic and the diversity of institutional settings represented in the sample.

Public sector employees responsible for managing the central complaint system CİMER in their respective units were generally the most hesitant to elaborate or share personal observations. For this reason, interviews with this group prioritized procedural and technical

aspects, focusing on how petitions were received, processed, and responded to within the bureaucracy. Depending on the flow of conversation and the level of trust established, explorations shifted between "general and specific questions" (Döringer, 2021). General explorations sought to elicit insights into participants' firsthand observations within the system, such as patterns in citizens' reporting behaviours. Specific explorations were pursued through comprehensive questions and mirroring techniques: the former clarified statements and prompted the interviewee to explain their perspective, while the latter tested ad hoc hypotheses (e.g., "Do you mean the abuse of petitioning by citizens creates a workload for public sector workers?"). In some cases, control of the conversation was intentionally given to participants, with only minimal and sometimes no follow-up questions to capture their individual evaluations and experiences. In this way, I minimized any potential risks for participants while ensuring their engagement without feeling pressured.

With trade unionists and legal experts, who, unlike civil servants, had greater professional and legal freedom to share opinions, a more flexible approach was adopted. Here, technical and procedural knowledge was interwoven with personal observations, evaluations, and anecdotes drawn from clients or union members. Although their experiences were shaped by their professional positions, both cohorts were uniquely situated to observe the broader implications of the reporting mechanism across different social and institutional settings. The legal cohort included several academics who offered analytically rich interpretations grounded in their engagement with diverse legal cases. Trade unionists provided critical reflections on how reporting practices affected everyday professional and social relations, drawing on their own experiences as public sector workers and their proximity to workers and collective grievances as union representatives. Together, their accounts contributed empirically and interpretively nuanced perspectives that illuminated the broader societal ramifications of the reporting mechanism.

The diversity of the cohort allowed us to triangulate insights across different institutional perspectives. Recurring themes across these varied cases lend analytical credibility to the findings. This triangulation does not imply representativeness, nor does it remove the situated nature of participants' perspectives. Rather, it strengthens the analytical credibility of the findings by allowing patterns to be examined across differently positioned actors whose access to, and interpretation of, the reporting mechanism varied according to their institutional location. Input from public sector workers was complemented by the more critical observations of trade unionists and legal practitioners, who were often freer to articulate personal evaluations. This contrast enriched the data and mitigated potential self-censorship among civil servants. Importantly, even seemingly procedural accounts revealed meaningful

patterns. For instance, across institutions, participants consistently noted that citizens addressed their petitions directly to the President, a practice that carries both procedural significance and interpretive weight for understanding the dynamics of authority and legitimacy in the system. Therefore, I maintained a focused attention on the implicit aspects of procedural knowledge to capture both the institutional mechanisms and their broader implications.

2.4. Analytical Strategy: Analysing PCEI

2.4.1. Coding

This study employed a combined deductive–inductive strategy, moving reflexively and iteratively between theory and data. Following the PCEI framework, technical and procedural input was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000), while thematic insights were captured through a flexible process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Pre-defined themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), informed by the literature and the research question, provided meta-codes around repression, co-optation, and legitimation. At the same time, I remained open to new themes emerging from the data, drawing on the inductive logic of grounded theory rather than adhering strictly to its formal procedures.

Technical and procedural material was coded systematically to allow comparability within the cohorts under clearly defined deductive categories (Mayring, 2000). For example, within bureaucracy, this is centred on pathways under the pre-defined code "bureaucracy of reporting", such as *eliciting*, *processing*, and *responding to petitions* and their *outcomes* (Appendix F, Figure 6). In the domain of the judiciary, categories were determined based on judicial processes and procedures under deductive codes such as *laws*, *case types*, and *judicial outcomes*. At the same time, following inductive logic, open coding was applied across both procedural and narrative material to capture themes that extended beyond technical detail (Appendix F, Figure 7). Crucially, procedural accounts often contained implicit evaluations or revealed broader patterns, such as *investigative harassment*, *complaint anxiety*, etc. Narrative material, in turn, provided insights into personal experiences, motives, and observations. This combination allowed us to trace the institutional logics and pathways of the reporting system while also exposing how authoritarian strategies operate in practice, revealing its weaponization for repression, its instrumentalization for co-optation, and its legitimation through procedural norms.

2.5. From data to findings

The interview questions were designed to capture the authoritarian dynamics of the reporting mechanism around the meta-themes of repression, co-optation, and legitimation, with

particular attention to their institutional and procedural production. This design provided a basis for systematic coding of the interview data, enabling a structured and in-depth analysis and informing the organization of the meso-level empirical chapters.

In moving from data to findings, particular attention was paid to the inferential limits of the interview material. The interview data are not treated as representative of all users, victims, public officials, legal professionals, or trade unionists involved in the reporting mechanism. Rather, they are used as qualitative evidence that illuminates how differently situated actors experience, observe, and interpret the institutional operation of denunciation. For this reason, individual quotations are not used as standalone evidence for broad conclusions. They are presented as illustrative of wider patterns only when they resonate with recurring themes across interviews, align with procedural accounts, or can be situated within documentary, legal, institutional, and discursive evidence.

At the same time, the interview findings were triangulated with a targeted analysis of laws, regulations, policy texts, reports by monitoring bodies and independent organizations, and official sources, including institutional websites and publicly available official materials. This interpretive triangulation involved examining interview findings, both technical and narrative, alongside documentary materials to contextualize participants' accounts within broader institutional and discursive frameworks. For example, the recurring theme of petitioners addressing the President directly was examined against official narratives that promote the personalization of CİMER. Similarly, participants' accounts of complaint anxiety, procedural uncertainty, and investigative burden were read alongside legal and bureaucratic procedures that structure how complaints are received, processed, and acted upon.

This approach allowed us to validate, enrich, and situate the findings within the institutional logic of the reporting mechanism. It also ensured that the empirical chapters did not draw conclusions solely from isolated quotations or from the particular perspectives of individual respondents. Instead, the analysis moves from situated accounts to broader analytical claims only where there is sufficient convergence across interview material, institutional procedures, and documentary evidence. The conclusions drawn in Chapters 6 and 7 should therefore be read as analytically grounded interpretations of recurring mechanisms and patterns, rather than as universal claims about all instances of reporting or all actors involved in the system.

3. Repression through the Legal Framework

This chapter examines how repression is produced through the reporting system, focusing on its institutionalization within the judiciary. As the first empirical component, it analyzes how the judicial sphere enables, amplifies, and legitimizes denunciation practices. The discussion

proceeds in two main parts. The first, *Instrumentalization of the Legal System* (3.1), explores the judicial engineering from above through restructuring the high judiciary, politicized appointments at the lower courts, and crippled judicial impartiality, as well as the weaponization of the Penal Code through shifting judicial responses and adaptive legislation. These shifts erode impartiality and create a legal environment that is increasingly aligned with the executive's political agenda. The second, *Judiciary as a Tool of Repression* (3.2), turns to the bottom-up operation of the reporting mechanism, showing how the judiciary selectively receives, processes, and sanctions denunciations. The analysis shows how eliciting denunciations is marked by selective reception; how processing denunciations is marked by a violation of due process; the tools utilized within the judiciary; and, finally, how the judicial process becomes a form of punishment in itself through disproportionality between charges and outcomes, prolonged trials, and intimidation tactics. Together, these components demonstrate how the judiciary both reflects and reinforces the regime's authoritarian project, translating discursive constructions of threat into material legal consequences.

3.1. Instrumentalization of the legal system

Legal experts and practitioners participating in this research emphasized the primary role of the legal system in Turkey's rapid de-democratization and in the rise of popular denunciations. They identified two key patterns through which the legal domain was leveraged to serve the regime's interests while facilitating popular reporting. First, judicial impartiality was severely compromised by the dismantling of checks and balances. This was achieved through the restructuring of high-level courts, such as the Constitutional Court and the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (CJP), as well as first-instance courts, aligning the judiciary with the executive. This paved the way for the politicized high judiciary to establish case law through biased interpretations of law, while first-instance courts adopted these interpretations and extended the regime's influence into everyday judicial decisions. Together, this political alignment enabled the legal system to translate regime priorities into routine judicial practice.

Second, criminal and administrative law were mobilized through distinct but complementary processes. Existing Penal Code and anti-terror provisions were interpreted and enforced in increasingly politicized ways, while state-of-emergency decree-laws introduced broad criteria of membership, affiliation, connection, and contact that enabled dismissals, closures, and other administrative sanctions. Some of these exceptional measures were subsequently incorporated into ordinary legislation, giving their effects a more durable legal basis[13].

[13] One important example was Law No. 7145 of July 2018, adopted after the formal end of the state of emergency, which inserted Temporary Article 35 into Decree-Law No. 375 and retained institution-specific procedures for removing personnel assessed as possessing membership, belonging, affiliation, or

Crucially, this transformation made affiliation, support, association, and social proximity not only politically suspect but legally and administratively consequential. Within the crisis-driven framework of reactionary politics that culminated in the 2016 coup attempt, the legal system became a central mechanism for converting suspicion, denunciatory allegations, and evidence of association into grounds for administrative scrutiny, criminal investigation, prosecution, dismissal, and punishment. Law therefore did more than authorize repression: it supplied the classificatory and procedural grammar through which the witch-hunt was institutionalized.

3.1.1. Judicial engineering

3.1.1.1. Restructuring the high judiciary

Following the coup attempt, the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency on 21 July 2016 marked the beginning of a wider reconfiguration of the state apparatus. Over the next two years, the state of emergency enabled not only large-scale dismissals, arrests, and closures, but also a radical overhaul of key institutions across the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (ICJ, 2018, p. 1). The scale of this transformation was considerable. During the nearly two-year State of Emergency, 32 emergency decree laws were issued, amending legislation across areas ranging from criminal procedure to media law and introducing sanctions against individuals and institutions. Many of these measures were not confined to the State of Emergency period. Instead, many of these measures acquired lasting effect through parliamentary approval of the emergency decree-laws, subsequent ordinary legislation, and the continuing legal and administrative consequences of actions taken during emergency rule (IHOP, 2018; ICJ, 2018).

The 2017 constitutional amendments, proposed during the state of emergency, further transformed the institutional architecture of judicial governance and fundamentally reshaped Turkey's legal landscape. A central element of this transformation was the restructuring of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (CJP), the body responsible for key decisions concerning judicial appointments, promotions, transfers, discipline, and dismissals. Under the new constitutional arrangement, of the thirteen members, four are appointed directly by the President, while the Minister of Justice and the Ministry's senior official serve ex officio. The

connection with designated organisations, alongside powers to obtain information relevant to such assessments. A later manifestation of this relational screening logic can be seen in Law No. 7315 on Security Investigations and Archive Research (2021), which requires specified appointment and security-screening procedures to examine whether individuals have unity of action, connection, or affiliation with terrorist or criminal organisations. Unlike the 2016–18 removal measures, however, Law No. 7315 principally concerns appointment and security vetting rather than the dismissal of already-serving personnel.

remaining seven are elected by the Grand National Assembly. Crucially, none of the members were elected or appointed by judges and prosecutors themselves (ICJ, 2018, pp. 18–19).

This restructuring raised serious concerns about judicial independence. The Venice Commission observed that, because the two ex officio members are part of the executive, six members are effectively selected through presidential or executive authority thus the reforms placed unprecedented executive influence over the judiciary, fundamentally compromising its independence and impartiality. This concern was especially significant because the amendments allowed the President to act simultaneously as head of state, head of government, and leader of a political party. As a result, presidential appointments to the CJP became inherently partisan, further weakening the institutional separation between the executive and the judiciary (2017, pp. 22–23).

The significance of this restructuring becomes clearer when the powers of the CJP are considered. Although the combination of the roles of head of state and head of government is common in presidential systems, in Turkey, this configuration unfolded in a context of weakened checks and balances and extensive presidential discretion. In this setting, judicial appointments could function not merely as administrative decisions, but as instruments of political control and rewards for loyalty. The Venice Commission warned that the parliamentary selection procedure could allow a governing majority aligned with the President to determine the composition of the Council. This concern materialized during the first selection under the amended system in 2017, when parliamentary cooperation between the AKP and MHP gave them sufficient votes to meet the three-fifths threshold required in the second round of voting (2017, pp. 22–23). Given the CJP's authority over judicial appointments, relocations, promotions, and disciplinary actions, this concentration of influence gave the executive considerable power over judicial careers. Beyond the CJP itself, the reforms also had implications for the Constitutional Court. The CJP elects members of the Court of Cassation and the Council of State, which in turn nominate candidates for some seats on the Constitutional Court. The President selects Constitutional Court members from these candidate lists, alongside making appointments through several other constitutionally specified routes. The executive influence therefore extended to the highest levels of the judiciary, severely undermining its independence (Venice Commission, 2017, p. 27).

This wider context is important because it shows that judicial restructuring unfolded alongside a broader emergency-driven transformation of the state, in which exceptional measures became institutionalized. Venice Commission raised serious concerns about both its drafting and content and outlined these implications. The amendments were debated and adopted through an unusually compressed parliamentary process during the state of emergency. With

limited opportunity for broad public, academic, or civil-society consultation, it shifted Turkey's governance from a parliamentary system to a hyper-presidential model without meaningful input from academia or civil society. Through eighteen articles, the president acquired sweeping authority over state institutions, effectively dominating both the legislature and the judiciary (pp. 5–7). The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) similarly emphasizes that emergency decrees and constitutional reforms did not merely produce temporary legal exceptionalism; many of the institutional changes introduced during this period had lasting effects on the justice system and on access to effective legal remedies (2018).

Against this backdrop, interviews highlighted the systematic capture of the judiciary as a primary driver of the institutionalization of the reporting mechanism. Lawyer8 drew attention to the broader consequences of the judicial overhaul, emphasizing that the restructuring of the high judiciary removed the expectation that politically driven lower-court rulings would be corrected through appeal:

> We once believed higher courts, like the ECHR or Court of Cassation, would overturn most trials, but that didn't happen. They swiftly reshaped the Court of Cassation, the Council of State, and even the Constitutional Court. This was no coincidence but a deliberate plan. Any remaining judicial independence has now been completely erased, it's a total takeover (09 January 2025).

Lawyer8's account points to the vertical dimension of judicial capture. The restructuring of the Court of Cassation, the Council of State, and the Constitutional Court did not merely weaken judicial independence at the top. It also reshaped the conditions under which first-instance courts operated. By appointing loyal judges to the upper courts and centralizing control over judicial hierarchies, the government ensured that rulings from lower courts would be shaped by approval from above. The high judiciary thus played a pivotal role in sustaining engineered control: by consistently upholding pro-government verdicts from lower courts, it produced case law that legitimized and entrenched politically driven outcomes.

This hierarchical restructuring also affected how denunciatory inputs were processed at the level of everyday legal practice. Lawyer5 illustrates how judicial capture undermined the independence of first-instance courts by making judges attentive to signals from politically superior institutions, particularly the Ministry of Justice and the Presidency:

> CİMER works under the Presidency, forwarding reports directly to the relevant institutions. For judicial matters, these are handled by the Ministry of Justice. If a petition concerns an ongoing lawsuit, it is automatically added to the file because it originates from the Ministry. Under the Prime Ministry Communication Centre (BİMER), many such reports were ignored, but this changed after the constitutional referendum placed the Minister of Justice at the head of the CJP, bringing the judiciary under political control. Since then, complaints from the Ministry are taken more seriously. With judicial appointments and evaluations under its authority, judges are now monitored directly by the Minister, curbing their independence (12 September 2024).

Lawyer5's account shows how executive control over the judiciary could shape the practical treatment of citizen reports submitted through the Presidential Communication Center (CİMER). Under this arrangement, petitions submitted through CİMER are routed to relevant institutions and, in judicial matters, may reach courts through the Ministry of Justice. Once inserted into case files through this channel, such complaints can acquire disproportionate weight because judges may treat them not as ordinary citizen submissions but as signals from politically superior institutions. Consequently, cases may be processed with limited independent judgment, as judges respond to what they perceive as implicit expectations from higher authorities. In this sense, the restructuring of the high judiciary created the institutional conditions through which denunciatory inputs could travel through the legal system with enhanced authority.

3.1.1.2. Appointment of pro-government judges

Restructuring the high judiciary was only one element of a broader process of judicial engineering, which also involved the systematic reshaping of the lower courts. The first-instance judiciary became a particularly important site of transformation because lower courts were directly involved in arrests, detentions, investigations, confiscations, and other decisions central to the post-coup legal order. Following the failed coup attempt, this level of the judiciary was reshaped through two interconnected processes: mass dismissals and rapid replenishment.

Between 2016 and 2017, 4,113 judges and prosecutors were dismissed (IHOP, 2018). The scale of this purge amounted to approximately 30 percent of all active judges and prosecutors (ICJ, 2018, p. 15). These dismissals created vacancies that were filled through a replacement process widely criticized for its speed, lack of transparency, and politicized criteria. Concerns centred on the absence of clear recruitment standards, the use of politically biased oral interviews, and the appointment of insufficiently trained judges directly from the justice academy. As a result, the first-instance judiciary was rapidly repopulated by inexperienced and politically aligned appointees, further weakening judicial independence and reinforcing executive control over the courts (PACE, 2018, p. 27).

The consequences of this rapid reconstitution were visible in the composition of the judiciary. According to Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe (PACE), 5,000 of Turkey's 15,000 first-instance judges had less than one year of experience, while another 5,000 had less than five years of experience (2018, p.27). These figures indicate not only the scale of the purge, but also the extent to which the post-coup judiciary was rebuilt through accelerated and politically contested appointments.

In their accounts, nearly all participants referred to this dimension of judicial restructuring. Lawyer8 emphasized the contested nature of the recruitment process, particularly the way in which formal examination procedures were weakened and oral interviews became decisive:

> Judges and prosecutors must pass an exam conducted centrally, but the interview process remains a critical issue. After the coup attempt, decree-laws lowered the written exam threshold from 70 to 40, allowing those with minimal legal knowledge to qualify. Instead of maintaining a reasonable standard, they admitted candidates scoring below 50. These exams were held frequently, and thousands were recruited in large batches, drastically lowering judicial competence (09 January 2025).

This account highlights how the rapid replenishment of the judiciary weakened professional standards and eroded institutional memory. Echoing the PACE, yet participants also emphasized that the problem extended beyond competence. The recruitment process was described not simply as accelerated, but as politically filtered. Lawyer8 illustrated this through an anecdote concerning the ideological character of interview questions:

> The interview process for judges and prosecutors remains problematic. In a recent exam, candidates were asked what the year 1917 signifies. Answering "the Russian Revolution" meant failure—the correct answer was Alparslan Türkeş's birth year. This isn't general nationalist knowledge but something only those with ideological training, like in Idealist Hearths[14], would know. This reflects a highly politicized selection process (09 January 2025).

Alparslan Türkeş was the founder of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a symbolic figure of far-right Turkish nationalism. In this context, the question functioned as a coded test of ideological familiarity and political belonging. Lawyer8's account therefore suggests that judicial recruitment did not merely privilege loyalty to the government in a broad sense, but increasingly reflected the nationalist-conservative alignment that became central to the AKP–MHP alliance. The appointment process thus helped produce a judiciary whose members were not only inexperienced, but also politically and ideologically aligned with the ruling bloc.

This politicization also shaped the strategic placement of judges in courts with significant coercive authority. Referring to a case in which a party-affiliated lawyer was appointed as a judge, Lawyer8 explained:

> They made it easier to move from being a lawyer to a judge. For example, a lawyer who previously headed an AKP district branch became a judge in the same district's Criminal Court of Peace within a month. There are numerous similar cases. These courts decide on matters of great importance—such as arrests, detentions, and confiscations—so the judges there wield considerable power. That's how the government quickly filled these positions with people close to them, and it's still going on today (09 January 2025).

These accounts show that the transformation of the lower courts was not a secondary consequence of the post-coup purge, but a central component of judicial engineering. The

[14] A nationalist organization closely affiliated with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party. It serves as the youth and ideological training wing of the Grey Wolves, a paramilitary ultranationalist movement that emerged in the late 1960s.

dismissal of thousands of judges and prosecutors created the institutional space for rapid replacement, while the recruitment process enabled the insertion of inexperienced, dependent, and politically aligned appointees into strategically important positions. This transformation complemented the restructuring of the high judiciary. While the upper courts secured hierarchical control and appellate validation, the repopulation of first-instance courts ensured that politically sensitive cases would be handled within a newly dependent and compliant judicial environment. In this sense, the post-coup restructuring of the judiciary transformed what had previously operated as a *de facto* witch-hunt against perceived opponents into an explicit institutional project of state purification and regime consolidation.

3.1.1.3. Crippling impartiality through pressure

Alongside the appointment of pro-government judges and prosecutors, legal experts emphasized the intense pressure placed on members of the judiciary who remained within the system. Their accounts echoed broader concerns raised by independent monitoring bodies regarding the post-2017 structure of the CJP/HSK and its implications for judicial independence (IHOP, 2018; ICJ, 2018; PACE, 2018). Similarly, legal experts described the CJP/HSK not simply as an administrative body, but as a central mechanism of career control, capable of shaping judicial behaviour through reassignment, disciplinary procedures, and the threat of professional sanction.

Lawyer1 highlighted the pervasive insecurity among legal professionals due to the CJP's extensive control over judicial careers. In their account, this insecurity affected not only high-profile political trials but also more routine cases, where judges anticipated the possible consequences of rulings that might be perceived as politically undesirable:

> A judge's fate is in the hands of the CJP. This was seen in high-profile cases like the Gezi Protests, but the issue runs deeper. A judge handling a simple defamation case against the President knows how easily judges can be punished or reassigned, making it natural to think, "Why take the risk?" In the end, they comply, reasoning, "If I don't issue the ruling, higher courts will overturn it anyway." (08 August 2024).

Lawyer1's evaluation illustrates how dependence on the CJP can generate compliance among judges. The significance of this account lies in showing how legal practitioners interpret the institutional environment in which judicial decisions are made. Judicial pressure, in this sense, operates not only through direct intervention but also through the perceived risks attached to professional independence.

A similar dynamic appeared in Lawyer7's discussion of prosecutors, particularly in cases involving terrorism allegations, which play a significant role in denunciation-related investigations:

> Inspectors from the Ministry of Justice don't evaluate prosecutors on the cases they pursue, but on the ones they don't. They ask, 'Why didn't you open an investigation?' To avoid scrutiny, prosecutors turn most reports and complaints into formal lawsuits, thinking, 'Better to process this so the inspector won't question me—let the court handle it.' Without such oversight, they would focus only on cases with legal grounds (17 October 2024).

Lawyer7's account suggests that prosecutorial discretion is narrowed when non-action becomes professionally risky or administratively suspect. In such a context, the safest bureaucratic response is not necessarily to assess the legal merit of a complaint carefully, but to process it further. Prosecutorial discretion is effectively criminalized when failing to act on dissent-related cases is treated as misconduct, compelling prosecutors to investigate nearly all complaints and reports, regardless of legal merit.

Yet participants did not identify the CJP/HSK as the only source of pressure. Lawyer1 also pointed to the role of chief prosecutors within courthouses, describing them as locally positioned actors who can shape prosecutorial decision-making:

> The prosecution has been completely reshaped. Prosecutors once had relative independence, but now chief prosecutors, appointed by the regime, dictate decisions. If a prosecutor sees an offense and takes action, the chief prosecutor can block it. Conversely, if a prosecutor dismisses a case as freedom of expression, the chief prosecutor can push for its review and ensure it gets filed (08 August 2024).

These accounts suggest that political oversight was not experienced only as centralized pressure from above, but also as a locally mediated form of control within courthouses. It shows that judicial capture cannot be reduced to partisan appointment alone. It also operates through institutional pressure, forced compliance, and hierarchical supervision inside the judiciary. In this sense, pressure on the judiciary strengthens the institutional conditions under which denunciations can become legally consequential. Reports and complaints do not automatically produce punishment, but they enter a judicial environment in which prosecutors and judges may have incentives to process, escalate, or validate politically sensitive allegations. The instrumentalization of the legal framework through judicial engineering is therefore complemented by the weaponization of the Penal Code, which will be examined in the following section.

3.1.2. Weaponizing the Penal Code

3.1.2.1. Judicial shifts in response to the political agenda

Across the interviews with legal practitioners, the weaponization of the Penal Code emerged as a key theme in their interpretation of Turkey's changing judicial landscape. Because these participants encounter criminal investigations, indictments, and court proceedings in their professional practice, their accounts are used here to trace how shifts in political context are perceived to affect the application of criminal law. Participants repeatedly described criminal

proceedings as closely linked to the political atmosphere, with the Penal Code being interpreted flexibly either to intensify pressure on political opponents or to relieve pressure when political conditions changed. As Lawyer6 put it, "criminal proceedings are carried out closely linked to the political atmosphere and processes" (2024).

Participants identified several key milestones in this shifting judicial landscape. The year 2004 marked a turning point, as Turkey's legal framework underwent significant transformation during the EU accession process. Lawyer8 described this period as a "utopian era" of legal reform. A decade later, the Peace Talks were described as producing a relatively more permissive legal atmosphere, temporarily easing pressure on Kurdish political actors and activists. By contrast, participants consistently pointed to the Gezi Protests, the Corruption Scandal, the breakdown of the peace talks in 2015, and the coup attempt in 2016 as decisive moments that intensified the use of criminal law against dissent. In their accounts, these events marked moments after which criminal law was increasingly interpreted and applied in ways that targeted different groups in line with shifting political priorities.

These practitioner accounts align with the broader timeframe that guided the macro-level analysis of political discourse. The overlap is analytically significant because it suggests that enemy-making discourse did not merely organize society along an "us-versus-them" divide, but also created a permissive environment for punitive legal action. This is not to claim that discourse mechanically determined judicial outcomes in each individual case. Rather, the interview material indicates that legal practitioners perceived a close relationship between shifts in political discourse, changes in prosecutorial and judicial behaviour, and the expanding use of criminal law against targeted groups. In this sense, the regime's use of criminal law can be understood through the lens of autocratic legalism (Scheppele, 2018), whereby formally legal instruments are adapted to changing political conditions and deployed against perceived opponents.

This relationship is particularly important for understanding denunciations. Reports and complaints become consequential not simply because citizens submit them, but because they enter a legal environment in which the meaning and seriousness of allegations are shaped by political context. The changing political and judicial configurations, therefore, affected the dynamics of denunciation by making some accusations more legally actionable, more institutionally credible, or more likely to trigger punitive procedures.

3.1.2.2. Adaptive penal enforcement through autocratic legalism

While tracing the shifting judicial landscape, legal experts also drew attention to the "legalistic" mechanisms through which judicial responses were shaped. Their accounts emphasized the

adaptability of the Penal Code as a central condition enabling these shifts. Rather than relying solely on major legislative overhauls, they argued, the government was able to mobilize existing penal provisions in increasingly expansive and politically responsive ways. This observation is consistent with external legal assessments of monitoring bodies, which have repeatedly criticized key provisions of the Turkish Penal Code for their vagueness, overbreadth, and susceptibility to arbitrary or politically motivated application (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2018, 2024; Venice Commission, 2015).

From this perspective, the Penal Code's adaptability did not stem only from formal amendments, but from the interaction between vague legal provisions, flexible prosecutorial interpretation, and selective judicial enforcement. As the AKP reversed its earlier democratization agenda and Erdoğan consolidated power after 2010, existing provisions were increasingly stretched to suppress dissent, criminalize opposition, and align judicial outcomes with changing political priorities. The Penal Code, therefore, functioned as a repertoire of legal tools: its provisions could be invoked, combined, substituted, or reinterpreted depending on the political context and the identity of the accused.

Three themes consistently emerged from participants' accounts and are supported by the wider legal literature on Turkey's penal framework, which together show that penal enforcement operated through autocratic legalism: repression was not always achieved by abandoning legality, but by using formally legal provisions in elastic, selective, and politically instrumental ways:

i) the poor legal quality of certain provisions, which made them prone to expansive interpretation and manipulation;
ii) The code's inherent flexibility allows authorities to substitute or combine provisions in order to pursue charges, particularly through the interaction between organization-related offenses and terrorism-related provisions.
iii) targeted additions and omissions to provisions that expanded the scope of repression.

i) Poor legal quality: unpredictability and vagueness

Participants highlighted the inherent flaws of the Penal Code, pointing especially to the poor legal quality, ambiguity, and unpredictability of certain provisions. These problems are particularly visible in provisions regulating freedom of expression and counterterrorism, which have been repeatedly criticized for their vagueness and overbreadth (Venice Commission, 2015) and are frequently invoked in denunciation-based cases.

According to Lawyer1, ambiguity constitutes a central characteristic of the Penal Code and facilitates the weaponization of criminal law. Drawing on the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, Lawyer1 emphasized that both the drafting and implementation of these provisions have long been problematic. Because they lack legal predictability and fall short of minimum standards of legal quality, they create wide discretionary space for prosecutors and judges. This discretion does not operate neutrally; rather, it allows similar acts to be interpreted differently depending on the political context and the identity of the accused. As Lawyer1 explained:

> Court rulings are subject to arbitrary interpretation, allowing authorities to decide at will what constitutes an insult or an offense against the state. This creates a criminal law framework that is highly manipulable, unpredictable, and excessively flexible, especially regarding freedom of expression (Lawyer1, 08 August 2024).

This account is consistent with the Venice Commission's assessment of several Penal Code provisions, particularly those concerning insult, denigration, public provocation, and membership in armed organizations (2015). The problem is not simply that these provisions are broad, but that their breadth gives legal actors the capacity to translate denunciations into criminally actionable claims. In this sense, poor legal quality becomes politically consequential: vagueness allows denunciatory claims to travel through the legal system while preserving the appearance of legality.

ii) Substitutive flexibility within the Penal Code

Expert evaluations reveal the Penal Code's inherent substitutive flexibility, which enables the weaponization of criminal law. This flexibility stems from overlapping or broadly framed provisions that can be applied interchangeably or sequentially. As a result, authorities can navigate across different articles and invoke alternative provisions to pursue charges according to the desired political and judicial outcome. Lawyer8 illustrates this substitutive logic through the movement between different provisions used to police dissenting expression:

> The crime of inciting hatred under once penalized figures like author Orhan Pamuk, but was later reformulated within the new Penal Code due to European backlash. Instead, authorities began using Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terror Law on terrorist propaganda. When that faced criticism, yet another provision was enforced. These laws function like Matryoshka dolls, with one replacing another as needed. The system isn't creating anything new—it's merely intensifying and applying existing laws more aggressively (09 January 2025).

This observation is consistent with legal scholarship and institutional assessment reports, which show that expression-related offences in the Penal Code operate as part of a broader repertoire of control. Rather than being applied in a strictly fixed or neutral manner, these provisions have been interpreted flexibly and, at times, interchangeably to restrict critical views that conflict with official ideology, with judicial practice shifting in line with broader political developments (Kuyucu, 2014; Venice Commission, 2015). One example, which was also

frequently cited by legal experts, is the interchangeable use of Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terror Law for "terrorist propaganda" and Article 215 of the Penal Code for "praising crime and criminals". Initially used primarily against Kurdish individuals, the application of "terrorist propaganda" was eased during the Peace Talks, leading to a sharp decline in prosecutions. However, after the Peace Talks collapsed, the judicial practice shifted accordingly. Kuyucu (2014) documents the broader substitutability of expression-related offences during the peace-process period. Interview participants further suggested that enforcement shifted again after the process collapsed in 2015.

The analysis shows that existing provisions can be activated, substituted, or reinterpreted depending on the political moment. The Penal Code functions as a repertoire of interchangeable legal tools, allowing the authorities to maintain a legalistic façade while adapting criminal enforcement to shifting political needs. Legal experts underlined the implications for denunciations, which operate in a legal landscape already structured by substitutive flexibility. Once a report enters the legal system, an accusation can be translated into different penal categories: insult, incitement, terrorist propaganda, praising crime and criminals, or organizational support.

iii) Legalizing the witch-hunt: targeted legislation

Although the regime primarily drew on the adaptability of the existing legal framework to pursue its objectives without major legislative change, the identification of politically suspect individuals was also increasingly formalised through targeted administrative and emergency measures. This process preceded the coup attempt. Prime Ministry Circular No. 2016/4 of February 2016 instructed authorised superiors to take immediate administrative action against public employees who maintained specified relations with, assisted, acted under the instructions of, or supported organisations and structures considered threats to national security. While the circular did not prescribe a formal identification procedure, implementation necessarily required institutions to determine which employees fell within these relational and behavioural categories[15].

The failed coup considerably expanded this framework. Decree-Law No. 667 authorized the dismissal of public servants, judges, and prosecutors, as well as the closure of legal entities, on the basis of membership, belonging, affiliation, or connection with terrorist organisations or structures considered to threaten national security. Crucially, Articles 3 and 4 did not merely

[15] The February 2016 circular predates the coup and was explicitly titled "Regarding Public Employees Connected to Organizations and Structures Threatening National Security". More importantly, there is official evidence that it travelled down the hierarchy. A Ministry of Education district directorate instructed schools and institutions to communicate it to all personnel and implement it (MEB, 2016a).

establish substantive grounds for removal; they distributed responsibility for assessing these relationships across institution-specific bodies and senior authorities, including ministry-level boards, The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and university bodies, governor-led boards, and appointing authorities. By authorising these actors to remove personnel *assessed* as possessing such relationships, rather than requiring a prior criminal conviction, the decree turned public institutions themselves into sites of affiliation assessment. These relational categories were nevertheless left ambiguous as to their scope, giving institutional actors considerable discretion over what could count as evidence of membership, affiliation, or connection (ICJ, 2018; OHCHR, 2018; Venice Commission, 2016).

This distributed assessment authority was reinforced by an expanded capacity to gather information. Article 3 of Decree-Law No. 670 required public and private institutions to provide, without delay, information and documents requested by the authorised bodies concerning individuals examined under Articles 3 and 4 of Decree-Law No. 667, as well as their spouses and children, including telecommunications-related information. The provision therefore enabled affiliation assessments to draw on information dispersed across different institutional and relational domains rather than on a single allegation or evidentiary source[16].

This institutional assessment was subsequently connected more explicitly to citizen-supplied information. Prime Ministry Circular No. 2016/21 permitted petitions alleging such membership, affiliation, or connection by public officials to be examined even where ordinary identifying requirements concerning the petitioner were incomplete, provided that the allegation concerned a concrete person and event and contained sufficiently credible information or documentation[17]. In this way, the legal framework did not merely broaden the categories through which individuals could be targeted; it connected institutional affiliation assessments to an informational channel through which citizens could contribute allegations concerning public officials.

[16] KHK No. 670 also authorised public institutions, under specified conditions, to obtain information concerning Bank Asya accounts relating to personnel under examination and their spouses and children. Together with the broader information-sharing obligation, this illustrates the range of institutional records that could be mobilised in affiliation assessments.

[17] Prime Ministry Circular No. 2016/21, İdarelere Verilen Dilekçeler Hakkında, 21 October 2016, Official Gazette No. 29864. The circular created an exception to ordinary formal requirements for petitions concerning public officials allegedly possessing membership, affiliation, or connection with designated organisations or structures.

This legal ambiguity was central to the expansion of the post-coup purge. By blurring the boundaries between criminal responsibility, administrative suspicion, and social association, the concepts of "contact" and "affiliation" made it possible to sanction individuals without proving direct involvement in criminal acts. Reported grounds for establishing such links were not clearly codified or publicly defined; they functioned instead as open-ended guidance for emergency measures[18], raising concerns regarding the vagueness in defining the nature of the alleged "link or connection" with terrorist organizations, leaving authorities with wide discretion (OHCHR, 2018; Venice Commission, 2016). In this respect, the provision created a quasi-legal framework through which suspicion could be institutionalized and translated into dismissal, prosecution, and exclusion.

This is precisely the dynamic identified by Lawyer8, who explains why the regime needed a broadened legal category to expand the purge beyond those directly involved in the coup attempt:

> Unlike clearly defined 'complicity,' the concept of 'association' has no basis in criminal law. Since accusations didn't fit into the complicity framework, the regime fabricated 'association' to justify mass purges. Declaring war on a bureaucratic group, the regime expelled thousands at a time. This couldn't have been done using narrowly defined criminal law provisions. The scope had to be broadened, and 'association' served that purpose. Otherwise, the purges would have been limited only to those directly involved in the coup attempt (09 January 2025).

Lawyer8's account is consistent with the ICJ's legal assessment. The problem was not only the scale of the purge, but the creation of an elastic legal category that lowered the threshold of responsibility. Instead of requiring demonstrable criminal participation, the state could rely on loosely defined association, contact, or affiliation. This made the purge administratively efficient while preserving the appearance of legality (2018).

Lawyer1 similarly described the introduction of contact and affiliation as a radical legal step, emphasizing its role in facilitating denunciations among public officials:

> Now, where can the concepts of 'association' and 'connection' play a role in denunciations? When public officials report on each other. I encountered this during the post-coup period. People whom I knew were friends reported one another. I don't know how strong their bond of friendship was, but at that stage, many people reported each other. In fact, this happened frequently in cases opened on charges of terror membership (08 August 2024).

Lawyer1's account shows how the vague criteria of contact and affiliation not only legitimized mass purges from above but also encouraged participation from below. Once ordinary social, professional, or financial connections could be interpreted as evidence of affiliation,

[18] Commonly referred criteria included a set of conducts which are all allegedly signs of association with the designated Gulen movement such as using ByLock (an instant messaging app), closing Bank Asya accounts after a certain date and past social contacts (ICJ, 2018).

denunciations became a practical means of producing suspicion. In this way, targeted legislation did not merely authorize state action; it expanded the evidentiary field through which citizens and public officials could implicate one another.

A second example of targeted legal infrastructure is the 2015 reward regulation issued under the counterterrorism framework. Lawyer6 pointed to this measure as part of the state's active promotion of informant behaviour:

> The state actively promoted informant behavior, acclimating society to mass denunciations. Legal foundations were created for this, with regulations encouraging people to inform others in exchange for rewards. As a result, people began reporting others easily, often without investigation, for reasons as trivial as 'they look suspicious to me' (23 September 2024).

This observation is supported by the Regulation (No. 29461) On Rewards for those Who Assist in the Capture of Perpetrators of Offenses Falling within the Scope of the Anti-Terror Law (2015), which was introduced to increase the participation of Turkish citizens and foreign nationals in denunciation and other preventive activities in counterterrorism. Introduced in 2015, after the collapse of the Peace Talks and before the failed coup attempt, this regulation shows that the legal groundwork for incentivized denunciation was already being laid before the post-coup purge. Together with the later use of "contact" and "affiliation" under the emergency decree-laws, it illustrates how targeted legal measures expanded the machinery of repression. The regime did not rely only on the flexible interpretation of existing law; it also introduced specific legal mechanisms that encouraged denunciation, broadened suspicion, and converted social or administrative information into actionable evidence. In this sense, the witch-hunt was not merely political rhetoric or informal practice. It was legalized through vague criteria, emergency decree-laws, and incentive structures that made denunciation both institutionally useful and socially reproducible.

3.2. Judiciary as a tool of repression

So far, this chapter has examined how the judicial landscape was instrumentalized through the restructuring of both higher and lower courts and through the recalibration of the penal framework in line with the regime's political agenda. Together, these processes show how the legal system became a central component of authoritarian control and how its instrumentalization shaped the dynamics of the state's witch-hunt and, subsequently, popular denunciations. This section turns to the judiciary's role in facilitating denunciations through their elicitation, processing, and transformation into punitive action. Crucially, the judiciary became one of the sites where suspicion, alleged affiliation, and denunciatory claims could be converted into procedural grounds for legal action. The chapter shows how the judiciary

operated as a tool of repression through legal and procedural instruments that transformed the judicial process itself into a mechanism of coercion.

The analysis in this section draws primarily on the professional observations of legal practitioners who have first-hand experience representing clients, following criminal investigations, and observing changes in judicial practice from within the legal field. The interview material is used here to illuminate how this broader legal environment is experienced in judicial practice: namely, how denunciations acquire urgency when they can be attached to certain offences. These accounts illuminate how denunciations are received, processed, and rendered legally consequential in practice, particularly where practices are discretionary, informal, or shaped by ad hoc interpretations of legal procedure. Where available, these practitioner accounts are triangulated with legal provisions, official statistics, monitoring reports, case-based evidence, and secondary literature. Where such evidence is limited, the interview material is used more cautiously to identify observed patterns in judicial practice.

3.2.1. Eliciting denunciations

3.2.1.1. Selective reception: crimes in high demand

Legal practitioners consistently identified the type of alleged offence as a key factor shaping whether reports or complaints were likely to trigger judicial action. In their accounts, denunciations were more readily received when they could be attached to politically sensitive or broadly framed offences. Three categories were especially prominent in their observations: terrorism-related charges, defamation, and crimes framed as disrupting public harmony.

i) Terrorism charges

Legal experts consistently identified terrorism-related allegations as among the most institutionally receptive categories of denunciation. Their observation is consistent with broader concerns raised in the literature and in monitoring reports about the expansive use of Turkey's anti-terror framework against political opposition, journalists, academics, Kurdish activists, and alleged members of the Gülen movement. Lawyer7 described terrorism-related allegations as producing a markedly different level of institutional reaction compared with ordinary crimes:

> The content of a denunciation determines the level of scrutiny. Cases involving terrorism allegations receive extreme, almost illogical, scrutiny, unlike crimes such as murder, assault, or theft. For theft, the process is straightforward: taking statements and checking security footage. But for an allegation like conducting propaganda, authorities immediately retrieve call records, track visits, collect fingerprints, seize books, and analyze digital devices—all within 24 hours. If the case concerns the state, it moves swiftly; if it concerns individuals, progress requires persistent effort (17 October 2024).

Lawyer7's evaluation illustrates how legal practitioners perceive a hierarchy of judicial urgency, in which allegations concerning state security are treated as more institutionally compelling than ordinary crimes. The significance of this account lies in showing how terrorism-related denunciations are understood by practitioners to activate a more intensive investigative response. In this context, denunciations can serve as entry points into broader investigations, especially where allegations concern terrorist membership, propaganda, or affiliation with proscribed organizations.

This dynamic was also visible in participants' discussions of propaganda charges, particularly in relation to social media activity. Legal experts described social media as a key source from which denunciatory material is collected, circulated, and transformed into evidence. Lawyer4 connected this pattern to the post-2015 crackdown on Kurdish political expression:

> Between 2015 and 2016, incidents like the Kobani protests and urban trench conflicts led to investigations, even against teachers, based on Facebook activity. Criticizing the Roboski massacre, praising trench conflicts, or insulting security forces could be classified as propaganda… If a Facebook profile was public, the police accessed it directly; if not, acquaintances denounced the posts. The cybercrimes unit collected screenshots, reviewed content, and built cases. Afterward, authorities raided homes—often at night or early morning—detained individuals and investigated them for propaganda or alleged terror ties. Some were arrested, and many teachers lost their jobs in this crackdown (06 September 2024).

This account links denunciation to the digitalization of surveillance and evidence-gathering. In participants' accounts, denouncers did not necessarily need to provide extensive legal evidence; they could supply screenshots, alert authorities to online content, or direct cybercrime units toward particular users. Social media therefore became a particularly accessible terrain for denunciation, especially because online expression could be detached from its context and reclassified as propaganda, insult, or evidence of affiliation.

A case recounted by Lawyer1 further illustrates how denunciatory claims based on social media or academic expression could initiate legal proceedings, even when the initial charge later changed:

> My client scored the highest in a career advancement exam. The second-highest-scoring candidate filed a CİMER complaint, accusing them of terrorist propaganda through academic publications and private statements. Authorities summoned them for questioning, and a legal case was opened based on a single tweet. Later, the propaganda charge was dropped, but the case continued under Article 301 for insulting the Turkish Republic and its institutions (08 August 2024).

This example shows how denunciatory claims can generate legal momentum once they enter the judicial system. Even where the initial terrorism-related accusation is not sustained, the case may continue under another provision of the Penal Code. This points to the adaptability of criminal law in politically sensitive cases: denunciations do not need to produce a fixed or stable charge from the outset; they may instead initiate a process through which authorities search for legally actionable grounds.

The accounts suggest that terrorism-related offenses occupy a privileged position in the judicial reception of denunciations: terrorism allegations create a particularly receptive legal environment in which denunciatory claims can be rapidly transformed into investigations, procedural burdens, and punitive consequences.

ii) Defamation charges

Legal experts also identified defamation-related offences as a highly receptive category of denunciation, particularly where allegations concerned the president, the Turkish state, or public officials. This pattern is in line with judicial statistics and monitoring reports that show a sharp rise in investigations and prosecutions under Article 299 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting the president (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The interview material, therefore, serves a different function here: it illustrates how this broader legal trend operates in everyday judicial practice, particularly through social media denunciations.

Participants emphasized the pivotal role of lawsuits for insulting the president in sustaining a cycle of criminalization. Regulated under Article 299, the offence has become one of the most visible examples of how the Penal Code is used to police political expression. Lawyer8 located this shift within a longer legal history, arguing that the provision itself is not new, but that its enforcement changed dramatically under Erdoğan's presidency:

> The Italian Penal Code includes a law against insulting the president, but it was last enforced in 1947. Its non-enforcement reflects a modern approach to free expression. This doesn't mean no Italian has insulted the president—it simply isn't prosecuted. Turkey was once similar, with only 10–15 insult cases per year under previous presidents. However, after Tayyip Erdoğan took office, these cases skyrocketed to tens of thousands, marking a dramatic increase (09 January 2025).

Lawyer8's account is significant because it distinguishes between the existence of a restrictive legal provision and its politically intensified enforcement. The rise of Article 299 cases cannot be explained only by the text of the law; it also reflects a changing enforcement environment in which criticism of the president became increasingly actionable. In this setting, denunciations play an important role by bringing social media posts, comments, and everyday expressions to the attention of authorities. Legal experts' accounts suggest that Article 299 cases span a wide social range, from prominent public figures to ordinary citizens and minors. Lawyer6 described how even informal digital interactions can become grounds for criminal investigation:

> Cases of insulting the President have skyrocketed, even involving minors. High school students can face prosecution for remarks made while playing online games. This happens either through police virtual patrols or citizen reports. A player might take a screenshot and report a friend to CİMER or the police for an alleged insult. Once reported, an investigation is swiftly launched, and the individual soon becomes the subject of a legal case (23 September 2024).

This account illustrates the expansion of criminal liability into everyday digital spaces as observed by experts, with a low threshold at which speech can become legally actionable: a

screenshot, a complaint, or a report can transform an informal exchange into a criminal investigation. Denunciations, therefore, extend the reach of Article 299 by allowing citizens to identify, capture, and transmit otherwise dispersed forms of political expression.

Participants also noted that defamation-related denunciations extend beyond the president to public officials and state institutions. Lawyer6 described a case involving comments directed at ministers during the forest fires:

> I have an elderly client facing a defamation trial for comments made during the forest fires directed at two ministers. The client quoted a news article and added their remark. If they had quoted the minister's own Tweet, it could have been noticed by an advisor or social media team. However, they cited a local newspaper, something the minister's team wouldn't typically track, yet the post was still found. When accounts have many followers, engagement increases visibility. But for smaller accounts, reports likely play a role in bringing such posts to authorities' attention (23 September 2024).

This example illustrates a mechanism that is central to denunciation: the expansion of visibility. Posts that may not otherwise attract the attention of officials, advisors, or security units can become visible through citizen reporting. In this sense, denunciations supplement formal surveillance by widening the state's capacity to monitor and police critical speech across digital platforms.

iii) Crimes disrupting public harmony

Legal experts identified offences framed around public harmony, particularly the crime of inciting hatred and hostility among the public, as another receptive category for denunciations. Participants' accounts show how broadly worded public-order provisions can be invoked in response to complaints about speech, satire, or social media commentary. In this sense, the interview material is used here to illuminate a practice-based mechanism: how denunciations can transform contested expression into an alleged disturbance of public order.

Participants described this provision as especially vulnerable to politicized interpretation. Lawyer8 noted that although the offence was formally designed to address hate speech and social hostility, it has often been used against writers, intellectuals, and critical voices. This observation situates the provision within a longer history of using public-order language to regulate dissenting expression. In the context of denunciations, the significance of this offence lies in its elasticity: complaints do not need to establish direct harm, but can frame speech as socially disruptive, offensive, or threatening to public peace. Lawyer1's account of a university Spring Festival case illustrates how denunciations may become part of the evident logic of public-order offences:

> Two cases were filed against the student who played the imam during the Spring Festival. One case relied on mass petitions involving a complaint copied and signed by various individuals, even from other provinces. It was strategically used to claim that public order was disrupted. Authorities

justified charges by sheer number of complaints, arguing that they proved a disturbance to public peace (08 August 2024).

The alleged conduct involved a student role-playing as an imam during a traditional spring festival at a state university. The case is analytically significant because it shows how the volume of complaints itself can be mobilized to support the claim that public order has been disturbed. In this logic, denunciations do not merely alert authorities to an offence; they may help constitute the appearance of social disturbance. The number of complaints becomes part of the justification for action, even when the conduct is merely expressive.

Other accounts similarly pointed to the role of denunciations in making low-visibility online speech actionable. Participants described cases in which social media comments that might otherwise have remained unnoticed were brought to the attention of authorities through reports or complaints and then reframed as offences against public harmony. These examples suggest that the selective character of enforcement does not necessarily require systematic monitoring of all speech. Rather, denunciations can create selective visibility by identifying particular posts, users, or expressions for legal attention. The legal practitioners' observations illuminate the interaction between broad public-order offenses and citizen reporting. Denunciations provide a mechanism through which contested speech becomes visible, legally actionable, and potentially punitive.

3.2.2. Processing denunciations: Violation of due process

Participants framed due process violations through a distinction central to Turkish legal practice, commonly expressed in the principle that "procedure comes before substance" (*usul esastan önce gelir*). This principle does not treat procedure as a mere technical formality; rather, it assumes that a just legal outcome depends on the proper observance of procedural safeguards. In this understanding, legality, evidentiary sufficiency, equality of arms, and judicial impartiality are not secondary matters but preconditions for reaching a substantively just decision.

The evidentiary value of legal practitioners' accounts is particularly important in the post-coup legal landscape, where the application of law has often been discretionary, uneven, and politically contingent. Rather than following stable and predictable procedural standards, politically sensitive cases frequently unfold through ad hoc interpretations, shifting evidentiary thresholds, and case-by-case legal reasoning. For this reason, formal legal texts and official procedures provide only a partial picture. Lawyers' professional observations are essential for understanding how denunciatory claims are actually received, processed, and converted into legal action in practice.

This observation is consistent with broader rule-of-law assessments that have raised concerns about fair trial guarantees, judicial independence, evidentiary standards, and the presumption

of innocence in Turkey's post-coup legal order (Human Rights Joint Platform, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2024; ICJ, 2016, 2018; OHCHR, 2018; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2018). The following subsections examine how denunciations are processed within this legal environment. The analysis relies primarily on legal practitioners' professional observations of how complaints are translated into legal files, particularly where due process violations appear as recurring patterns in judicial practice: the shifting of the burden of proof onto the accused, the weak relationship between accusation and evidence, and the reversal of investigative logic from evidence-led inquiry to suspicion-led prosecution.

The first due process concern raised by legal practitioners concerns the weakening of the presumption of innocence by shifting the burden of proof onto the accused. This pattern was discussed particularly in relation to post-coup terrorism-related denunciations, where lawyers observed that vague or weakly substantiated reports could nevertheless trigger legal scrutiny. Lawyer7 contrasted this with earlier practice, arguing that before 2016, denunciations lacking legal merit were more likely to be filtered out or challenged procedurally:

> Until 2016, reports lacking legal merit were often disregarded. Even if processed—such as a bribery accusation against a public official—administrative sanctions could be appealed by challenging the denunciation's validity without proving whether the alleged crime occurred. This changed entirely after 2016. Now, once a report is filed, no procedural checks are conducted. The burden shifts to the accused, who must prove they have no organizational ties or involvement in illegal activity (17 October 2024)

Lawyer7's account is significant because it shows how denunciations can acquire legal force even when their evidentiary basis is weak. The problem is not only that vague reports are processed, but that their acceptance into the legal system alters the position of the accused. Instead of requiring authorities to establish the credibility of the accusation at the outset, the process can shift the burden onto the accused to demonstrate the absence of organizational ties or illegal activity. This weakens the presumption of innocence in practice and helps explain how denunciations become punitive even before a final verdict is reached.

Lawyer7 traces the legal rationale behind this shift, explaining that the Court of Cassation previously set a precedent in sexual abuse cases involving children or women: if no personal animosity existed between the accuser and the accused, the accusation was presumed truthful, based on the assumption that no one would tarnish their own reputation without cause. This effectively placed the burden on the accused to prove their innocence. Originally confined to abuse cases, this precedent has now been extended to political trials. In terrorism-related charges, courts apply the same logic, where the accusation is presumed valid under the reasoning: "Why would someone falsely accuse you without reason?"

This does not mean that every denunciation is automatically accepted as true. Rather, the account illustrates how, in politically sensitive cases, the threshold for initiating legal scrutiny

may be lowered while the burden of explanation shifts onto the accused. This observation is central to understanding how denunciations can become consequential even when their evidence base is weak. Therefore, violation of due process lies in the procedural environment that allows suspicion to function as a starting point for legal action.

A second due process violation concerns the weak relationship between accusation and evidence, and it emerged as a dominant pattern in interviews with all cohorts: lawyers, bureaucrats, and trade unionists. Legal experts described politically charged denunciation cases as often moving through vague or speculative forms of reasoning, where affiliations, associations, or professional contacts could acquire evidentiary weight even when they bore no direct relationship to the alleged offence. This pattern reflects the broader post-coup logic introduced by Decree Law No. 667, discussed above, in which the criteria of "contact" and "affiliation" established exceptionally broad administrative grounds for dismissal and closure, while also influencing the evidentiary and classificatory logic of subsequent criminal investigations. This logic is closely connected to guilt by association, a concept widely discussed in the denunciation literature and also reflected in monitoring bodies' concerns about the vague and discretionary application of alleged organizational links. In the Turkish post-coup context, such reasoning was particularly visible in cases involving alleged ties to terrorist organizations, where the evidentiary threshold shifted from criminal conduct to proximity, contact, or perceived affiliation.

Lawyer8's own experience is analytically significant in this context because it combines professional evaluation with first-hand experience of prosecution. His account is an illustrative case showing how a denunciatory claim can proceed despite a weak connection between the accusation and the evidence presented. A legal scholar and human rights advocate, Lawyer8 had previously faced prosecution for alleged PKK membership and was later acquitted. He subsequently faced another trial after a colleague accused him of being affiliated with FETÖ. According to his account, the allegation rested primarily on his role as a columnist for *Today's Zaman*, an English-language newspaper later associated with the Gülen movement. This link was treated as sufficient grounds to initiate criminal proceedings, even though his formal statement was not taken at the initial stage. Lawyer8 emphasized that the indictment did not identify any criminal content in his writings:

> I said in court: 'If you see even the slightest criminal element, please state it.' But there's nothing like that in the indictment. None of my writings or statements are used as evidence—it's solely about writing for what they call Gülenist media. They even admit, 'We know you're not part of the movement, but why did you write for their newspaper?' (09 January 2025).

The case illustrates the gap between the alleged offence and the evidence used to support it by showing how denunciatory claims can operate through associative reasoning: the accused is

not required to have committed a clearly identifiable criminal act; rather, proximity to a stigmatized institution or network becomes sufficient to generate suspicion. Lawyer8 also pointed to what he regarded as selective enforcement, noting that other public figures who had written for the same newspaper, including İbrahim Kalın, now Director of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), did not face comparable charges. This observation highlights a central problem in politically charged proceedings: the same association may be treated as legally meaningful for regime critics while remaining irrelevant for politically protected actors.

A third due process violation concerns the reversal of investigative logic. Legal experts described a shift in which investigations no longer necessarily moved from evidence to suspect, but from suspect to evidence. In this pattern, a denunciation first identifies a person as suspicious, after which investigators search for details that might substantiate the accusation. This practice is especially consequential in cases involving alleged "contact" or "affiliation," discussed above, because these categories allow tenuous, incidental, or historically remote associations to be reinterpreted as evidence of organizational connection. Lawyer6 described this logic in relation to FETÖ-related denunciations:

> Now, let's say someone is reported for [being a member of] FETÖ. An investigation has to be conducted to determine whether the report is baseless. During that investigation, something might come up—because if you're looking for a fault, you'll find one. For instance, the person's distant cousin might have attended a Gulen-affiliated school at some point, since they were so widespread. Once something like that surfaces, there you have it: *association* or *connection* (23 September 2024).

The account describes an investigative sequence in which the denunciation does not provide evidence of an offence in itself; rather, it supplies the initial suspicion that justifies further scrutiny. Once that scrutiny begins, incidental associations can be reclassified as legally meaningful links. In this way, denunciations can initiate a process in which the legal system searches backward from accusation to evidence. Lawyer7 illustrated a similar pattern through a case in which a client was reportedly denounced for failing to display a flag during a soldier's funeral:

> In some western provinces, during a soldier's funeral, most local shopkeepers hang flags. Those who don't are reported as members of the PKK terrorist organization. My client was denounced by a neighbor solely for not displaying a flag. His house was raided in the morning, and his phone, computer, tablet, and other devices were confiscated. Authorities then used two of his social media posts as evidence, leading to a trial (17 October 2024).

This example illustrates how politically charged denunciations may convert an ambiguous inaction into a basis for criminal suspicion. While the alleged failure to display a flag did not itself constitute evidence of terrorist organization membership, in this case, it triggered a search through the client's digital life, where unrelated social media posts were later used to construct a legal case. Here, due process violation emerges in the order of reasoning but not

weak evidence: suspicion generated by denunciation precedes, and then organizes, the search for evidence.

This backward investigative logic also clarifies the demand-and-supply dynamic at the centre of this thesis. On the demand side, the state's receptiveness to politically charged allegations creates an institutional environment in which prosecutors and investigators may search for confirmatory details once a denunciation is received. On the supply side, citizens can insert personal grievances, suspicions, or opportunistic claims into this legal environment by framing them through recognized categories of threat, such as FETÖ, PKK, terrorism, or affiliation. Legal experts shared anecdotes of denunciations arising from disputes, including minor conflicts over everyday matters, illustrating this dynamic of how personal grievances could be translated into politically actionable accusations. These accounts identify a practice-based pattern observed by legal practitioners: in politically sensitive cases, denunciations can lower the threshold for investigation, direct attention toward the accused, and encourage a retrospective search for incriminating associations. This reversal of investigative logic is central to understanding how denunciations become punitive even before conviction, by exposing individuals to raids, confiscations, interrogations, trials, and reputational harm.

3.2.3. Judiciary tools in the reporting mechanism

In the previous section, I examined how the legal landscape was reshaped through strategic manipulation of laws, the erosion of judicial impartiality, and the broader instrumentalization of legal institutions for authoritarian ends. These transformations positioned the judiciary as a central instrument in the state-led crackdown on denounced individuals. This section turns to the specific judicial tools that operationalize repression within the reporting mechanism. Two tools stand out in this regard: CİMER, which facilitates submission, circulation and tracking of denunciations, and the *anonymous witness*, which enables accusatory claims to enter judicial proceedings through opaque testimonies which are difficult to challenge. Together, these tools activate and sustain repression through judicial means, enabling the state to convert citizen reports into legally sanctioned punitive action.

3.2.3.1. CİMER (Presidential Communication Centre)

Participants from all cohorts emphasized the central role of CİMER in eliciting denunciations and complaints from the public. As an accessible and user-friendly platform for submitting applications to public authorities, CİMER functions as one of the main channels through which grievances, suspicions, and accusations enter the state bureaucracy. Its institutional location under the Presidency is important because it gives complaints a particular administrative weight: they do not circulate merely as ordinary citizen petitions, but as applications routed through a presidentially branded communication system.

Participants' accounts point to a practice-based dynamic that illustrates CİMER's influence on the institutions: once complaints are routed through CİMER, they may generate additional pressure on the receiving institution because responses must be recorded and reported back. Legal practitioners, therefore, described CİMER not simply as a neutral petitioning channel, but as a mechanism that can increase the institutional urgency attached to complaints, including those involving denunciatory claims.

Lawyer2 explained that complaints forwarded through CİMER may reach prosecutors via the Ministry of Justice and that the presidential label attached to these referrals can alter how they are perceived. In this account, prosecutors do not necessarily treat such complaints as ordinary submissions from citizens; rather, the obligation to respond can create pressure to open an investigation file or to demonstrate that some form of action has been taken. Lawyer7 similarly contrasted complaints submitted directly to a prosecutor's office with complaints submitted through CİMER. While both may be formally equivalent as complaints, participants suggested that CİMER applications carry greater practical weight because they are embedded in a system of administrative tracking and response.

This does not imply that every CİMER complaint automatically leads to an investigation, prosecution, or conviction. Rather, the interview material suggests that CİMER can reshape the institutional processing of denunciations by making them more visible, formally recorded, and bureaucratically traceable. A complaint submitted in person may remain within the discretionary space of the prosecutor's office; a complaint forwarded through CİMER, by contrast, arrives through a channel that requires institutional acknowledgement. This creates a pressure to process, respond, or justify inaction.

Participants also described CİMER's effects as extending beyond the initiation of proceedings. Lawyer5, drawing on a case involving his client, argued that repeated CİMER complaints could shape the courtroom environment by contributing to a perception of public pressure or continuing suspicion. This account illustrates a courtroom dynamic in which accumulated complaints could operate as an informal background factor in decisions concerning pretrial detention or sentencing, even if they are not formal evidence in themselves.

By connecting citizen reporting to bureaucratic and judicial responsiveness, CİMER makes a difference through its administrative weight. By centralizing complaints under a presidential communication system and requiring institutional follow-up, CİMER can increase the visibility, urgency, and administrative weight of reported allegations. In politically sensitive cases, this may contribute to the transformation of citizen suspicion into legal action by embedding denunciations within a chain of institutional accountability that legal practitioners experience as pressure.

3.2.3.2. Anonymous witness

Another judicial tool identified by legal experts in the context of denunciation-related proceedings is the use of secret witness testimony. Secret or anonymous witness procedures are formally permitted under Turkish criminal procedure only under specified conditions to protect individuals who provide information in sensitive criminal proceedings (Tatar, 2013), and the ECtHR does not prohibit their use where safeguards are in place to protect the defendant's right to a fair trial (ECHR, 2008). However, monitoring reports have raised serious concerns about the expansion and abuse of this mechanism in Turkey, particularly in political trials. The Italian Federation of Human Rights (FIDU) report notes that secret witness testimony has become common in the last decade and has been used in high-profile proceedings, including cases involving human rights defenders, lawyers, and pro-Kurdish political actors and the alleged members of Gulen movement. It also records cases in which anonymous witnesses were allegedly used across numerous proceedings, did not actually exist, or later admitted that they did not know the defendants they had accused (Turkut et al., 2023).

These documented concerns provide important context for the legal practitioners' accounts in this study. Lawyer1 described the secret witness as a "magical formula" in cases where prosecutors seek to establish alleged organizational membership without clear evidence of violent acts. In his account, individuals who were themselves under investigation or accused of organizational involvement could be encouraged to identify others in exchange for leniency, reduced punishment, or procedural advantage. This differs from voluntary citizen denunciation, but it remains relevant to the reporting mechanism because it transforms accusation into a structured judicial tool: one person's testimony can generate a chain of further suspects, files, and proceedings.

Lawyer1 illustrated this dynamic through cases involving alleged membership in illegal organizations:

> Imagine a civil servant is under investigation for terrorism ties. At the police station, they're offered immunity or acquittal in exchange for cooperation—along with anonymity for protection. This isn't about money; it's something far bigger… Sometimes, secret witnesses are later exposed, but the accused can't retaliate. Instead, they are left in court, desperately trying to prove their innocence. The use of secret witnesses creates a chaotic and deeply flawed process (08 August 2024).

Noting that over five years, around two million citizens were investigated for alleged membership in an illegal organization, with hundreds of thousands convicted of terrorism-related charges between 2016 and 2017, Lawyer1 highlights the chain reaction triggered by secret witnesses:

> This pattern was common in cases of alleged membership in illegal organizations. A secret witness from the same institution would report 50–60 individuals, and since the witness was also part of

> the [Gulen] movement, their testimony was deemed credible. The prevailing logic was: 'If they identified some members, they must know about others too,' reinforcing the validity of the denunciations. Those accused faced prosecution—some were imprisoned, while others endured lengthy trials before eventual acquittal. Regardless of the verdict, their lives were irreparably damaged, and they lost their jobs due to the accusations (08 August 2024).

While this case shows the capacity of the secret witness tool to create a self-reinforcing prosecution cycle, Lawyer1's account resonates with the concerns raised in monitoring reports regarding the reliability, repeat use, and evidentiary weight of secret witness testimony in political trials. The significance of this mechanism stems from its multiplier effect. Unlike ordinary denunciations, which usually originate from citizens' voluntary reports, secret witness testimony operates within the judicial process itself. Yet it reproduces a similar accusatory logic: suspicion expands through alleged affiliation. The witness's insider status can make broad accusations appear credible, while the secrecy of the procedure limits the defendant's ability to test the witness's motivation, reliability, or basis of knowledge. This account shows that the secret witness becomes part of the broader reporting mechanism by institutionalizing accusation as a judicial tool for identifying, expanding, and prosecuting alleged networks of affiliation.

3.2.4. Punishment through process: Judicial repression in practice

The previous sections examined how denunciations enter and move through the judicial system. This section turns to what happens once individuals become entangled in legal proceedings. The evidence presented here is necessarily practice-based: many of the punitive effects of judicial repression do not appear only in final convictions, but in the process itself through investigation, detention, repeated questioning, raids, prolonged trials, deferred verdicts, and professional or social consequences. For this reason, legal practitioners' and affected participants' accounts are particularly important for understanding how judicial procedure becomes punitive even before, or irrespective of, final conviction. The section identifies several recurring forms of punishment through process: disproportionate consequences, prolonged proceedings, early-stage intimidation, and uncertainty produced by deferred or delayed outcomes.

A first form of punishment through process concerns the disproportionate relationship between the alleged conduct and the consequences that follow. Legal practitioners described cases in which denunciations transformed ordinary, ambiguous, or low-level acts into terrorism-related proceedings, particularly in politically sensitive contexts involving Kurdish identity or expression. Lawyer4's account of a Kurdish client denounced after Kurdish music was played in a car illustrates this dynamic:

> My client was driving from X province to Y with several passengers, including a couple of sergeants. When Kurdish music played, one sergeant forced him to turn it off. The driver

> explained that it was a radio but an argument broke out. The sergeant recorded everything—the music, the driver, and the passengers—and submitted it as evidence. Despite clear privacy violations, this wasn't considered. Only the sergeant's statement was taken, a case was filed against the driver, and he was convicted (06 September 2024).

This case shows how ordinary acts may become legally consequential when interpreted through a politically charged security frame. However, in this case, initial denunciation did not remain confined to the immediate incident. According to Lawyer4, the same accuser later searched the driver's social media history and initiated a second denunciation based on older posts that were framed as terrorist propaganda. Therefore, the case also illustrates how denunciations can generate a cumulative legal burden: one accusation opens the door to further scrutiny, which in turn creates opportunities for additional allegations. In this sense, the punishment lies not only in conviction, but in repeated exposure to investigation, prosecution, and legal uncertainty.

A second form of punishment through process concerns the duration of proceedings. Both experts and ordinary citizens across different cohorts described prolonged trials, delayed reinstatements, and slow implementation of final decisions as producing punitive effects even where individuals were eventually acquitted or legally vindicated. Trade unionist MunicipalUnionRep1's case is illustrative:

> I was dismissed with a high disciplinary penalty through naming names, but the Council of State ruled my dismissal unlawful and ordered my reinstatement. However, other cases have dragged on for eight years, stuck in limbo with excessively prolonged proceedings. This is a deliberate tactic to exhaust and wear people down, keeping the process unlawfully ongoing (30 October 2024).

MunicipalUnionRep1's account shows how delay itself can function as a form of punishment. Even when courts eventually rule in favour of the accused or dismissed person, the prolonged process can impose years of professional exclusion, financial insecurity, reputational damage, and psychological strain. This point is also consistent with broader concerns raised in ECtHR case law and monitoring reports regarding excessive length of proceedings and delayed implementation of judicial decisions in Turkey (Ümmühan Kaplan v. Turkey, 2012, Behçet Taş v. Turkey, 2015, 2026; European Commission, 2025).

A third form of punishment through process concerns judicial intimidation. Legal experts described how procedural measures such as raids, confiscations, repeated summonses, and deferred verdicts can produce intimidation regardless of the eventual outcome of the case. Two forms of judicial intimidation emerged prominently from the interviews: early-stage coercion, such as house raids and confiscations, and long-term uncertainty, such as deferred verdicts or delayed outcomes.

A key aspect of judicial intimidation is the violence used during the early stages of judicial proceedings, particularly during arrest warrants. Legal practitioners described these measures

as intimidating not only because of their coercive force, but also because they impose immediate social, psychological, and familial consequences before any determination of guilt. In this sense, the punitive effect of denunciation may begin long before trial.

Participants shared multiple cases of house raids experienced by their clients. Lawyer3's account of a client investigated in relation to illegal betting is illustrative of this early-stage coercive effect:

> One of our clients faced a case related to illegal betting. They had previously been tried in 2013 for similar charges. Later, their name resurfaced in multiple documents based on a baseless report, leading to a 5 a.m. home raid. Despite no evidence being found, both the individual and their family suffered. They were detained for days, subjected to an unnecessary investigation, and later released and acquitted (05 September 2024).

One of the many similar examples, this one illustrates how the investigative process can itself become punitive when a report triggers intrusive measures despite weak or ultimately unsubstantiated evidence. Even where the accused is later released or acquitted, the raid, detention, and public exposure produce consequences that cannot be fully undone. The impact also extends beyond the denounced individual to family members, who experience the raid and detention as part of the same coercive process. In this respect, house raids operate as a form of early-stage punishment through intimidation, regardless of the final judicial outcome.

A further form of punishment through process concerns the deferral of the verdict, known in Turkish law as HAGB. HAGB is a legal mechanism HAGB is a mechanism through which the court determines guilt and a sentence but defers the pronouncement of the judgment for a supervision period, during which the judgment does not ordinarily produce the consequences of a final conviction unless the statutory conditions are breached. Formally, it can appear as a lenient outcome because it prevents the immediate execution of a sentence under certain conditions. However, the mechanism has been criticized for producing legal uncertainty and weakening effective judicial protection. In 2023, the Turkish Constitutional Court annulled the HAGB provisions, finding that defendants could be required to make decisions about HAGB before the facts of the case were fully clarified and that the available review mechanisms did not adequately secure fair-trial guarantees (2023, 2025). Legal experts' accounts are therefore consistent with broader judicial concerns: although HAGB suspends the formal consequences of conviction, it may leave individuals under prolonged threat of punishment, encouraging caution, self-censorship, and compliance. This is particularly significant in politically sensitive expression cases, where the ECtHR has treated suspended or deferred sanctions as capable of producing a chilling effect on the exercise of rights (Pech, 2021; Voorhoof, 2023).

Lawyer1 emphasized that the consequences of a deferred verdict are often underestimated from outside the Turkish legal context:

> The widespread use of measures like deferred verdicts significantly impacts society, fostering a general sense of intimidation. Many Western observers struggle to grasp the full extent of this. For instance, receiving a deferred verdict may not seem like a severe penalty at first. However, once it appears on your record, it follows you everywhere. You cannot become a public servant, and if you already hold that position, you will be dismissed. Beyond these, it creates a lasting stigma that affects your family, children, spouse, and social circle (08 August 2024).

This account illustrates how an apparently moderate legal measure can produce punitive effects beyond the formal sentence. The accused is not necessarily imprisoned, but remains under the shadow of a conditional verdict, with consequences for employment, reputation, family life, and future legal vulnerability. In this sense, HAGB can extend punishment beyond the courtroom by keeping individuals in a prolonged state of legal and social uncertainty. Lawyer1 further connected deferred verdicts to financial pressure, particularly in defamation cases:

> Here's how the system operates: A complaint is filed, often for minor offenses like alleged insults. Judges take the easiest route by issuing penalties with deferred verdicts, reasoning that the accused won't go to jail anyway. Meanwhile, the complainant's lawyer earns attorney fees, even for minimal effort. After securing a deferral, they file compensation lawsuits, using mediation as leverage to demand payments, threatening further lawsuits if the accused doesn't comply. This turns into a financial trap, with some individuals forced to pay tens of thousands of liras (08 August 2024).

This account points to another dimension of process-based punishment: the economic burden produced by repeated complaints, attorney fees, compensation claims, mediation pressure, and the costs of legal defence. The issue is not only whether the accused ultimately receives a custodial sentence. Instead, the process itself can impose financial costs that are disproportionate to the alleged offence, especially in defamation-related proceedings. For individuals with limited resources, even minor accusations can become financially exhausting when they generate multiple legal steps or parallel compensation claims.

This dynamic also shows how denunciation can create incentives beyond ideological or political motives. In defamation cases, participants suggested that complaint-making may become entangled with financial interests, especially where legal representatives or complainants can benefit from attorney fees, settlements, or compensation claims. The significance of this account for the present study lies in showing that the reporting mechanism may generate not only punitive and political effects, but also material incentives that encourage the continuation of legal pressure. As part of the broader reporting mechanism, positioned at the intersection of profit and judicial intimidation, the deferral of verdicts carries far-reaching socio-political implications. Lawyer1 explains how:

> This system serves two purposes: creating a lucrative industry for lawyers while suppressing dissent. In defamation cases, deferral of verdicts provides moral cover for the government,

> allowing it to claim leniency. Yet, individuals fear reoffending, knowing the next penalty will be harsher. The result is a chilling effect, silencing criticism and reinforcing societal control (08 August 2024).

Lawyer1's reflections illustrate how deferred verdicts can sustain a façade of moderation while still producing intimidation. Because the verdict is deferred, the state can present the outcome as less severe than imprisonment or immediate punishment. Yet the accused remains constrained by the possibility of future activation, further proceedings, professional consequences, or financial liability. In this way, HAGB contributes to the politics of uncertainty: individuals are not necessarily removed from society through imprisonment, but they are disciplined through conditional freedom, legal insecurity, and fear of renewed prosecution.

This section demonstrated how punishment can operate through the judicial process itself through house raids, prolonged trials, deferred verdicts, and financial burdens. These examples identify the range of mechanisms through which denunciations can generate coercive effects even before conviction, after acquittal, or in cases where formal punishment appears limited. The process becomes punitive because it exposes individuals to intimidation, uncertainty, financial pressure, reputational damage, and self-censorship.

3.3. The judicial materialization of authoritarian discourse

The first part of this chapter examined the broader legal framework through which denunciations became judicially actionable. It showed how the legal system was reshaped through judicial engineering, including the restructuring of institutions, the appointment of politically aligned judges and prosecutors, and the weakening of judicial impartiality through institutional pressure. It also examined how the Penal Code became increasingly adaptable to the regime's changing political agenda, particularly through offences related to terrorism, defamation, and public order. The subsequent sections traced how these structural changes were experienced and observed in practice, showing how the judiciary could facilitate denunciations by receiving, processing, and converting them into investigations, trials, professional sanctions, and other punitive consequences.

A close examination of the legal and judicial domains therefore reveals not only the top-down engineering of repression, but also how law materialized the ideological boundaries identified in the discourse analysis. The macro-level discourse constructed particular groups as internal enemies, especially Kurds, members or alleged affiliates of the Gülen movement, and those positioned as sympathetic or ideologically proximate to them. The legal framework translated these boundaries into practice through broad and vague categories such as support, contact, and affiliation, as well as through penal provisions that made dissenting expression, criticism,

or association legally actionable. In this sense, discourse did not remain at the level of rhetoric. It shaped the categories through which suspicion was recognized, accusations were received, and denunciations became legally meaningful.

The section also has shown that this judicial materialization did not operate only through final convictions or formal punishment. It also worked through process: investigations, house raids, prolonged trials, deferred verdicts, financial burdens, and reputational harm. These mechanisms demonstrate how denunciations become consequential once they enter a legal environment structured by political priorities and weakened procedural safeguards. The evidence identified recurring mechanisms through which authoritarian discourse is translated into judicial practice. In sum, discourse framed the enemy, while law provided the procedural and institutional means through which that enemy could be pursued.

4. Repression through bureaucracy

4.1. Instrumentalizing reporting in bureaucracy

This thesis argues that, in Turkey's hybrid regime context, nominally democratic institutions have been instrumentalized for authoritarian purposes. Within this broader institutional landscape, the judiciary and bureaucracy have been central to engineering the state's witch-hunt against its adversaries, with the reporting mechanism embedded across both domains. While the judiciary has played a key role in implementing the witch-hunt as state policy, bureaucracy has enabled it in a distinct way: by transforming complaint systems, petitioning platforms, and channels of civic engagement into mechanisms for gathering information, processing suspicion, and disciplining alleged enemies.

This bureaucratic function became especially important within the crisis-driven trajectory of autocratization that culminated in the 2016 coup attempt. The post-2016 state of exception, Turkey's Reichstag scenario, enabled the regime to mainstream exceptional governance and transform the political system from parliamentary democracy into a hyper-presidential regime. In this context, control over bureaucracy became vital. The fallout with the Gülen movement had produced the figure of the hidden insider allegedly embedded within state institutions, while the re-securitization of Kurdish politics extended the logic of suspicion to other adversaries. Bureaucracy was therefore not merely an administrative apparatus; it became both a target of purification and an instrument through which the regime sought to identify, expose, and remove unwanted elements from within. The administrative character of this identification process was visible across sectors: YÖK instructed universities to assess

allegedly connected or supportive personnel and report the results upwards[19], while the Ministries of Education[20] and Health[21] publicly confirmed large-scale exercises to identify personnel linked to FETÖ/PDY.

At mass level, this process was facilitated by the centralization of petitioning under the Presidency through CİMER, which operated as a hub linking citizens, public institutions, and the executive. While complaint and petitioning systems are typically framed through the language of responsiveness, transparency, and bureaucratic accountability, in this context they were also leveraged to collect large volumes of politically useful information. This created a dual mechanism of control: pressure from above through centralized executive oversight, and pressure from below through citizen, colleague, and service-user reporting. Public sector employees were disproportionately affected, although the flexible infrastructure of reporting extended beyond this domain. With nearly five million people employed in government positions as of 2023 (TUIK, 2021), the broader societal consequences of collective reporting behaviors become evident. These practices cultivated an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, as workers faced the constant possibility of being reported for alleged misconduct, ideological nonconformity, hidden affiliation, or other perceived infractions.

This section draws on interviews with public sector workers from various fields, including education, health, and public administration, as well as trade union representatives from the health, municipal services, and education sectors. These accounts provide insight into the nature and mechanisms of repression within the public sector, examining how reporting practices function within bureaucracy and shape the lived experiences of those affected. By exploring the intersection of reporting behaviours and bureaucratic control, this section reveals how societal control and repression are enforced through everyday bureaucratic practices.

The section first examines how the institutionalization of reporting fostered a complaint culture that shaped citizen input, reinforced entitlement, merged civic participation with

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[19] On July 20 2016, the Council of Higher Education required all state and foundation universities to urgently assess academic and administrative personnel connected to the "Parallel State Structure" or suspected of supporting or assisting it; take action against those identified; remove suspected personnel immediately from positions capable of creating "managerial vulnerability"; and report the results in writing to YÖK by 5 August 2016 (Anadolu Agency, 2016).

[20] On 19 July 2016, the Ministry of Education announced that it was conducting a comprehensive study of personnel connected to FETÖ and had suspended 15,200 public employees pending investigation (MEB, 2016).

[21] On 27 July 2016, the Ministry of Health stated explicitly that an intensive exercise was underway to identify ministry personnel possessing membership of or connection with FETÖ/PDY (Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2016)

surveillance, and enabled shadow reporting practices that transformed oversight into exposure. It then explores how bureaucratic repression operates horizontally through reporting channels linking citizens and public servants to the Presidency, highlighting the abuse of petitioning mechanisms and the resulting victimisation of public sector workers through dual pressures, excessive workload, intimidation, and other forms of administrative ill-treatment.

4.2.1. Establishing Complaint Culture

Participants across bureaucratic settings described an overwhelming influx of citizen applications reaching their institutions on a daily basis. These applications included complaints, service demands, denunciations, crime reports, and a wide range of other grievances. Traditionally, such reports could be submitted through multiple bureaucratic channels, including in-person petitions at public offices. With the increasing digitalization of state services, however, CİMER has become a dominant platform for citizen-state interaction, centralizing and streamlining the petitioning process.

This shift did not merely alter the logistical form of reporting. In participants' accounts, CİMER's accessibility, ease of use, high responsiveness, and direct association with the Presidency changed how citizens understood their ability to activate the state. Reporting became faster, easier, and more consequential, enabling citizens to transform grievances, suspicions, and accusations into bureaucratically traceable applications. The analysis that follows, therefore, examines reporting culture as a post-coup phenomenon cultivated from above and sustained from below: encouraged through institutional design, presidential responsiveness, and administrative obligation, while reproduced through citizens' routine use of petitioning channels. This culture operated not only through citizens' grievance reporting, but also through internal administrative reporting. Collectively, these practices produced a bureaucratic infrastructure through which suspicion, affiliation, loyalty, and misconduct could be reported, recorded, circulated, and acted upon.

The following subsections examine how this complaint culture was established, how it turned petitioning into a mode of participation, and how bureaucratic reporting became entangled with repression.

4.2.1.1. The medium is the message: How centralized petitioning cultivates a culture of complaints

Interviews revealed the existence of multiple platforms for processing citizen input. Some institutions, such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance, maintain their own specialized channels. CİMER, however, functions as the primary overarching platform through which petitions are received, categorized, and redirected to relevant institutions.

Citizens are therefore not limited to a single institutional avenue, nor do they always need to identify the appropriate recipient themselves. By centralizing state-society communication and making bureaucratic responsiveness more visible, CİMER has become a major hub for petitioning.

This centralization does more than simplify communication. In participants' accounts, it also shapes how citizens frame their interactions with the state. CİMER consolidates diverse forms of input from demands to complaints, reports, opinions, and expressions of gratitude, within a single interface. While this lowers barriers to participation and strengthens the perception of accessibility, it also blurs the boundaries between different types of application. As a result, petitions that might otherwise be framed as requests, inquiries, or routine administrative matters can be recast as complaints requiring state intervention.

Participants working within public institutions repeatedly noted this tendency. Although CİMER formally allows for different categories of application, they observed that many petitions are submitted or interpreted through a complaint-oriented language. This does not mean that all CİMER applications are denunciatory or punitive. Rather, the point is that the platform's structure, accessibility, and requirement of institutional response make complaint-making appear to citizens as an effective way to activate the state. In this sense, the "complaint culture" identified by participants refers less to the content of every petition than to a broader mode of engagement in which citizens increasingly approach the state through grievance, accusation, and demand for intervention.

MinistryStaff1 illustrates how even routine bureaucratic transactions can be reframed as complaints when submitted through CİMER:

> Sometimes, petitions feel more like grumbling rather than formal complaints or demands. Many lack clear requests, as if individuals are simply pouring their hearts out. For instance, someone seeking an attorney's fee could get it immediately by applying directly to the relevant institution. Legal departments don't withhold such payments. Yet, instead of following this process, they file a complaint, creating the false impression that their request was denied (05 August 2024).

This account is significant because it shows how bureaucrats experience the everyday effects of centralized petitioning. The complaint does not necessarily arise from a prior refusal or institutional failure; rather, complaint-making becomes a shortcut for securing attention, accelerating response, or exerting pressure. In this way, CİMER reshapes citizen-state communication by making the complaint form itself a privileged route to bureaucratic action.

The implications extend beyond ordinary service demands. Once complaint-making becomes normalized as an effective mode of engaging the state, the same logic can also structure reports about public officials, institutions, neighbours, colleagues, or perceived political opponents. The platform does not create denunciations by itself, but it provides a

standardized and responsive channel through which suspicions and grievances can be translated into bureaucratically actionable claims. In this sense, the medium matters: centralized petitioning does not merely transmit citizen input; it shapes the form, language, and perceived effectiveness of reporting.

4.2.1.2. From grievance to entitlement: Demanding state action

Interviews suggested that the expansion of a centralized complaint framework has also reshaped citizens' expectations of state intervention. Participants described a shift in which personal grievances, ideological discomforts, or subjective offence are increasingly framed as rights violations requiring an official response. In this context, "entitlement" does not refer simply to citizens exercising their legitimate right to petition. Rather, it captures an expectation that the state should intervene on behalf of the complainant, even where the complaint concerns symbolic discomfort, moral offence, or interpersonal disagreement rather than a direct legal harm.

Lawyer1 described this tendency as a form of "perceived victimization," in which subjective offence is reframed as actionable harm:

> Complaints and denunciations are deeply intertwined in our system because people mistake personal grievances for rights. For example, discontent with the speed of the call to prayer doesn't grant someone a legal right, but some insist, 'This affects my religious practice.' Or take the singer Gülşen's case—she was reported for insulting religious school graduates. They argued: 'Our rights were violated.' But no actual right was infringed. If a crime was committed, it would be a matter of crime reporting, yet there is no such thing as personal harm here. Since the distinction is so blurred, denunciations are framed as complaints. The underlying mindset is: 'Take action for me.' However, complaints and denunciations are fundamentally different (08 August 2024).

Lawyer1's account illustrates how the boundary between complaint and denunciation can become blurred in public perception. In the examples he cites, a religious officer's recitation of the azan and a pop singer's comments about religious schools were not treated merely as matters of disagreement or criticism, but as grounds for state action. The analytical significance of these examples lies in the transformation of subjective offence into a claim upon the state. Citizens do not only report wrongdoing; they also ask the state to validate their grievance and act against the person or institution perceived to have caused offence.

Participants also connected this mindset to the accessibility of CİMER and similar reporting channels. HealthStaff2 observed that the availability of these platforms shapes citizens' expectations of what they are entitled to do:

> As these channels have become more accessible, people now see them as a right and believe they can report anyone. (11 September 2024)

This account points to a shift in the meaning of petitioning when accessibility, responsiveness, and political encouragement converge. As reporting becomes easier and more visible, citizens

may increasingly understand state intervention as an available remedy for everyday discomfort, moral disagreement, or ideological dispute. This matters for denunciations because it lowers the threshold for transforming grievances into accusations. The reporting mechanism thereby normalizes the expectation that the state should intervene not only in cases of concrete harm, but also in conflicts over values, identity, and perceived disrespect.

Overall, the accounts identify a practice-based shift in state–society relations. Citizens are not merely passive recipients of state repression; they can actively mobilize state institutions to pursue grievances, discipline others, or demand recognition of perceived injury. When combined with political rhetoric that encourages vigilance and reporting, this entitlement to state action can help normalize surveillance and punitive intervention in everyday life.

4.2.1.3. From Horizontal Policing to Vertical Repression

Participants' accounts point to a climate of everyday surveillance in which peer monitoring can be converted into bureaucratic intervention. Within the complaint culture described above, horizontal surveillance operates through citizens, colleagues, students, parents, or service users monitoring one another for perceived ideological, moral, or professional misconduct. Once reported through official channels, however, these peer-triggered complaints may activate vertical authority, as state institutions respond through administrative inquiries, investigations, or disciplinary procedures. In this sense, ordinary interactions can become institutionally consequential when routed through responsive reporting mechanisms.

SchoolStaff1 illustrated this dynamic through the example of classroom interactions that rapidly escalate into administrative scrutiny:

> The flood of unnecessary complaints has become overwhelming, wearing teachers down. Imagine a simple classroom interaction between a teacher and a student, which should be an ordinary moment of instruction, suddenly spirals into bureaucratic escalation. The District Directorate of National Education is notified, the school principal is informed, and soon, the entire school is whispering: 'You said this? There's going to be a complaint about you.' It's a truly unsettling situation (05 September 2024).

This account shows how reporting can transform everyday professional encounters into objects of bureaucratic attention. The initial interaction may be horizontal, involving a student, parent, colleague, or service user, but the consequences become vertical once administrative authorities are required to respond. In this way, the reporting mechanism extends the reach of state oversight by allowing ordinary actors to activate institutional scrutiny.

Participants described several examples in which this vertical escalation was linked to ideological or symbolic disputes. SchoolStaff2 recounted being reported, along with all principals in her town, for not displaying a Turkish flag on the anniversary of Atatürk's death, despite the absence of a clear regulatory requirement. She interpreted this as part of ongoing

ideological conflicts among teacher unions. Other accounts involved a teacher reported for speaking Kurdish with students during a break, a teacher denounced by a student after a misunderstood classroom discussion of fascism as part of the curriculum, and a nurse reported after the word *çarşaf* was misinterpreted during a hospital interaction. These cases illustrate how latent cues can be reframed as ideological offences when filtered through a complaint-oriented bureaucratic system.

EduUnionRep1 explained the disciplining effect of such complaints:

> What do [complaints] lead to? For me, it's not a problem because I have my arguments—I have my yearly plan, my textbook, and all my resources. I have to teach about fascism; if I don't, I could be held accountable because it's part of the curriculum…. But this creates another effect: 'Look, if you say something I don't like, or if you cross me in any way, I can drag you in front of inspectors, force you to justify yourself, have you removed from this school, or have you transferred elsewhere. My father is powerful, or my ideology is in power.' So, you are forced to align your discourse with their ideology (21 August 2024).

The case reveals the perceived threat of administrative exposure. Even where complaints do not result in formal sanctions, they can still produce disciplinary effects by forcing individuals to justify themselves before inspectors, administrators, or superiors. The targeted person learns that ordinary speech or professional conduct may be reported, while the complainant learns that state institutions can be mobilized in interpersonal or ideological conflict.

This reflects the central dynamic of complaint culture: horizontal policing can become vertical repression, thanks to which the state does not need to monitor every classroom, hospital room, or workplace directly. Instead, citizens and service users can generate reports that activate bureaucratic oversight. This dynamic is especially consequential when institutions are highly responsive to complaints, because responsiveness teaches complainants that reporting is effective and teaches targets that nonconformity, ambiguity, or even misunderstanding can carry professional risks. In this sense, complaint culture incorporates everyday surveillance into bureaucratic governance, transforming ordinary interactions into potential sites of administrative discipline.

4.2.1.4. Shadow reporting

Participants highlighted the prevalence of shadow reporting, where accusations do not trigger formal bureaucratic procedures but still hold individuals accountable. Even without an official complaint, these reports can carry serious consequences. In such cases, influential figures or power holders with ties to the ruling party leverage their influence to apply pressure through administrative channels. Bypassing formal procedures, they use their authority to intimidate and discipline the reported individuals, further reinforcing the broader climate of repression.

Highlighting the prevalence of shadow complaints, HealthStaff2 explained that individuals bypass official channels simply because they have personal connections with an institution's director. These unofficial complaints, which remain unregistered and do not follow formal procedures, are often used to push illegitimate or unreasonable demands or to make unfounded accusations. Through this informal reporting mechanism, individuals with influence apply pressure without accountability, further entrenching arbitrary decision-making. HealthStaff2 says:

> Abuse is truly at its peak. Because through informal complaints, improper demands are made—often leveraging personal connections with the institution's director. They call and say, "The employees treated me this way," but without going through the official complaint process. This way, irregular and baseless complaints emerge—not just baseless ones, but also ones that are improper. For example, someone comes in and makes a request. When you refuse, citing legal boundaries and your rights, they bypass the formal process and involve higher-ups to pressure you into fulfilling their demands. Unfortunately, these go unrecorded (11 September 2024).

Beyond personal connections, an unofficial shadow reporting system operates through individuals affiliated with the ruling party. Unionist and teacher EduUnionRep1 elaborates on how internal disciplinary and oversight mechanisms in the education sector have been politicized through party-aligned denunciation networks. She explains that under AKP rule, traditional bureaucratic oversight, once grounded in state regulations, has been replaced by a dual system of control: one formal and the other informal, where party-aligned actors monitor, report, and influence administrative outcomes outside official regulatory channels.

The informal control is enforced by party-affiliated individuals embedded within schools, such as parents who are AKP members, who monitor and report perceived ideological deviations. These denunciations bypass standard complaint procedures, triggering politically motivated investigations and disciplinary actions that prioritize party loyalty over professional or legal standards. According to EduUnionRep1, this shift has turned internal oversight in educational institutions into a tool of political surveillance and control, eroding neutrality in public administration and fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship among educators.

EduUnionRep1 illustrated this informal yet structured mechanism of surveillance and denunciation with one of the incidents they personally experienced. She recounted how routine discussions about school problems, such as safety concerns arising from altered class schedules due to an earthquake-damaged school, can quickly turn into politically charged situations:

> During a parent meeting, some parents expressed concerns and sought solutions, while others remained passive, observing. When I encouraged parents to direct their complaints to official education authorities for a tangible solution, a politically affiliated parent—a local party representative—intervened. This individual shifted the discussion by framing my remarks as criticism of the government, escalating the situation into accusations of defamation or anti-government sentiment (21 August 2024).

EduUnionRep1 later discovered that these politically aligned individuals report such incidents through party channels rather than formal complaint systems like CİMER. She explained that these reports travel through the party's internal network, ultimately leading to official investigations against her. This unfolded when party officials, such as district or provincial heads, raised concerns in internal meetings and then communicated them to education authorities through informal means. This communication may take the form of direct conversations, phone calls, or written messages instructing officials to "handle the situation" regarding a particular individual.

EduUnionRep1 recounted additional instances where shadow reporting occurred at the student level, leading to her being flagged and targeted through party affiliates without an official complaint, based on ideologically driven denunciations. However, informal reporting through party-affiliated individuals is not limited to ideological cases. It is also used to exert pressure for personal gain, leveraging personal influence and circumventing institutional rules. Secondary school principal SchoolStaff2 described an incident in K. province where a high-ranking official attempted to pressure the school administration into altering attendance records for their child, who had exceeded the permitted absence limit. Despite the official's insistence, the school administration refused to manipulate the records, adhering strictly to regulations. In retaliation, the official filed a complaint against the administration, accusing them of negligence and errors in recording absences. This triggered an official investigation targeting the school principal and vice-principals. Although ministry inspectors ultimately cleared the administration of any wrongdoing, the official leveraged their position throughout the process, exerting influence to advance their case.

Within the complaint culture, shadow reporting operates as a parallel system of control, bypassing official bureaucratic procedures while still imposing serious consequences on individuals. This mechanism is particularly potent when wielded by individuals with political or institutional influence, such as those affiliated with the ruling party, who leverage their connections to pressure administrators and enforce ideological discipline or self-interest.

4.2.1.5. From managerial oversight to mandated exposure: Administrators naming names

In the reporting regime consolidated around the coup attempt, administrators were positioned as gatekeepers of institutional purification, responsible not only for implementing sanctions but also for identifying and assessing suspected personnel within their own organisations. This process had already begun before the coup: Prime Ministry Circular No. 2016/4 instructed authorised superiors to take administrative action against public employees maintaining specified relations with organisations and structures considered threats to national security.

After the coup, this responsibility was considerably expanded. Decree-Law No. 667 distributed affiliation assessment across institution-specific bodies and senior authorities, while sectoral instructions translated this authority into concrete identification exercises. YÖK, for example, instructed universities to urgently assess personnel suspected of connection to, support for, or assistance to the "Parallel State Structure," take action against those identified, and report the results upwards by a fixed deadline. Personnel suspected of supporting the organisation were also to be removed from positions considered capable of creating "managerial vulnerability" (Anadolu Agency, 2016).The Ministries of Education and Health similarly announced large-scale exercises to identify personnel connected to FETÖ/PDY (MEB, 2016; Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2016). These measures provide an institutional backdrop to participants' accounts of administrators being required to "name names": managerial reporting was not simply an informal response to political pressure, but became embedded within a broader administrative process of personnel identification and assessment.

EduUnionRep1 recounted an official directive from the Directorate of Education instructing school principals to report teachers suspected of affiliation with terrorist organizations. In her account, these reports were often shaped by perceptions of ideological or political orientation rather than by formal investigation or criminal evidence. She emphasized that many colleagues were dismissed despite never having been investigated, charged, or tried, while her own experience depended heavily on the judgement of individual principals:

> When institutions were naming names after the coup, my biggest advantage was that not all school principals had been replaced by partisan ones yet—some neutral ones still remained. At the time, my principal was a union member who refused to report anyone, saying, 'There are no terrorists in my school; I cannot do this to anyone.' Later, a new principal was appointed. He was ideological but not partisan, and after getting to know me, he admitted, 'When I arrived, I had strong prejudices against you because I was warned to be cautious about you. Over time, I understood the reality. I was pressured weekly to provide something against you, but I had nothing to report. You do your job well and follow all the rules. If I hadn't resisted, your name would have likely been on those lists' (21 August 2024).

EduUnionRep1's account shows how the formally distributed responsibility for personnel identification became dependent on managerial judgement at the organisational level. The legal and administrative framework established the obligation and authority to assess suspect affiliations, but it could not predetermine how individual administrators interpreted those categories or whom they chose to report. Managerial oversight was thereby transformed into a potential mechanism of exposure: the willingness of a principal or superior to report, resist, or remain silent could determine whether suspicion entered the institutional assessment process.

The arbitrariness of administrative discretion during purges was a recurring theme in union members' accounts. Reflecting on the dismissal of 4,500 public sector workers due to their trade union affiliations—900 on behalf of whom his branch pursued legal action for—trade

unionist HealthUnionRep1 emphasized that no evidence was ever found against these individuals: no investigations, no trials, nothing. Yet, they were dismissed solely based on institutional discretion. This, he explained, meant that "administrators became informants, labeling individuals," and that "names were reported without question, leading to immediate dismissals without any investigation." Other union members echoed this pattern, underscoring that the purges were largely driven by administrative denunciations, which were particularly weaponized against members of opposition trade unions. Individuals were targeted not for any tangible oppositional activity but simply for their membership.

Several participants described a further consequence of this administrative responsibility: the denunciation of inaction. Where identifying and acting against suspect personnel had become part of managerial responsibility, administrators could themselves become vulnerable when they were perceived as failing to participate. HealthUnionRep1 recalled informally learning that one administrator had reported another for failing to act against him, citing his union activity, alleged terrorist affiliation, and social media posts as justification. MunicipalUnionRep1 described a similar case in which two investigators refused to sign a report because they considered the proposed sanction disproportionate; according to his account, the lead investigator retaliated by reporting them to the governor.

In the highlighted cases, administrators not only denounce their subordinates but also turn on each other for failing to participate in denunciations, illustrating how, in an environment where reporting is mandated, inaction itself becomes grounds for being reported. Echoing the dynamics established within the judiciary, this mechanism creates a self-reinforcing cycle of repression, where individuals are targeted not only for their actions but also for their silence. The internal conflicts among investigators further illustrate that repression is not purely top-down; it is also outsourced to competition and strategic positioning within bureaucratic structures, escalating denunciations even among those enforcing the system. HealthUnionRep1 explains the reason:

> We encountered many cases where people turned on each other just to secure someone else's position. Individuals were targeted and sacrificed simply for their seats and titles, with certain dismissals entirely driven by this motive. When decree laws began being issued, workplace administrators sought to ingratiate themselves with higher authorities and the government. They wrote reports alleging that specific individuals had connections or associations [with illegal groups] and used these reports to denounce them. In some cases, colleagues also targeted opposition-aligned union leaders like us, submitting denunciation letters to the purging committees. As a result, these individuals were dismissed (06 August 2024).

HealthUnionRep1's reflections reveal how ambition-driven denunciations played a significant role in purging union members. This view was widely shared by other participants, who emphasized career advancement as a key motive for administrators to denounce oppositional public officials, particularly union members who were easily identifiable. More broadly, these

accounts illustrate how a culture of reporting is not only embedded in the social fabric but also institutionalized through administrative hierarchies. The political discourse that openly cultivated and mandated the purging of so-called "enemies of the state" materializes within institutions, where administrators are expected to surveil, pursue, and purge employees through denunciations, translating ideological imperatives into bureaucratic practice.

This section examined how a complaint culture was established institutionally and cultivated socially through centralized reporting mechanisms, an emerging entitlement mindset, the expansion of horizontal policing, the operation of shadow reporting, and the practice of administrators naming individuals. Together, these dynamics show how reporting became embedded in everyday bureaucratic routines, transforming oversight into exposure and turning suspicion, affiliation, and loyalty into administratively actionable matters. Building on this analysis, the following section shifts focus to how citizens employ the same reporting channels to pressure public servants, producing a form of horizontal repression in which citizen complaints trigger investigations, generate workload pressures, and create an atmosphere of intimidation within public institutions.

4.1.2. Citizen-led repression: Pressuring government offices through the Presidency

The previous section examined how reporting became embedded in bureaucratic routines through centralized petitioning, complaint culture, horizontal policing, shadow reporting, and administrative naming practices. This section turns to how citizens use these channels to pressure public institutions and public-sector workers. The analysis draws primarily on accounts from public employees, trade unionists, and staff responsible for processing CİMER and related applications in health and education institutions. These accounts illuminate how public employees experience the reporting mechanism in practice, particularly where repeated, unfounded, or disproportionate complaints generate administrative pressure, workload, intimidation, and emotional strain.

4.1.2.1. Abuse of petitioning

Participants described two main forms of petition misuse. The first is procedural misuse, where individuals submit repeated applications, circulate the same grievance through multiple channels, or escalate a minor issue in order to pressure institutions. The second is substantive misuse, where petitions contain unfounded claims, inappropriate demands, or unjust complaints that nevertheless require administrative processing. In both forms, the problem is not petitioning itself, which remains a legitimate democratic and administrative right. Rather, the issue is how a highly responsive and centralized complaint system can make even trivial, repetitive, or unfounded applications bureaucratically consequential.

Participants shared numerous examples illustrating procedural misuse of the petitioning system. SchoolStaff2 described how her school received seven separate petitions requesting the removal of trees obstructing a resident's window, which was a personal grievance repeatedly reintroduced through formal channels. Likewise, HospitalStaff2 noted recurring petitions demanding the removal of a single lamp in the hospital yard. These examples demonstrate how routine or trivial issues are escalated into formal complaints insistently and repetitively, burdening institutions with matters unrelated to their core responsibilities.

Participants also shared cases illustrating the substantive misuse. HospitalStaff1 recounted complaints about trivial issues, such as staff members drinking coffee during working hours, as well as unjust petitions filed against doctors for failing to greet patients with a smile. In some cases, these could escalate into formal investigations, even when unfounded. SchoolStaff2 was reported for marking a student as absent, triggering an official inquiry. In another instance, a complaint targeted the school bell music for being *"inappropriate"* even though it complied with ministry-approved standards. SchoolStaff1 was denounced by a parent who falsely claimed his son was denied meals despite the fact that, as a non-boarding student, he was not entitled to them. Moreover, abuse through excessive grievance extended to those who are handling them. HospitalStaff1, the staff member managing the CİMER platform in his department, shared how they were reported simply because a petitioner was dissatisfied with the resolution of their complaint, remarking: "They reported me to myself."

4.1.2.2. Victimization of public sector workers

Participants highlighted how the exploitation of the petition system disproportionately victimizes public-sector workers, particularly in the health and education sectors. Officials in these fields frequently face unwarranted complaints, procedural harassment, and excessive scrutiny, often leading to investigations or disciplinary actions that disrupt their professional lives. Victimization unfolds as pressure from citizens and administrators, workload, intimidation, and ill treatment.

Pressure emerged as a prominent theme across all accounts. Public-sector workers described being caught between pressure from above and pressure from below. Complaints submitted through CİMER are taken seriously not only because they come from citizens, but also because they are routed through a platform associated with the Presidency. SchoolStaff1 explained:

> CİMER is a platform taken very seriously by both the administration and patients. Everyone is wary of it. Because of its wide reach, it carries significant weight. The fact that it bears the name Presidency makes it even more influential (20 August 2024)

The dual pressure created by the *presidential effect* embedded in CİMER was a recurring theme in participants' accounts. Many agreed that "people believe that through CİMER, they can pressure institutions via the Presidency" (HealthStaff2, 2024), resulting in disproportionate vulnerability and victimization of individuals. Within the complaint-driven framework, CİMER functions as both a tool of public surveillance over civil servants and a mechanism reinforcing top-down administrative control. As a result, public sector workers find themselves under heightened scrutiny, not only from their superiors but also from ordinary citizens who perceive CİMER as a direct channel to the Presidency. This *presidential effect* amplifies the significance of complaints, creating a climate of fear in which bureaucrats feel compelled to respond with excessive caution. As a result, the system transforms governance into a highly politicized and reactive space, where institutions operate under constant pressure from both hierarchical oversight and public denunciations.

Participants also emphasized the workload generated by the reporting mechanism. While the reporting mechanism already imposes a heavy workload due to its bureaucratic complexity, requiring officials to process, respond to, and investigate all complaints, the system's abuse has further amplified this burden. Consequently, public sector workers are frequently assigned irrelevant or excessive tasks, diverting their focus from their primary responsibilities.

HealthStaff1 describes how, in addition to their regular responsibilities, they are tasked with overseeing two separate reporting channels, CİMER and SABİM, leading to burnout from constantly responding to inappropriate or trivial demands. SchoolStaff2 shares an example of how they were forced to personally investigate a complaint about trees obstructing a resident's view. Instead of this matter being handled through the appropriate channels, the participant had to visit the Regional Forestry Directorate in person to determine which authority was responsible for removing the trees. Similarly, HealthStaff2 explains how unnecessary, inappropriate, and unjust complaints result in investigative harassment in the healthcare sector. HealthStaff2 explained that this not only victimizes healthcare workers but also negatively impacts the public, as excessive administrative investigations disrupt the delivery of essential medical services:

> I summoned a doctor and a nurse for an investigation due to a complaint, and work in that department immediately halted because there was no one to replace them. Normally, sufficient suspicion should be required before taking action. But here, no such standard applies—cases proceed the moment a notice arrives, as officials fear potential repercussions for inaction (11 September 2024).

This account illustrates how complaint responsiveness can produce institutional inefficiency and worker victimisation at the same time. The complaint does not only affect the accused worker; it also disrupts service delivery by removing staff from their duties and redirecting

institutional energy toward investigation. HealthUnionRep1 described this as a deepening of already excessive work: HealthUnionRep1 described this as a deepening of already excessive work:

> To avoid these complaints and investigations, the burden of excessive work deepens, forcing people to work even harder. Despite experiencing burnout, they continue to engage with patients (06 August 2024).

Here, the mechanism in which the reporting can produce a form of double burden, becomes visible: public-sector workers must perform their ordinary duties while also managing the risk, paperwork, and emotional strain of complaint-driven investigations.

Beyond workload, participants described reporting as a source of intimidation. The key issue is not only whether complaints result in punishment, but the fear that they might trigger an investigation. EduUnionRep1 argues that even if most reports do not escalate into full investigations, the mere possibility that one complaint might trigger an official inquiry is enough to instill anxiety among teachers. This turns reporting into a form of social leverage, where individuals use the threat of complaints to pressure or discipline educators. Even when teachers follow regulations, they remain vulnerable to being reported simply because someone dislikes their actions. The mere mention of *"I will report you to CİMER"* acts as a warning signal, discouraging teachers from enforcing rules or asserting authority.

SchoolStaff2's accounts reveal the pervasive intimidation fueled by complaint anxiety, underscoring the growing fear among teachers, administrators, and civil servants within the Ministry of National Education:

> Over the past five years, the anxiety of 'What if something happens to me?' has notably risen. The worry of 'Will something happen to me?' or 'Will I face an investigation too?' has become widespread. (11 November 2024).

Similarly, HospitalStaff1 explains how this complaint anxiety affects workplace interactions, where her even ordinary calls cause unease since she is overseeing CİMER in her own unit.

> When I call colleagues from other departments, people get anxious because I'm responsible for SABİM and CİMER. Even when I make regular personal phone calls, people feel fearful and uneasy (20 August 2024).

These accounts show how reporting produces disciplinary effects even without formal sanction. The reporting mechanism becomes internalized as a permanent possibility, shaping how workers speak, act, and interact with citizens and colleagues. In this sense, citizen-led reporting operates as horizontal repression not only through actual complaints, but also through the anticipatory anxiety that complaints generate.

Finally, participants described mistreatment from members of the public in everyday interactions with the reporting system. This was especially visible among frontline workers

who handle complaints directly or interact with citizens face-to-face. HospitalStaff1 described the emotional burden of being the main point of contact for applicants:

> It's a highly stressful job. At times, we even face insults. Since we are the main point of contact, applicants vent their frustrations to us when they feel they can't express them to anyone else. *(20 August 2024).*

Shared accounts highlight an important dynamic of how complaint system is perceived by citizens as a channel through which they can vent their aggression. This is a pattern which echoes the "Meckerkultur" phenomenon in the German Democratic Republic, conceptualized to describe the complaints lodged to let off steam (Staadt, 1996). Within this scope, one particularly troubling pattern expressed by most participants is the use of complaints as a tool for retaliation. HealthUnionRep2 shares:

> One Friday, a child with a metabolic condition was admitted to the hospital. The mother requested a special diet, but the cafeteria refused due to shortages. I escalated the issue and ensured the diet was provided, even if it was not my responsibility. Later, while handling an emergency, the mother inquired about the soup's ingredients. I told her I'd assist her shortly. The next day, I was informed of a CİMER complaint against me—despite my efforts, I was still reported (06 August 2024).

The interviews reveal a dynamic in which reporting has increasingly become a channel for public aggression, a tool for retaliation, and a source of mistreatment for frontline workers rather than serving its intended purpose of constructive oversight. The absence of safeguards against misuse leaves public employees vulnerable to baseless, unjust, and unrealistic complaints, leading to stress and burnout. Ultimately, instead of enhancing accountability, the system functions as a pressure valve for public discontent, redirecting frustration from systemic issues toward those tasked with providing essential services. This theme was central to trade unionists' evaluations of the system.

4.2. From Rhetoric to Routine: Bureaucratic Enactment of Political Discourse

The previous section examined how the reporting mechanism operates through the bureaucratic apparatus, generating repression within the public sector and beyond. It showed that the reporting regime was first institutionalized through bureaucrats and administrators, who were mandated to identify, report, and expose individuals deemed suspicious within their own institutions. It then demonstrated how the centralization of reporting mechanisms, particularly through CİMER, blurred the boundaries between petitioning, denunciation, and oversight, fostering a wider complaint culture. This institutional engineering produced a socially embedded reporting culture in which reporting became routine behaviour. Ordinary citizens internalized the logic of complaint, developed an entitlement to demand state intervention, and used formal and informal channels to exert pressure on public employees. What was formally presented as a democratic channel for citizen grievances thus became a

mechanism for targeting, disciplining, and intimidating oppositional or nonconforming voices within the public sector.

Viewed in light of the macro-level findings on political discourse, this reporting regime reveals how rhetoric was enacted institutionally and reshaped social reality. The hidden-enemy narrative, first developed through the discourse of alleged Gülenist infiltration and later extended to other forms of political dissent, promoted and justified the identification, exposure, purge, and punishment of suspect actors. Through centralized systems such as CİMER, this discourse was translated into routine administrative practice. High state responsiveness further reinforced reporting behaviour by signalling to citizens that complaints would be received, processed, and acted upon. The result was a reporting culture marked by both vertical and horizontal surveillance, in which the task of identifying enemies was outsourced to society at large.

Public sector workers became especially vulnerable to denunciations from colleagues, superiors, and citizens alike. They could be targeted not only for alleged political affiliation or ideological misalignment, but also through ordinary service-related grievances that acquired punitive force within the reporting system. The disproportionate weaponization of reporting against marginalized and oppositional groups illustrates how the state's policy of purging institutions of "unwanted" elements was implemented in practice, echoing the signals already embedded in political rhetoric. At the same time, the pressure placed on public employees by the overwhelming volume of complaints demonstrates how the rhetoric of "service" mobilized citizens into participating in repression. Taken together, discourse framed the enemy, bureaucracy processed suspicion, and reporting embedded repression in the everyday functioning of state institutions.

5. Conclusion: Patterns of repression through the reporting mechanism

The meso-level analysis demonstrates that the judiciary and bureaucracy serve as the primary institutional domains of the reporting mechanism, producing repression against dissenters, alleged affiliates, and public sector employees. Through strategic institutional engineering, legal and bureaucratic frameworks have been restructured to align state machinery with the regime's political agenda, transforming these domains into facilitators of a participatory reporting mechanism. In this process, the enemy-from-within narrative constructed in political rhetoric became institutionally actionable: suspicion, affiliation, loyalty, and denunciatory claims were translated into legal, judicial, and administrative procedures. This logic then diffused into a distinct form of weaponized oversight, whereby ordinary citizens used complaint channels to

target public servants for perceived bureaucratic misconduct, ideological nonconformity, or political suspicion.

The top-down institutional arrangements effectively facilitated the state policy in cracking down on dissent and tightened oversight over bureaucracy. In turn, the society was actively conditioned for participation both through discursive means and reinforcement, which I conceptualize as *responsive conditioning*: by establishing accessible reporting channels and ensuring high state responsiveness to citizen complaints, the regime effectively mobilizes the public as an extension of its surveillance apparatus. This strategy serves a dual purpose: it addresses the regime's information problem by crowdsourcing intelligence from society while simultaneously entrenching citizens in the very mechanisms of repression. This was especially significant in the context of the post-coup witch-hunt, where the alleged embeddedness of enemies within institutions and ordinary social relations made identification a central task of governance.

By empowering and incentivizing individuals to monitor and report on their peers, the state expands policing beyond formal institutions, integrating repression into the fabric of everyday life. Denunciations directly result in repression for the accused, even when they do not lead to serious consequences, while the broader practice of surveillance generates an omnipresent sense of fear and suspicion. The psychological weight of being watched, whether real or perceived, contributes to widespread self-censorship and social fragmentation, further reinforcing authoritarian control.

What emerges from this system is a form of "participatory repression" (Bergemann, 2017) in which ordinary citizens become active agents in enforcing state dominance. As Gellately (1996) argues, involvement in repression at the grassroots level integrates society into the terror system, making repression not just a top-down imposition but a collectively sustained phenomenon. This dual effect, that is targeted repression through denunciations and generalized repression through pervasive surveillance, ensures that authoritarian control is both deeply embedded and self-perpetuating. Yet, unlike the totalitarian settings examined by these scholars, where participation was mobilized through ideological or coercive means, the Turkish case reveals a bureaucratically normalized and procedurally mediated form of participation. Through institutionalized complaint channels, denunciation is reframed as a legitimate form of civic participation, normalized within everyday practices of complaining and problem-solving. This extends the concept of participatory repression to hybrid regimes, suggesting a subtler, routinized form of complicity that blurs the boundary between participation and repression, extending the concept beyond its classical formulations. In this

model, compliance and control are embedded not only in overt ideological campaigns or coercive institutions, but also in routine administrative practices that convert civic engagement into a mechanism of authoritarian governance.

Chapter VII. Implementing the Social Contract: Co-optation and legitimacy through the reporting mechanism

1. Introduction

Drawing on the cases of single-party communist regimes in Bulgaria and China, Martin Dimitrov (2014, 2023) developed a theoretical model of governance that helps explain mass denunciations in these contexts. Accordingly, these regimes forged a quasi-social contract with their citizens, premised on an exchange of information for service delivery. Citizens provided political support and intelligence, while the state responded with goods, services, and visible responsiveness. Complaint mechanisms played a central role in this arrangement: they alleviated the regime's information problem, reduced public dissatisfaction by offering solutions, and simultaneously functioned as instruments of control and co-optation. This chapter argues that, when adapted to the institutional and political specificities of Turkey's authoritarian hybrid regime, this model helps illuminate the reporting mechanism's role in co-optation and legitimation.

The second component of the macro-level analysis showed how this contractarian logic is articulated discursively through the rhetoric of the Nation and narratives of service. Building on this, the meso-level analysis examines how the reporting mechanism operationalizes this logic institutionally. This chapter focuses primarily on how the system co-opts citizens through the judiciary and the bureaucracy. In the judiciary, co-optation operates through material incentives and legal protections for denouncers, as well as ideological gatekeeping and the elevation of "public interest" in judicial reasoning. In the bureaucracy, it takes shape through a hyper-centralized petitioning system that promises problem-solving, responsiveness, and proxy accountability, shielding citizens from bureaucratic wrongdoing. Through these channels, the regime absorbs millions of complaints, requests, and denunciations each year, using them to consolidate control over institutions and society.

Alongside co-optation, the reporting mechanism also generates important legitimation effects. These operate through two main pathways. First, denunciations are embedded within a constitutional and legal framework that frames petitioning and reporting as civic rights and duties, allowing the state to present the mechanism as participatory and procedurally grounded. Second, a perception of due process is cultivated through selective justice that produces occasional favourable outcomes, visible bureaucratic responsiveness, and targeted legal reforms such as the regulation of unfounded denunciations. These measures project

restraint and fairness while masking the political instrumentalization of reporting. Combined with the high public uptake of platforms like CİMER, which is reinterpreted as evidence of popular endorsement, the system becomes not only a tool of co-optation but also a vehicle of procedural legitimation. The reporting mechanism thus operates on a dual register: while easing public dissatisfaction and drawing citizens into the regime's moral and political order, it also reinforces the perception that state action is lawful, justified, and accountable. In this way, co-optation and legitimation become mutually reinforcing pillars of the reporting system.

This chapter examines how the social contract is operationalized through the reporting mechanism to co-opt society and generate procedural legitimation. It first shows how the judiciary is deployed as an instrument of co-optation through ideological gatekeeping, material incentives, and legal protections for denouncers. It then demonstrates how the bureaucracy performs a similar role through a centralized petitioning system that positions citizens as stakeholders, enables their participation in governance, at least in principle, and promises responsiveness and accountability. The chapter subsequently examines how these practices acquire a veneer of legality and due process through constitutional framing, selective justice, and targeted legislative reforms. The analysis draws on interviews, legal and institutional documents, official materials, and secondary literature to show how these elements work together. In doing so, the chapter traces how the reporting mechanism simultaneously draws citizens into the regime's governance practices and legitimates its exercise of authority.

2. Co-optation through law and judiciary

2.1. Law as the protector of public order and morality

The Turkish Penal Code contains a proactive model of state intervention for offences framed as threats to social order, public safety, the nation, or the state. In such cases, prosecutors may initiate investigations *ex officio*, acting not on behalf of an individual victim but in the name of society or the public interest. These provisions cover a broad spectrum of acts categorized under offences against society, the nation, and the state, reflecting the legal framework's strong emphasis on safeguarding collective welfare, public morality, and institutional authority.

This proactive framework has an important co-optative dimension. As discussed in the previous chapter, broadly defined and ambiguous provisions give legal authorities wide discretion to pursue political opponents under the language of public order and collective protection. At the same time, this legal framing can help align citizens with the state by presenting legal intervention as a defence of shared values, social harmony, and moral order. When acts are defined as harmful not merely to individuals but to "society," "the nation," or

"the state," citizens are encouraged to understand denunciation and prosecution as forms of civic protection rather than merely as coercive practices.

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of the Penal Code's poor legal quality and the erosion of judicial impartiality, this section argues that the legal framework consolidates authoritarian control while also contributing to its legitimation. It does so by translating coercion into a language of collective security and moral duty. In this framing, loyal supporters can see the law as defending their values, while dissenters are positioned as threats to the social fabric. The coercive effect of the law, therefore, lies not only in punishment but in its capacity to make punitive action appear protective, necessary, and publicly justified.

2.1.1. Ideological gatekeeping through the judiciary

The previous section examined how offenses categorized under *Crimes Against Society* and *Crimes Against the Nation and the State* serve as key instruments for repressing dissent. Legal experts highlighted that denunciations often trigger state intervention in these domains, and that the broad, flexible interpretation of legal provisions allows authorities to undermine civil rights through ideological alignment or prosecutorial pressure.

However, repression is not the sole function. The analysis reveals that while the legal framework looms over regime opponents like the *sword of Damocles*, it simultaneously serves as a powerful instrument of societal co-optation. By selectively deploying the law, the regime not only suppresses opposition but also cultivates loyalty within its support base. This dual function is particularly evident in how *public interest* is strategically invoked in legal proceedings. On one hand, it is weaponized to justify crackdowns on dissent, framing repressive measures as necessary for national security and stability. On the other hand, it serves as a tool to appeal to supporters, presenting the state as the guardian of the *nation* and its defining elements, religion, nationalism, values, morality, as well as societal peace and security. In this way, the judiciary becomes a ground for *lawfare* that operates both as a tool of repression and a mechanism for political consolidation, mobilizing its base while silencing adversaries.

The co-optative function of law lies in its capacity to translate ideological boundaries into legal categories. When courts and prosecutors act in the name of "society," "the nation," "public order," or "public morality," repression can be framed not as political punishment but as protection of the collective. In such cases, public interest can become a flexible legal language through which some grievances are validated while others are dismissed. In this way, the judiciary can operate as a mechanism of ideological gatekeeping: it protects the values, symbols, and identities associated with the state-defined Nation while marking dissenting actors as threats to social order.

Legal experts described this dynamic in cases where collective petitions, public outrage, or claims of moral injury shaped the judicial response. Their accounts suggest that public interest is not always invoked as an abstract or neutral principle. Rather, it can operate as a legal language through which the grievances of regime-aligned social groups are recognized and validated. This is especially visible in cases involving the offence of *inciting hatred and hostility* among the public, which legal experts identified as one of the clearest categories through which judicial co-optation operates. In their accounts, this provision enables the regime to appeal to its support base through law, by treating claims of offence against public harmony, religious values, national symbols, or social peace as matters requiring legal intervention. Participants referred to cases in which denunciations transformed discomfort or ideological disagreement into legally actionable claims. In this way, lawfare does not merely punish dissent; it also rewards loyal constituencies by affirming their moral grievances as public interests, while exposing dissenters, secular voices, leftists, Kurds, and other marginalized actors to legal scrutiny.

This is the mechanism through which "public interest" becomes a strategy of judicial co-optation: collective complaints allow contested expression to be recast as a threat to public peace, morality, or social cohesion. This dynamic was visible in cases discussed earlier. Lawyer1 recounted an anecdote in which collective petitions were interpreted as a *disruption of public harmony* to justify the prosecution of a college student who had allegedly insulted religious values by mimicking an imam. In another case, Lawyer1 described a coordinated denunciation campaign by alumni of religious schools that led to the prosecution of a well-known pop singer for *insulting a segment of society*. This mechanism also emerged from micro-level interviews. One participant described being detained after thousands of complaints had been submitted against him as a result of online petitioning campaign for "insulting religion". Although he was initially released after giving his statement, he was later arrested, with the judge explicitly referring to the volume of complaints and noting that public outcry had to be taken into account.

The case illustrates a similar co-optive dynamic through which public-interest provisions converted collective grievance into legal action. Beyond reporting an offence, collective denunciations shape the judicial trajectory by transforming public outcry into a procedural ground on which the case proceeds. More importantly, they helped produce the appearance of a public injury that the state is then called upon to remedy. Even when complaints do not independently establish guilt, their sheer number was treated as a sign of social harm, public disturbance, or collective demand for punishment. In this way, denunciations transform

accusation into institutional pressure: they generate the appearance of public injury, shape judicial reasoning, and legitimize coercive measures such as detention or arrest.

Strong state responsiveness to charges such as *inciting hatred and hostility*, *insulting religious values*, or *disturbing public harmony*, therefore, contributes to ideological gatekeeping through the judiciary. By selectively activating the language of public interest, the legal system can reinforce the boundaries of the state-defined Nation: a collective identity shaped by Sunni Muslim belonging, Turkish nationalism, moral conservatism, and loyalty to state authority. Those positioned within this moral-political community appear as citizens whose values deserve protection, while those outside it are more easily framed as threats, provocateurs, or sources of disorder. In this sense, denunciations do not simply activate legal provisions; they help define whose feelings count as public injury and whose speech can be treated as a threat to collective order.

Lawyer7's account of a case involving police violence and social media criticism illustrates how this ideological boundary is reproduced through judicial response to a denunciation. In this case, the denouncer was not an ordinary citizen but the General Police Headquarters, which filed a complaint against a human rights lawyer who criticized police violence on social media:

> A recent case highlights how denunciations operate. A police officer was filmed violently detaining a TAYAD (an organization for the families of political prisoners) member, touching her inappropriately. Despite clear footage, he was acquitted. Meanwhile, a human rights lawyer who criticized the incident on Twitter—without naming the officer or even stating he was a police officer—was prosecuted. The post simply condemned violence against women. The denunciation came not from the public, but from the General Police Headquarters (17 October 2024).

Law enforcement's ideological posture toward politically marginalized groups, as reflected in this case, emerged as a recurring theme across citizen and expert interviews. Participants repeatedly described the police not merely as a coercive arm of the state, but as one of the regime's ideological core institutions: an actor closely associated with right-wing nationalism, hostility toward marginalized political groups, and the enforcement of dominant moral-political boundaries. These accounts are consistent with broader analyses of policing under the AKP, which show that law enforcement has become central to the authoritarian management of dissent rather than functioning as a neutral public-security institution (Yildizcan & Ozpinar, 2013). The frequent use of police violence against Kurdish, leftist, feminist, LGBTI+, and other oppositional groups, alongside patterns of impunity for state violence, has also been widely reported (Human Rights Watch, 2024) . These accounts and reports reflect a broader political order in which the coercive apparatus protects nationalist-conservative boundaries while disciplining those positioned outside them.

What makes this case analytically significant, therefore, is not only the asymmetry of the judicial response, but what this asymmetry protects and reproduces. On one side, a police officer filmed using violence against a member of TAYAD, a politically marginalized organization associated with prisoners' families, was acquitted despite visual evidence. On the other side, a human rights lawyer who criticized the incident in general terms, without naming the officer or explicitly identifying him as police, faced prosecution after a denunciation by the General Police Headquarters. The case, therefore, shows how denunciation can operate not only from below, through ordinary citizens, but also from within state institutions themselves.

This asymmetry illustrates the judiciary's role as an ideological gatekeeper. Rather than applying the law neutrally to both state violence and criticism of state violence, the judicial process protects the coercive and ideological core of the regime while criminalizing speech that challenges it. In doing so, legal institutions mark the boundaries of acceptable criticism and reproduce a hierarchy of protection: violence by state actors is shielded from accountability, while public criticism of that violence is reframed as a prosecutable offence. The judiciary therefore does more than punish dissent. It signals which actors embody the regime's protected ideological order, whose conduct will be insulated from scrutiny, and whose speech can be rendered legally vulnerable. In this sense, ideological gatekeeping operates by protecting the regime's coercive base, validating its moral-political hierarchy, and warning dissenting actors that criticism of state violence falls outside the boundaries of legitimate public speech.

As these cases demonstrate, public-interest provisions operate as co-optive measures in which broadly worded offences allow complaints about critical speech to be translated into allegations of collective injury. Through ideological gatekeeping, public grievance is manufactured, amplified, and converted into legally consequential action. The judiciary becomes an arena where ideological belonging is protected, dissent is disciplined, and the boundaries of the state-defined Nation are legally reinforced.

2.1.2. Responsive conditioning

Selective legal enforcement not only defines the boundaries of the state ideology but also actively reinforces it. Building on the preceding discussion of ideological gatekeeping, this section identifies a mechanism I call *responsive conditioning*: the process through which state responsiveness to ideologically framed denunciations teaches citizens which grievances are likely to be recognized, validated, and acted upon. When reports lead to investigations, prosecutions, disciplinary procedures, or other visible consequences, citizens may come to see denunciation as an effective means of activating state power. In this way, responsiveness can

condition further reporting by signalling which accusations matter and which categories of people are more vulnerable to punitive attention.

This mechanism should be understood as an analytical inference drawn from the convergence of several forms of evidence: the macro-level discourse that frames citizens as responsible for protecting the Nation, the legal categories that make certain accusations actionable, and participants' accounts of how denunciations produce institutional consequences in practice. Rather than suggesting that all citizens report for ideological reasons and that all reports are rewarded, the mechanism captures how a responsive reporting system can encourage participation when citizens perceive that their complaints are taken seriously and that the state is willing to act on them.

Lawyer1 reflected on this dynamic by explaining how responsiveness can validate denunciatory action and encourage citizens to understand reporting as a contribution to the state and nation:

> The regime encourages denunciations through responsiveness. When a report triggers legal action, people read it as validation: something was done because of their initiative. Those with informal ties to the authorities may receive hidden rewards, while ordinary citizens see lawsuits and prosecutions as proof that their denunciations matter. These outcomes convince them they are providing a valuable service to their country and nation. There is no bounty or official prize for reporting, but the moral satisfaction is powerful. They believe they have done something good, that they have fulfilled their duty (08 August 2024).

This evaluation explains the mobilizing power of judicial responsiveness on citizens. Beyond repression, the mechanism also serves a psychological function, granting supporters a sense of importance within the state machinery. Lawyer1 underlines the perception that denunciations can generate consequences that may themselves be politically productive: When citizens see their reports yield tangible consequences, this gives citizens a sense that they can participate in defending public order, national security, or moral values through the reporting mechanism. In this way, they feel validated, reinforcing their role as ideological enforcers.

Responsive conditioning therefore links co-optation to participation. Citizens are not simply coerced into silence; some are drawn into the regime's control apparatus by being made to feel that their vigilance matters. This dynamic also connects Chapter 7 to the macro-level discourse analysed earlier: Erdoğan's rhetoric repeatedly framed loyal citizens as the "eyes and ears" of the state and presented vigilance as a duty to the Nation. When this discourse is combined with visible institutional responsiveness, denunciation can appear not merely as accusation, but as civic service. In this sense, responsive conditioning helps normalize societal participation in repression while simultaneously reinforcing the regime's claim that it acts in accordance with public demand, moral order, and national interest.

2.1.3. The pact of alliance on the bench

During the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan's statement that he was "barely keeping the 50% at home" became emblematic of a broader political strategy that positioned supporters and opponents against one another. The statement suggested that his support base could be mobilized against protesters if necessary, and it marked an important moment in the consolidation of a polarized political narrative. Over time, this friend–enemy framing became a recurring feature of Erdoğan's discourse, defining the boundaries of legitimate belonging and positioning critics, secular actors, leftists, Kurdish activists, feminists, queer activists, and other dissenting groups as threats to the Nation.

What began as a rhetorical strategy to pit supporters against opponents soon became a defining feature of Erdoğan's political narrative, resurfacing across different political and social contexts. The narrative took a decisive turn when it evolved into an explicit call for public denunciations, transforming rhetoric into political practice. At the core, however, lies a dynamic more complex than a simple friends-versus-foes dichotomy: a social contract of alliance between Erdoğan and his supporters in which the binary was not merely reiterated but activated, assigning supporters the role of policing and monitoring those cast as enemies. This shift marked a critical moment in Turkey's broader societal transformation, embedding denunciation within everyday political engagement.

This sheds further light on the broader mechanisms at play, demonstrating that conditioning citizens through judicial responsiveness, though central to sustaining participation, is only part of the story. Alongside this, a powerful form of ideological conditioning encourages citizens to act on behalf of the state. Interviews revealed how this discursive dynamic operates in practice: ideological denunciations predominantly originate from the regime's support base, who genuinely perceive reporting as a civic duty. Mobilized by the broader political discourse, these individuals assume responsibility for monitoring deviant behaviour, reporting it to state authorities, and actively demanding punishment. Through the incentives embedded in state rhetoric, denunciation becomes not merely a political act but a moral obligation, deepening the regime's ideological hold over society.

Participants shared anecdotes that illustrate this phenomenon: CourtStaff1 recalled receiving a petition against a pop singer who was denounced for featuring a woman in hijab in a music video. The denouncer demanded punishment on the grounds that the singer had offended covered women. MinistryStaff2 recounted a case in which a citizen reported a random person for pro-Kurdish remarks on Twitter, falsely alleging that the individual worked in the same department as the participant. The report branded the person a terrorist and called for their dismissal. But the ensuing investigation revealed that no such employee existed. Reflecting on

the case, MinistryStaff2 asked: "What if he actually had been employed there?" Similarly, Lawyer1 described how a citizen denounced a journalist based abroad after hearing them comment on a dissident TV channel. Instead of simply changing the channel, the viewer called the hotline, insisting, "This person is making statements about our state; it should be investigated." An official investigation was promptly launched.

These cases illustrate how denunciations can operate as part of an alliance between state demand and societal participation. The denunciations do not simply report alleged wrongdoing; they translate ideological discomfort into a request for state action. They also clarify who is being positioned as outside the moral and political community: Kurds, Gulen members, secular figures, dissident journalists, artists, feminists, queer activists, leftists, and those accused of insulting religion, the president, or the state. In this sense, the denouncer does not merely supply information. They participate in the policing of the boundaries of belonging.

This dynamic is particularly visible in one case shared by Lawyer1. A public figure, referred to here as T., was prosecuted after an anonymous email was sent to the police. The email contained dozens of tweets and described the accused in overtly ideological language:

> These people, who call themselves artists, singers, and actors, have no religion, honour, or morality. They are enemies of the state, the nation, and wisdom. Leftist idolaters. LGBT terrorists. Feminist terrorists. Always the same ones, and so on (08 August 2024).

The significance of this example lies in the vocabulary of denunciation. The denouncer did not present the accusation in narrowly legal terms, but in a moral and ideological register that closely mirrors the regime's enemy-making discourse. The accused was positioned as irreligious, immoral, anti-national, leftist, feminist, queer, and terrorist, categories that collapse political dissent, cultural difference, and moral deviance into a single image of threat. This illustrates how macro-level discourse can be reproduced at the micro-level of denunciatory practice, where citizens adopt and redeploy the state's language of enemies in their own appeals for punishment.

In another case shared by Lawyer1, the denouncer demanded punishment for a citizen who had insulted the president. They presented their action as a patriotic duty, demanding, and specifically requesting anonymity:

> As a patriotic citizen of the Republic of Turkey, I strongly condemn this offensive and disrespectful statement targeting our esteemed President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and I wish to file a complaint while remaining anonymous (08 August 2024).

This example illustrates how denunciation can be framed not as a private act of grievance, but as a civic duty performed in defence of the state and its leader. The denouncer positions themselves as a "patriotic citizen" acting on behalf of the political community, while the

alleged insult to Erdoğan is treated as an offence against collective values and national authority. In this sense, the complaint reflects the personalization of state power: protecting the President becomes synonymous with protecting the state, the nation, and public morality. The request for anonymity is equally significant. It shows how ideological motivation is supported by procedural affordances that reduce the personal risks of reporting. Anonymity makes denunciation safer and more accessible, allowing citizens to participate in punitive action while remaining shielded from social or legal accountability. The case, therefore, demonstrates how patriotic language, personalized loyalty, and procedural protection converge to make denunciation appear both morally justified and institutionally enabled.

The cases illustrate the central role the judiciary plays in operationalizing the regime's social contract with its supporters and with society more broadly. Courts translate the regime's discursive appeals to public order, morality, and the Nation into legal practice by instrumentalizing "public interest" in their proceedings. Through the selective and disproportionate application of the law, the judiciary performs ideological gatekeeping by punishing opponents while shielding or empowering supporters. Its heightened responsiveness to charges positions the regime as the guardian of the Nation, reaffirming its support base and encouraging citizens to act on its behalf. At the same time, this conditions citizens both ideologically and responsively, prompting them to engage with the state through denunciation. However, this represents only one dimension of co-optation through the legal system.

Nevertheless, this represents one dimension of co-optation through the legal system. Beyond ideological alignment and judicial responsiveness, the regime also incentivizes and protects denouncers through monetary rewards, anonymity, sentence reductions, and legal shields. These mechanisms, which cultivate and protect the denouncer, are examined in the next section.

2.2. Incentives for reporting

2.2.1. Monetary rewards

Reporting is not encouraged only through appeals to patriotism, civic duty, or moral responsibility. It is also incentivized materially. The state offers monetary rewards in areas such as tax evasion and counterterrorism, two domains that correspond to central concerns of fiscal extraction and national security. In both cases, financial incentives transform citizens into auxiliary sources of information, extending the state's capacity to detect hidden misconduct, identify suspects, and act upon otherwise inaccessible knowledge. The following subsections show how monetary rewards embed citizen reporting within legal and

administrative frameworks, making denunciation not only ideologically justified but also materially attractive.

2.2.1.1. Tax evasion

Under Turkish law, reporting crimes is defined both as a right and a duty. However, for certain offenses, it is not left entirely to individual discretion. To promote reporting, the state offers material rewards in specific cases, governed by various laws and regulations. These typically apply to two main categories, the first being finance and trade-related offenses, such as tax evasion (Law No. 1905), smuggling (Law No. 5607), currency violations (Law No. 1567), unlawful financial transactions (Law No. 1156), and the illicit handling of cultural assets (Law No. 2863).

While the legislation has long included provisions to reward reporting in key financial areas, efforts to actively elicit such reports have intensified in recent years. Financial rewards for informants have increased over time, with 6.4 million TL distributed in 2018 and a rise to 11.6 million TL by 2022 (Çakır, 2023). Because Turkey experienced substantial inflation between 2022 and 2018[22], these figures do not by themselves demonstrate an increase in the scheme's real value or intensity however they remain institutionally significant. A 2021 report by the Turkish Court of Accounts further illustrates this trend. The report documented repeated payments to a small group of individuals, indicating that the state turned reporting in some cases into a form of paid employment, fostering opportunism and contributing to a noticeable increase in baseless denunciations (Gelir İdaresi Başkanlığı, 2022).

The interviews show how the ongoing economic crisis has further reinforced the state's efforts to expand citizen involvement in tax oversight for revenue. TaxStaff1 reported a noticeable surge in citizens denouncing others for alleged tax evasion, attributing the increase to a broader culture of reporting and, specifically, to public appeals by the Minister of Finance, who explicitly called for denunciations. According to TaxStaff1, these played a significant role in normalizing and encouraging denunciations. The findings confirm that following official calls by the Ministry of Finance, which framed reporting tax evaders as a civic duty, new channels for denunciation proliferated across social media, messaging apps such as WhatsApp and BIP, and dedicated hotlines, supplementing the existing VİMER system.

While these reports are formally categorized as crime reporting, TaxStaff1 emphasized that they are often driven more by ideological or personal motives than by genuine legal concerns. Most reports, he noted, are unfounded, showing how the mechanism is frequently misused,

[22] Turkey's consumer price index increased by approximately 72 percent between 2018 and 2022 (World Bank, 2024).

not as a tool for legitimate oversight, but as a means of targeting individuals for monetary rewards or out of political and personal animosity. Taken together, these developments reveal how the economic crisis has been instrumentalized to expand citizen participation in surveillance and how state-led encouragement, even in ostensibly non-ideological domains such as tax evasion, creates fertile ground for malicious denunciations.

2.2.1.2. Informing on terrorism

The second major category eligible for rewards involves security-related crimes. Several laws offer monetary incentives for helping the authorities prevent or solve such offenses. The Anti-Terrorism Law (No. 3713) rewards those who uncover terrorism-related crimes or assist in capturing perpetrators, though only for offenses explicitly listed under the law. In contrast, the Law on Police Duties and Powers (No. 2559) allows rewards for information on any publicly wanted offender and guarantees informant anonymity. Similarly, the Law on the Prevention of Certain Acts Affecting Public Order (No. 1481) targets politically motivated crimes, offering rewards to those who aid in the capture of individuals deemed threats to national unity or the constitutional order.

Alongside existing laws, a series of executive orders expanded monetary rewards for informants at key political turning points. A 2015 Interior Ministry by-law, introduced shortly after the collapse of the Peace Talks and during the intensified targeting of PKK-affiliated Kurdish citizens, rewarded persons who provided information or assistance contributing to the apprehension of offenders sought for offences within the scope of the Anti-Terror Law. The 2019 regulation broadened the framework to include assistance in detecting terrorism offences, securing evidence, and apprehending perpetrators. Crucially, the timing is telling: The by-law was passed in 2019, after the regime transitioned to the presidential system, and CİMER was established under the office. This signals a deliberate effort of the new political order to broaden citizen participation in surveillance and to institutionalize denunciation as a central tool of governance through its novel institutions and legal regulations.

There was a dramatic increase in monetary rewards for terrorism-related informing, particularly after the coup. While the reward for terror-related crimes stood at 1 million in 2015, this amount more than doubled in 2016, reaching 2.413 million (Gökdemir, 2016). By 2017, this number reached 10 million (Demirci, 2015). These figures represent a far steeper escalation than the overall increase in rewards for informing on tax evasion, suggesting that terrorism-related denunciations received particular emphasis and encouragement from the state. Even accounting for inflation, the scale of the rise demonstrates a deliberate effort to incentivize public participation in counterterrorism surveillance. However, there is no publicly

available data indicating the total amounts paid in subsequent years, leaving the recent scale of financial incentives unknown.

2.2.2. Legal shield

Besides material rewards, the regime also offers denouncers incentives through an extensive system of legal safeguards. These protections range from offence-specific confidentiality and anonymous-reporting arrangements to institutional practices through which the source of a report may disappear from the resulting case file. The following section examines how these legal shields enhance the co-optative influence of the reporting system.

2.2.2.1. Anonymity

In addition to monetary rewards, *legal shields* further incentivize reporting by offering protections to denouncers within the legal framework. The most prominent of these is anonymity, which is established as a key safeguard in relevant legislation. Turkish law does not provide a single general regime of anonymity for all reports. Protection instead arises through offence-specific confidentiality provisions, witness-protection measures, the procedural distinction between informants and complainants, and institutional practices that may conceal the source of a tip.

The Criminal Procedure Code distinguishes between complainants, whose identities ordinarily appear in the indictment, and persons who merely provide information without acquiring formal procedural status. The latter may not be identified in the indictment, but this does not amount to a general statutory guarantee of informant anonymity. Although formal complaints and petitions ordinarily contain identifying information[23], legal scholars and participants noted that this requirement is often not adhered to in practice and tip-offs may enter the system with incomplete, false, or concealed identities. It is widely acknowledged that many reports lack proper identification, with names and addresses frequently omitted or falsified. Furthermore, the content of such reports tends to consist largely of vague and abstract allegations (Kizilarslan, 2019; Uğur, 2013). Adhering to the principle of mandatory investigations, public prosecutors are obligated to accept and process a significant number of vague and general complaints, reports, and meaningless petitions, even those submitted by individuals who are clearly known to have mental illnesses (Kizilarslan, 2019). In short, there is a discrepancy between theory and practice in the reporting process which is also confirmed by participants.

Additional layers of protection for denouncers exist within the penal framework for certain crimes. The Anti-Terror Law (No. 3713), for example, states that the identities of those

[23] A particularly consequential exception concerning terrorism-related allegations against public officials was introduced through Prime Ministry Circular No. 2016/21, discussed in Chapter VI.

reporting crimes under its scope cannot be disclosed without consent, unless the report itself constitutes a crime (Art. 14). Although anonymity provisions are scattered across various laws, similar protections appear in the Tax Procedure Law (No. 213), the Law on Bribery and Corruption (No. 3628), the Law on Prosecution of Civil Servants (No. 4483), the Law on Judges and Prosecutors (No. 2802), and Emergency Decree Law No. 430. Together, they underscore the legal emphasis on protecting informants and promoting reporting.

2.2.2.2. Erasing the denouncer

Legal experts revealed additional ways in which denouncers are protected beyond formal legal provisions. In cases involving crimes subject to state (*ex officio*) prosecution, those initiated automatically by the state rather than by a complainant, police often erase denouncers from official records. This is particularly true for cases based on social media activity, as these offenses are often automatically prosecuted using publicly available evidence, eliminating the need for a complainant or witness. As a result, legal proceedings usually begin with police minutes noting that "the case opens upon a report," without identifying the source. Lawyer6 explains:

> We usually can't identify the denouncer from the case file. It's not visible in the documents. Typically, a report includes something concrete like a tweet link, photo, or screenshot. Authorities use this evidence to identify the person, build a case, and open a formal investigation. The case file might state, "We received a tip-off and launched an investigation," but what's actually included are just the screenshots or content sent by the denouncer (23 September 2024)

The account reveals a significant dynamic where the denouncer procedurally disappears. Once the submitted content is incorporated into the file as evidentiary material, the identity, motives, and relationship of the person who supplied it may become irrelevant or inaccessible to the defence. This creates an asymmetry: the denunciation can initiate or shape the investigation, but the denouncer may not be available for scrutiny, cross-examination, or assessment of credibility. In this sense, anonymity is not only a formal legal protection; it can also operate through the structure of the file itself.

Legal experts also raised a related concern: in some cases, the absence of an identifiable denouncer makes it difficult to determine whether the report came from a citizen or from law enforcement monitoring. Lawyer4 explained:

> We usually can't identify the informant, and sometimes doubt one even exists. Often, law enforcement may spot something themselves but choose to frame it as, "We received a tip-off and acted on it," rather than admitting they initiated it. So it's entirely possible that no real tip was ever submitted (06 September 2024).

This account echoes the legal experts consistent identification of a zone of ambiguity within the reporting mechanism. When the source of a report is not disclosed, denunciation can function both as citizen participation and as a cover for state-initiated surveillance. The same

procedural formula, "upon a report", can refer to a genuine citizen tip-off, a police discovery, or a hybrid process in which citizen reporting and police monitoring reinforce one another.

This account echoes a broader zone of ambiguity within the reporting mechanism. Monitoring reports on terrorism prosecutions in Turkey have raised similar concerns about the abuse of anonymous or secret witness procedures. One report notes that anonymous witnesses have become common in political trials and records cases in which such witnesses were unreliable, repeatedly used across multiple proceedings, or allegedly did not exist at all (Turkut et al., 2023). Read alongside Lawyer4's account, this evidence illustrates how procedural opacity can blur the source of accusation. When the origin of a report is not disclosed, denunciation can function both as citizen participation and as a cover for state-initiated surveillance. The same procedural formula, "upon a report," can refer to a genuine citizen tip-off, a police discovery, or a hybrid process in which citizen reporting and police monitoring reinforce one another.

This opacity is important for understanding the co-optative and legitimating functions of denunciation. By presenting investigations as initiated through reports from society, the state can frame legal action as responsive to public vigilance rather than as unilateral surveillance. At the same time, the invisibility of the denouncer protects citizens who report, while also shielding the investigative process from scrutiny when the actual source is unclear. The reporting mechanism therefore blurs the line between grassroots participation and top-down control: denunciations may be genuinely citizen-led in some cases, state-initiated in others, and procedurally indistinguishable in the case file.

2.2.2.3. Sentence reduction and dismissal of charges

The interviews revealed that sentence reduction or dismissal is another significant incentive to denounce. There are two primary legal mechanisms that can benefit denouncers. One of these is *effective repentance*, which may result in non-punishment or a reduction in sentence, depending on when and how the person withdraws from the organisation, surrenders, and provides information.

Effective repentance, in the context of terrorism and organised-crime prosecutions, is most directly regulated under Article 221 of the Turkish Penal Code. Under this provision, individuals accused of involvement in a criminal organisation may receive immunity from punishment or a sentence reduction if they leave the organisation, surrender, or provide information about its structure, activities, or other members (Sümer, 2023). While similar provisions exist in other jurisdictions, the application in the Turkish context shows a distinct weaponization, particularly in the post-coup landscape. In terrorism-related proceedings, this

mechanism became especially significant because statements made under effective repentance could generate further accusations and identify new suspects. Formally, the mechanism appears as an incentive for cooperation with the judiciary. In practice, however, legal experts argued that it became a catalyst for mass denunciations, as individuals strategically invoked it to avoid prosecution, reduce punishment, or distance themselves from suspicion. This concern is consistent with wider debates on confessor-witness statements in organised-crime cases, where scholars and courts have noted the evidentiary risks created when testimony is given in exchange for legal benefit (Tosun & Öztürk, 2026). Lawyer2 explains:

> Especially in the post-coup period, people constantly denounced one another—often as a way to protect themselves, like saying, "Don't come after me." This reached a point where even a special unit was established at the Ankara Courthouse because so many people came forward as confessors in the FETÖ cases. Even the prosecutors couldn't keep up with it—it got that overwhelming (09 August 2024).

Lawyer2's account shows how effective repentance transformed denunciation into a self-protective legal strategy. In this context, reporting others did not necessarily stem from ideological conviction or civic duty; it could also function as a means of redirecting suspicion, bargaining with prosecutors, or demonstrating cooperation with the state. The establishment of a special unit in the Ankara Courthouse, as described by Lawyer2, indicates the scale at which this mechanism operated in FETÖ cases. Effective repentance therefore intensified the multiplier effect of denunciation: each confession could generate new names, new investigations, and further pressure on others to cooperate in the same way.

Anonymous witness testimony is another legal mechanism highlighted by participants as enabling denunciation under conditions of protection and opacity. Introduced through the Witness Protection Law No. 5726, which entered into force in 2008, the mechanism was formally designed to protect witnesses in serious cases, including organized crime and terrorism-related proceedings. Under Turkish law, witness protection measures may include concealing the identity and address of a witness, hearing the witness outside the presence of the accused, or altering the witness's voice or appearance where necessary (Anayasa Mahkemesi, 2014), however, such measures are supposed to be used only where there is a serious danger to the witness and where procedural safeguards are maintained. When combined with effective repentance or leniency practices, however, anonymity can also create incentives for suspects or witnesses to provide names in exchange for legal advantage (Tatar, 2013; Turkut et al., 2023). Participants highlighted this dynamic in relation to both PKK and FETÖ cases. Reflecting on one hearing, Lawyer1 explained:

> I attended a hearing in Diyarbakır where a so-called secret witness was testifying against 600 people. An implausible scenario. The use of secret witnesses has gone far beyond ordinary denunciation. This was also common in FETÖ cases. Sometimes the witness provided concrete details, but often the claims were vague. What happens behind the scenes is unclear; witnesses may

> be pressured and told, "Name someone else to save yourself." So they do, trading names for their own release (08 August 2024).

Lawyer1's account shows how the anonymous witness mechanism can be strategically folded into the state's fight against terrorism. Rather than functioning solely as a protective device for vulnerable witnesses, it can become a mechanism through which individuals allegedly affiliated with targeted groups are encouraged, pressured, or incentivized to name others. In this context, anonymity reduces the accountability of the accuser, while the possibility of leniency transforms denunciation into a survival strategy. The result is a self-perpetuating chain of accusations: one person's attempt to secure release or sentence reduction produces new suspects, new investigations, and further pressure on others to cooperate. This extends the logic of participatory repression into the courtroom, transforming legal cooperation into a mechanism of coercion.

Monitoring reports and case law raise similar concerns. The ECtHR has found violations in Turkish cases where domestic courts relied on anonymous witness testimony without implementing adequate safeguards to counterbalance the disadvantages imposed on the defence, particularly where the accused could not directly confront or test the credibility of the witness (ECHR, 2015b). The FIDU report on terrorism prosecutions in post-coup Turkey likewise documents the widespread use of anonymous tips and secret witnesses: in its review of 50 indictments, it found that anonymous tips or denunciations appeared in 43 indictments, while secret-witness statements appeared in 13. Particularly revealing is the "Venüs" case. According to the report, the testimony of an anonymous witness codenamed "Venüs" contributed to the detention and imprisonment of numerous people, including Selahattin Demirtaş (Turkut et al., 2023); yet the Diyarbakır Police Department later reportedly admitted that there were no archive records or documents relating to this witness (Stockholm Centre for Freedom, 2019). This example illustrates the extreme consequences of procedural opacity: a witness whose identity cannot be tested may not only be unreliable, but may even be impossible to verify as having existed in the first place.

Read alongside participants' accounts, these examples show how anonymous witness procedures can blur the line between protection, inducement, and denunciation. In principle, anonymity is justified as a safeguard against retaliation. In practice, especially in politically charged terrorism cases, it can facilitate unverifiable accusations, weaken the accused's ability to challenge the evidence, and shield the production of testimony from scrutiny. The mechanism, therefore, enables accusation without full accountability, transforms cooperation with prosecutors into a route to self-preservation, and allows chains of denunciation to be produced and legitimized.

The following section examines how the reporting mechanism functions as a tool of co-optation and legitimation. It first analyses how petitioning practices have transformed state–society relations by positioning citizens as stakeholders in governance. This includes a discussion of how participation is framed in policy and how it has produced a distinct form of e-citizenship characterized by high engagement but limited awareness, where petitioning is instrumentalized for bureaucratic and judicial shortcuts, and accountability replaced a sense of victimization. The section then explores the "presidential effect," highlighting how the central petitioning mechanism reinforces citizen attachment to the presidency by promoting the perception of direct communication with the president. Finally, it turns to the legitimation dimension, showing how procedural legitimacy is constructed through legal frameworks and nominal due process, illustrated by the legislation regulating the judicial processing of citizen reports and the broader illusion of justice it sustains.

3. Co-optation through petitioning in bureaucracy

The bureaucracy constitutes the primary domain in which the reporting mechanism operates in Turkey. Through the hyper-centralized platform CİMER, which links the entire administrative apparatus to the Presidency, the state has developed an exceptional capacity to absorb citizen input and demonstrate responsiveness. This institutional architecture, reinforced by the narrative constructed around it, channels citizen engagement into a highly personalized form of state–society interaction by offering tangible benefits such as responsiveness, problem-solving, and direct access to authority. This section argues that this mechanism functions as a mechanism of co-optation, shaped by the regime's ideological and political terms.

This section examines these dynamics in three steps. First, it shows how the discourse of the "new governance" seeks to reshape state–society relations by transforming citizens into stakeholders in governance. Second, it demonstrates the cultivation of a new bureaucratic subjectivity, which I call homo bureaucraticus, by the way the bureaucratic principles of transparency, participation, and accountability are operationalized in practice through digital platforms. I analyze how these principles generate high exposure but limited knowledge, offer citizens a shortcut to bureaucracy and the judiciary, and foster perceived victimization through complaint-driven accountability, together shaping the contours of e-citizenship. Finally, the section analyzes how the "presidential effect" is produced through CİMER, embedding personalistic appeals within routine administrative processes, one constructed in discourse with the "direct presidency" notion.

3.1. Transformation of state-society relations

3.1.1. Citizens as stakeholders: Participation in governance

The legislative and regulatory documents that established the central petitioning platform CİMER (formerly BİMER) articulate the conceptual foundations of this initiative by foregrounding key principles such as "governance" and "participation in governance." These terms signal a deliberate departure from the traditional bureaucratic model, framing the platform as part of a broader transformation in public administration. This new perspective prioritizes inclusive and collaborative processes that actively involve citizens as stakeholders in shaping policies and solutions. Circular No. 2006/3 (2006) defines this new approach as both a "management value" and a "management technique" (pp.1), highlighting the necessity of regulatory adjustments to public relations practices within public administration. As some scholars argue, this echoes the discourse of the global neoliberal shift in public sector reform in which states operate with a "private company logic, adopting a management approach by viewing citizens as customers" (Demirci, 2015, p. 101).

In the Turkish case, however, this managerial language is intertwined with the official narrative of the Nation. As Chapter V showed, political discourse constructs the Nation as a virtuous and unified moral force that had long been suppressed by previous regimes and was restored to its rightful position under the AKP. Within this narrative, the AKP appears as both liberator and architect of a renewed bond between state and society. The analysis of legal and administrative regulations, policy texts, the CİMER interface, and interview material shows how this narrative reshapes bureaucratic participation by presenting citizen input as empowerment, ideological alignment, and political consolidation.

This framing is visible in official discourse surrounding CİMER. The platform is presented not merely as an administrative application system, but as a bridge between state and society. A 2023 report by the Office of the Presidential Communication describes CİMER as a tool of democratic engagement that enables citizens to monitor state institutions, hold them accountable, and exercise the "national will" beyond elections:

> In practice, through CİMER, which enables the active oversight of every level of the state and turns citizens into partners in governance, our state presents one of the most distinguished examples of participatory democracy in the world, strengthening the unity between the people and the state. In a sense, CİMER represents the will that dismantled the hierarchy that once worked against citizens in state-society relations. Thanks to CİMER's structure, which enables both participatory democracy and constant oversight, national will is now manifested not only during elections but at every moment (p. 13)

This official framing positions CİMER as a channel through which citizens exercise political agency by engaging directly with governance. It presents the platform as overcoming bureaucratic distance, enabling citizens to monitor state activity, submit concerns, and

participate in public administration. In this sense, CİMER's participatory claim is not limited to problem-solving. It also connects citizen input to the language of national will, thereby embedding administrative participation within the regime's broader ideological narrative.

A closer examination of the CİMER website shows how this participatory model is curated in practice. The section "Participate in governance through CİMER" invites users to share opinions on selected topics. As of March 2025, these topics were closely aligned with the regime's ideological agenda: "Türkiye's Century," "Stray Animals," "Terror-free Turkey," and "The Family Year." Rather than offering an open-ended deliberative space, the platform channels participation toward policy areas already framed by the government as matters of national vision, public order, security, morality, and family values. Echoing Erdoğan's signature rhetoric, "Türkiye's Century" invites citizens to share their "dreams and visions," invoking the official narrative of Turkey's renewal and advancement under his rule since 2002. "Stray Animals" reflects the politicization of animal welfare following state-led mass culling policies and the societal backlash they generated. "Terror-free Turkey" keeps terrorism at the centre of citizens' political imagination, while "The Family Year" situates participation within the government's broader moral agenda around family, gender, and social values in a particularly revealing way. Here, citizens are invited to contribute to policies aimed at protecting the family:

> You can contribute with your opinions to the plans and programs that will be implemented with the aim of preserving the family institution, which is the guarantee of our strong state and nation, the essence of our national and moral values, strengthening its place and passing it on to future generations (CİMER, 2025).

This narrative frames the state's initiative to "protect the family" not as a matter of social welfare, but as a national project rooted in moralistic and nativist visions. To advance this agenda, citizen input is actively solicited. The ideological orientation of the "Family Year" campaign becomes particularly evident in the methods used to gather public opinion. The associated survey asks: "In your opinion, what public policy should be implemented first to protect the family?" The response options mirror the state's ideological framing: encouraging marriage, increasing birth support, combating LGBT, and expanding family counselling services. This structure presents family protection not simply as a social-policy question, but as a moral and national project in which citizens are invited to participate.

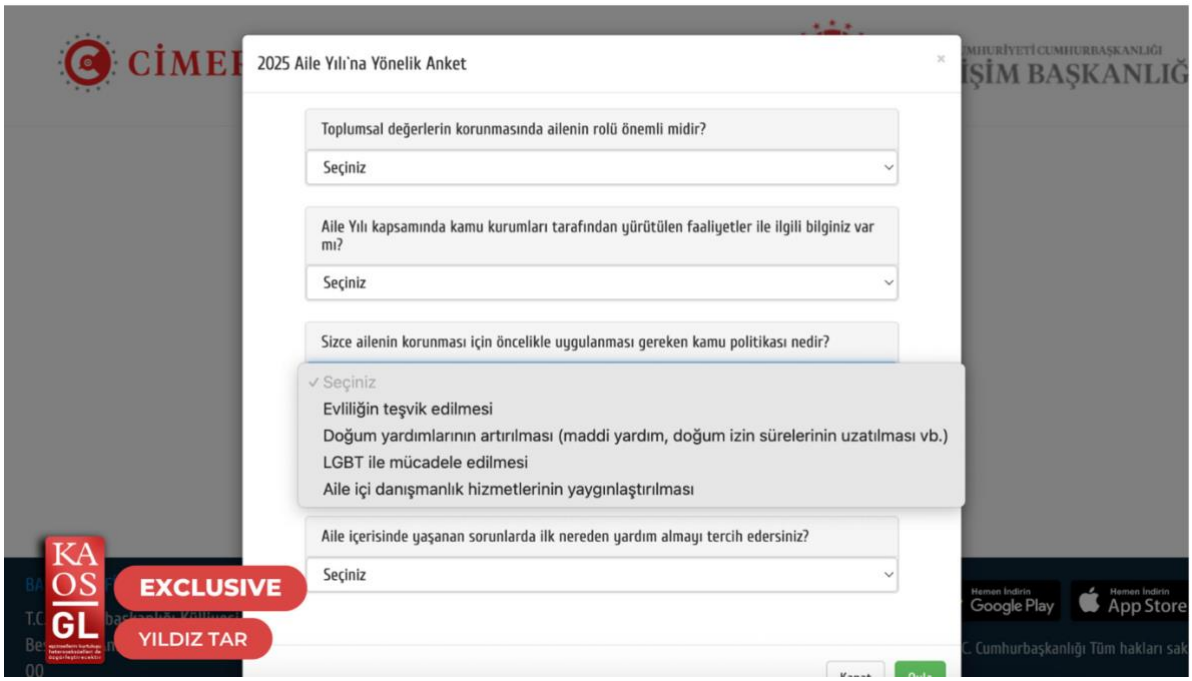


Figure 4: A snapshot from the CİMER survey conducted as part of the "Family Year" campaign, where "Combating LGBT" is listed among the selectable options (KAOSGL, 2025).

The policy-input function therefore illustrates how participation is both enabled and bounded. Citizens are encouraged to contribute, but the terms of participation are already shaped by the state's ideological priorities. By foregrounding topics such as terrorism, family, gender, stray animals, and national vision, CİMER operates as a controlled interface for gathering public sentiment, channelling grievances, and projecting openness to participation. This creates a participatory appearance while limiting the scope of deliberation.

This limitation becomes clearer when CİMER is compared with online deliberative models in other authoritarian contexts, such as China, where some platforms allow public interaction between citizens and local administrations (Chen et al., 2007; Kornreich, 2019; Su & Meng, 2016). CİMER, by contrast, is structured as one-way communication from citizen to state. It does not provide an interactive public forum, nor does it enable citizens to deliberate horizontally, exchange claims, or develop shared narratives. This design minimizes the "coordination effect" (Chen & Xu, 2017), reducing the risk of collective mobilization. In this sense, CİMER offers a managed participation rather than genuine deliberation. Crucially, it fosters a social landscape in which demands are atomized and individualized, turning participation into a series of isolated appeals to the state rather than a basis for collective claim-making, a dynamic that Boyraz (2018)had already identified in his analysis of BİMER, CİMER's predecessor.

In sum, the participatory framework constructed through CİMER channels citizen engagement into individualized and ideologically curated interactions. It positions citizens as

stakeholders in governance, but only within boundaries set by the state. This does not mean that all users experience the platform in the same way or that every application serves ideological purposes. Rather, the platform's institutional design and official discourse encourage a particular mode of citizenship: one in which citizens are invited to monitor, report, request, evaluate, and participate through bureaucratic channels. The next subsection examines this mode of participation through the concept of *homo bureaucraticus*.

3.1.2. Creation of homo-bureaucraticus: e-citizens

Rossel and Finger conceptualize e-governance as a co-evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT) and political institutions. This shift emerged amid globalization, as economic pressures prompted states to adopt more networked, participatory governance models (2007, p.400). E-governance was promoted by transnational organizations as a model for developing states. Central to this effort was the belief that digitalizing governance would boost transparency and encourage citizen engagement through a more informed citizenry (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010).

The concept of good governance underpins the official discourse on e-government and its petitioning mechanisms, as reflected in legislation and policy texts. The Presidency Communication Centre frames transparency, participation, and accountability as core principles of the "active state," in which citizens are expected to collaborate with officials in decision-making and oversight. Within this model, citizens are not passive recipients of services but "active citizens" whose participation is cultivated through rights claims, complaints, and suggestions (2023, pp. 23–24).

This section examines how these principles unfold in practice. It uses the concept of *homo bureaucraticus* to capture a mode of e-citizenship encouraged by digital governance: citizens are made more capable of monitoring, petitioning, requesting, and activating the state through bureaucratic channels. While the concept does not suggest that all citizens become bureaucratic subjects in the same way, its analytical weight lies in the paradox it captures: Digitalization increases exposure to bureaucratic procedures and gives citizens a sense of access and responsiveness, but this does not necessarily produce an informed, deliberative, or democratically empowered public. Instead, as participants' accounts suggest, it can generate high exposure with limited knowledge, participation through shortcuts rather than deliberation, and accountability framed through complaint-making and perceived victimization.

3.1.2.1. Transparency: High exposure, limited knowledge

Since the early 2000s, e-governance has become a central feature of the Turkish public administration system. This shift gained significant momentum during the EU accession process, which emphasized transparency as key to bureaucratic efficiency and improved communication between the state and society through digital tools (Çelenk, 2009; Öniş, 2003). Participants' accounts suggest, however, that the digitalization of bureaucracy did more than expand access to public services. By multiplying online platforms and administrative contact points, it increased citizens' exposure to bureaucratic procedures and reshaped their everyday modes of engagement with the state.

Interviewees described how digitalization introduced a new layer of visibility in public administration. Citizens can now access case files, track applications, monitor administrative transactions, and interact with institutions through multiple digital platforms. This gives citizens a heightened sense of access and control. However, participants also emphasized that increased visibility does not necessarily translate into legal understanding or meaningful empowerment. Lawyer6's account of UYAP, the e-justice platform, illustrates this ambivalent effect:

> The introduction of the "UYAP Citizen", the e-justice platform, allows individuals to access their legal case files online using their national ID. Some people monitor the system constantly, immediately contacting their lawyers about every new document—even when it's something minor and insignificant. For them, each update feels meaningful and urgent. This puts pressure on lawyers, who can't realistically monitor the system 24/7 and often have to explain that important developments will be formally communicated by the court (23 September 2024).

This account exemplifies how digital transparency can produce intensified monitoring without necessarily producing legal knowledge. The citizen gains access to procedural information, but may not have the expertise to interpret its significance. As a result, visibility generates anxiety, urgency, and dependence on further explanation. The point is not that digital access is inherently negative, but that access alone does not guarantee informed participation.

Lawyer6 connected this broader digital exposure to a changing mode of citizen engagement with state platforms:

> For instance, my client once called saying, "I was just browsing e-government and came across something—what does this mean?" Not Twitter, not Instagram—just scrolling through e-government. I've seen people go through every agency listed from A to Z on e-government. They know they don't own property, but still run a property search. No car? Still check for vehicle ownership. They're checking everything: "How many days until I retire? What's going on with this or that?" This kind of bureaucratic personality—should I call it admirable or terrifying? I honestly don't know. But one thing's clear: it's reshaped the whole system, especially around denunciations and complaints. Now, there's no need to show up anywhere in person (23 September 2024).

This account is illustrative of what I conceptualize as *homo bureaucraticus*: not a fixed citizen type, but a bureaucratically mediated mode of participation produced through constant access

to state platforms. Citizens are encouraged to browse, check, monitor, request, complain, and report through digital interfaces. This mode of engagement can be empowering insofar as it reduces distance from the state and makes administrative processes more accessible. Yet it also deepens bureaucratic dependency by encouraging citizens to interact with the state through forms, portals, tracking systems, complaint channels, and administrative categories.

Beyond digitalization itself, the proliferation of e-governance tools and bureaucratic contact points has increased citizens' exposure to the state. While CİMER stands out as the dominant platform, participants also referred to sector-specific channels such as SABİM in healthcare and VİMER for tax-related reporting, as well as hospital walk-ins, hotlines, and other digital applications. These multiple access points make the state more reachable, but participants repeatedly emphasized that reachability does not necessarily produce informed citizenship. Instead, they observed a pattern of engagement marked by urgency, limited procedural knowledge, and heightened expectations that the state should solve problems quickly.

Several examples illustrate this point. SchoolStaff1 recalled a petition by an impatient teacher demanding reimbursement before the process had even begun, noting widespread unfamiliarity with legal procedures by saying, "People often don't know deadlines, regulations, or their rights". HospitalStaff2 explained how some people confuse Patient Rights units within hospitals with human rights bodies, using this misunderstanding to pressure the system. HospitalStaff1 described receiving complaints that are incomprehensible, unreadable, and lacking basic details and information, often directed at the wrong hospitals. SchoolStaff2 summarized the pattern as follows:

> Here's what I observe: people tend to file complaints through CİMER about issues they can't figure out on their own. In Turkey, many don't even know or recognize the proper complaint procedures. In other words, those who are familiar with the system use the appropriate channels and follow procedures, while those who are clueless simply go straight to CİMER (11 November 2024).

This account should be read as a public-sector worker's observation of recurring bureaucratic encounters, rather than as a general characterization of all CİMER users. Its significance lies in showing how CİMER can become a default channel for citizens who lack procedural knowledge but still expect an official response. In this sense, transparency and accessibility do not necessarily produce a more informed public. They can also produce a form of bureaucratic immediacy in which citizens turn to the most visible and responsive platform, regardless of whether it is the most appropriate route. What matters is not only whether the application reaches the correct authority, but that the state appears reachable, attentive, and responsive.

This is where digital governance intersects with what I call responsive empowerment. Citizens may feel empowered not because they acquire deeper knowledge of procedures, rights, or institutional responsibilities, but because the state acknowledges them quickly and visibly. Lawyer6 described this affective dimension of responsiveness:

> The state promotes this well, saying "We're always here for you, 24/7," with fast responses. While a formal petition might take months, a CİMER complaint often gets a reply within a week. For ordinary people, that's significant. Getting a response from the Presidency, complete with the official Presidency seal, feels like being taken seriously. "The state acknowledged me and responded. "That alone matters and people use it fully (23 September 2024).

This account helps clarify the co-optative effect of e-governance in the Turkish case. Digital access, rapid response, and presidential branding generate a sense of recognition and inclusion. Yet this empowerment is often affective and procedural rather than deliberative. Citizens feel seen by the state, but they are incorporated through individualized applications, complaints, and reports rather than collective participation or shared decision-making. The response itself becomes politically meaningful: it produces attachment, reinforces trust in the personalized state, and encourages further engagement with official channels. In this sense, *homo bureaucraticus* captures the citizen as an active but bureaucratically channeled participant: exposed to the state, responsive to its procedures, and empowered primarily through the capacity to activate bureaucratic attention.

3.1.2.2. Participation: A shortcut to bureaucracy and the judiciary

In the official discourse, participation is highlighted as the central pillar upon which the concept of active citizenship rests. E-government tools are presented as central facilitators to foster this form of citizenship by involving individuals in decision-making and service-delivery processes. However, participants' accounts suggest that, in practice, petitioning often operates less as deliberative participation and more as a means of individual negotiation with the state. Citizens may use CİMER to bypass ordinary bureaucratic or judicial routes, accelerate responses, or bring pressure to bear on institutions. In this sense, participation is channelled into a transactional form of engagement: rather than collectively shaping policy or deliberating over public issues, citizens activate the state to resolve individual grievances, demands, or frustrations.

Participants described CİMER as being used in some cases as a perceived shortcut to the judiciary, particularly where legal channels appear slow, inaccessible, or unresponsive. CourtStaff1 noted that people frequently submit unreasonable or legally unresolvable requests, treating CİMER as a last resort. CourtStaff1 explained, many think, "If the legal route doesn't work, maybe CİMER can help." In one case, a person, frustrated by a 50-year land dispute, filed a complaint asking, "Why hasn't this case been resolved?" In another, a woman, whose

husband was convicted for FETÖ membership, repeatedly wrote, "Dear President, my husband is innocent, I request his release." These examples do not suggest that CİMER formally replaces judicial remedies. Rather, the fact that even those with active legal cases turn to CİMER suggests how some citizens perceive the platform as a parallel channel of appeal, one that appears more direct, personal, and responsive than the ordinary legal process.

Participants also described cases in which CİMER was used to bypass routine administrative procedures or to make demands that were legally or practically difficult to fulfil. HospitalStaff1 noted that some patients request admission without appointments, identification, or medical examination. MinistryStaff2, who manages subcontracted workers, described petitions around tender periods in which applicants asked why they were not being given permanent positions. Others submitted requests for severance pay through CİMER even though these could have been handled directly by the relevant institution. SchoolStaff1 summarized this perception by saying that, for some applicants, "the constitution, laws, or procedures don't matter. CİMER is a shortcut."

These accounts suggest a form of participation shaped by immediacy and expectation. Rather than following ordinary administrative steps, some citizens turn to CİMER because it appears to offer a faster and more authoritative route to institutional attention. The platform is therefore not simply used as a supplementary communication tool; in participants' accounts, it can become a way of circumventing lower-level bureaucracy by appealing directly to a higher, presidentially associated authority. This is central to the co-optative function of the system: citizens are drawn into bureaucratic engagement by the promise that the state will listen, respond, and intervene.

This sense of immediacy is reinforced by the broader official discourse that presents the state as a service provider and the citizen as an empowered recipient. Personalistic appeals are especially important here. Through CİMER's "direct presidency" framing, responsiveness is presented not only as administrative efficiency but as proximity to Erdoğan and the Presidency. EduUnionRep1 described this ideological message as follows:

> The government framed it this way: public institutions are part of the state, civil servants represent the executive, and citizens are service recipients. CİMER was introduced with the promise that "you can report any issue directly to the state—without red tape, straight to the Presidency." The message: "I'm this close to you." CİMER symbolizes the ideological bond the government aims to build with the people (21 August 2024)

EduUnionRep1's account shows how bureaucratic participation is personalized. CİMER does not merely connect citizens to administrative units; it symbolically connects them to the Presidency. This personalistic framing helps explain why citizens may experience petitioning

as empowering even when the substantive outcome is limited. The act of submitting a complaint or demand becomes a way of accessing the state through its highest authority.

HealthUnionRep1 described a related dynamic in the healthcare sector, where service-oriented discourse can produce heightened expectations of entitlement:

> In healthcare, there's a kind of inflated demand, with check-ups squeezed into five-minute slots, X-ray appointments that take months, and a general inability to keep things running smoothly because the system is overwhelmed. The mindset is: "You pay their salaries with your taxes, so they're obligated to treat you." But there's little awareness or concern about the conditions under which that care is actually provided (06 August 2024).

This account points to the tensions produced by service-oriented citizenship. Citizens are encouraged to understand themselves as entitled to responsive service, but this entitlement develops in a context where institutions are overburdened and public-sector workers operate under intense pressure. The result is a demanding form of citizenship: citizens are empowered to make claims on the state, but often through individualized complaints and expectations of immediate resolution rather than through informed, collective, or deliberative participation.

In the light of the cited accounts, the section identifies a recurring practice-based pattern: participation through CİMER can function as a shortcut to bureaucracy and, at times, to the judiciary. This does not mean that all petitioning is improper or that all users seek to bypass formal channels. Rather, when participation is mediated through a responsive, presidentially branded platform, citizens may learn to pursue state action through direct complaint-making. In this way, the system co-opts citizens by offering them access, recognition, and responsiveness, while simultaneously channeling their participation into individualized and bureaucratically managed forms of engagement.

3.1.2.3. Accountability: Perceived victimisation

Complaint systems provide what Dimitrov *(2014, 2023)* calls "proxy accountability," where the state positions itself as protecting citizens from the wrongdoing of state officials. In theory, this empowers citizens to monitor and hold institutions accountable. A similar logic is echoed in official discourse in Turkey, where accountability is framed as the hallmark of e-governance, enabling citizens to report misconduct and oversee institutions(Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı, 2023). However, participants' accounts suggest that, in practice, this accountability function is often filtered through perceived victimisation: citizens interpret unfavourable outcomes, delays, or routine administrative decisions as evidence of unfair treatment, misconduct, or rights violation.

This claim does not hold that all complaints are unfounded or that citizens' grievances are necessarily illegitimate. Rather, it points to a recurrent pattern that public-sector workers repeatedly described through cases in which complaints were driven by a sense of personal

injury despite the absence of identifiable procedural wrongdoing. In these cases, accountability becomes grievance-driven and individualized. Citizens do not merely seek correction of administrative errors; they demand recognition of perceived injustice and action against those they hold responsible.

Participants highlighted how perceived victimisation underpins citizen engagement through petitioning. SchoolStaff1 shares an anecdote in which an individual physically visited the school in person to lodge a complaint against the school administration for recruiting a cleaning staff member. Although the recruitment had been conducted centrally through the state employment agency and the school had no direct control over the process, the complainant attributed responsibility to the local institution and interpreted non-selection as evidence of wrongdoing:

> I applied to the Employment Agency. They didn't recruit me, but they hired my neighbour. Why couldn't I get it? There was definitely a rigging in the draw! (05 September 2024).

What matters in this account is not only the complainant's limited procedural knowledge, but also the transformation of disappointment into a claim of injustice. The complainant does not treat non-selection as an outcome of an impersonal administrative process; rather, it is interpreted through a personalized lens of exclusion, suspicion, and entitlement. In this sense, the grievance emerges from the gap between what the citizen believes they deserve and what the bureaucratic process delivers. CİMER becomes meaningful precisely at this point: it offers a visible and accessible channel through which perceived unfairness can be transformed into an actionable complaint.

SchoolStaff1 connected this dynamic to a broader pattern in which citizens increasingly interpret unmet expectations as violations of rights or entitlements:

> Because they don't know, they naturally assume everything they feel entitled to is a right and they file complaints about it. There's CİMER, after all—it's the complaint centre. People think, 'I believe I've been treated unfairly, so I'll report it there right away.' (05 September 2024).

This account shows how petitioning is sustained not only by legal consciousness, but also by affective perceptions of victimisation. Citizens do not necessarily need detailed knowledge of institutional responsibility or procedural rules in order to activate the complaint mechanism. What matters is the feeling of having been wronged and the expectation that the state should respond. CİMER thus channels subjective experiences of unfairness into bureaucratic action, allowing citizens to seek recognition even when the grievance may be procedurally misplaced.

MinistryStaff2 described a similar dynamic, illustrating how citizens often interpret objective procedures, like exam-based recruitment, through a lens of personal victimization when they fail:

> The flood of complaints usually comes during personnel recruitment. Since hiring is done through exams, everyone who fails writes to CİMER. It's kind of funny. People take the same exam under similar conditions, but only a few get hired. The other immediately files a complaint, claiming unfair treatment. They go on and on, explaining how they were wronged. During those times, almost everyone who's not selected turns to CİMER (10 October 2024).

These accounts suggest that CİMER can become a channel through which disappointment is translated into a formal claim of injustice. The cited cases show how the platform allows citizens to convert subjective perceptions of unfairness into bureaucratically actionable petitions. In this sense, proxy accountability can become personalized: citizens seek not only accountability from institutions, but also validation of their own sense of having been wronged. Participants also connected this dynamic to the cathartic function of complaint-making. Some described CİMER as a mechanism through which citizens express frustration even when they do not necessarily expect a substantive solution. HealthUnionRep2 explained this in relation to systemic problems in public services:

> People file these complaints even though they know they won't get a real solution. There's this system, a complaint mechanism. Why does it exist? To let off steam. Yes, to let off steam. It redirects the reaction, shifts the focus, and buys time. Yet we know that the real problem lies with the state (06 August 2024).

This account echoes the notion of *Meckerkultur* in the German Democratic Republic, where complaint-writing served not only to resolve problems but also to vent dissatisfaction. In the Turkish case, participants suggested that CİMER can perform a similar cathartic function: it offers citizens a formal channel to express anger, disappointment, and grievance, even when deeper structural causes remain unresolved. This shows that the co-optative function of complaint mechanism lies precisely in combining recognition, responsiveness, and deflection: citizens feel heard, while responsibility for broader institutional problems can be displaced onto individual officials or local units.

Yet, participants stressed that resorting directly to CİMER is not merely an emotional and impulsive decision. Across accounts from both the bureaucracy and the judiciary, a deeper theme emerged: a profound lack of trust in institutions. Citizens bypass conventional governance and judicial channels, appealing instead to CİMER, which they see as more reliable and trustworthy with its direct link to the highest authority. SchoolStaff1 captures this dynamic:

> Many complaints could be resolved more easily through direct channels, like filing a petition with the relevant institution, but people avoid this because they don't trust local institutions or their responses. Instead, they turn to CİMER, believing that since it involves the Presidency, it carries more weight and will be taken more seriously. This reflects a broader mindset in society— a reverence for authority. The idea is "those at the top can do anything, and if I ask, they'll make it happen for me—even if it's outside the rules" (05 September 2024).

This account highlights a paradox in the accountability promise of e-governance. While transparency and citizen monitoring are expected to strengthen institutional trust (Jaeger & Bertot, 2012), the Turkish case suggests a more centralized outcome. CİMER does not necessarily disperse accountability across institutions; it can concentrate expectations of responsiveness in the Presidency. Citizens direct grievances upward because the presidentially linked platform appears more powerful than ordinary bureaucratic channels. As a result, proxy accountability becomes personalized: the state appears responsive not through strengthened institutional autonomy, but through the figure of a central authority capable of intervening from above.

This dynamic connects perceived victimisation to the broader "presidential effect" examined in the next subsection. Citizens turn to CİMER not only because they want accountability, but because they believe the Presidency can compel institutions to act. In this way, complaint-driven accountability co-opts citizens by offering recognition, validation, and a sense of access, while simultaneously reinforcing dependence on centralized authority.

3.1.3. Presidential effect

3.1.3.1. Talking to the president

Participants across the judiciary, bureaucracy, and trade unions emphasized the authority embedded in the CİMER system, which they attributed to its direct association with the Presidential Office and, more specifically, to the personalized authority of the President. I conceptualize this as the *presidential effect*: the symbolic and practical weight that CİMER acquires because citizens and institutions perceive it as connected to the highest executive authority. In participants' accounts, this effect helps explain both the popularity of citizen reporting and the seriousness with which state institutions respond to CİMER applications.

Whether the petition involves a denunciation, a grievance over unfair treatment, or a personal demand, reports are consistently characterized by a direct appeal to the presidency, framing the president as the ultimate authority who can deliver justice, correct bureaucratic failures, and fulfill individual requests. This pattern is vividly reflected in the language used by petitioners, many of whom begin their submissions with the phrase: "My dear President."

Interviews highlighted the presidential appeal as a phenomenon successfully cultivated in the discourse and effectively enacted in practice, one marked by personalistic links between citizens and the president. However, the perceived connection on the part of citizens appears to be strikingly literal. Participants across the judiciary, bureaucracy, and trade unions consistently emphasized that many citizens genuinely believe that President Erdoğan personally oversees the system and reads every petition submitted through CİMER.

HospitalStaff1 described how this personalized language appears across different social and professional groups:

> Both educated and uneducated people write to the President as if sending a personal letter, beginning with phrases like "My President" or "My Chief." I've even seen a few doctors use this kind of language in their petitions (20 August 2024).

This account shows that the presidential appeal is not confined to citizens with limited formal education or bureaucratic literacy. The language of personal address travels across social and professional boundaries, suggesting that CİMER's symbolic force lies in its association with the presidency itself. TaxStaff1 similarly underlined that the perception of direct communication with the president himself is the main reason for the increase in the petitions:

> Some citizens think CİMER is the President's personal office. You know what the word in CİMER stands for: "Cumhurbaşkanı" (President). There are people who believe that when they write to CİMER, they're communicating directly with the President. That's one of the reasons there's been a rise in applications (13 October 2024).

Here, the institutional name itself becomes politically significant. The presence of "President" in CİMER's title helps blur the distinction between a bureaucratic communication platform and direct access to Erdoğan personally. HealthStaff1 notes that this misperception of direct communication is not limited to the presidency but to other ministry offices, a misperception furthered by a lack of awareness and knowledge:

> Many people genuinely believe that CİMER is overseen directly by the President or that SABİM is run by the Health Minister. Some even start their applications with "Dear President" or "Dear Minister of Health." And when we call them for follow-up, they sometimes ask, "Are you the Health Minister?" People think they're writing directly to top officials, but the system actually operates very differently (11 September 2024).

This account further demonstrates how personalized authority is projected onto bureaucratic platforms. Citizens do not simply use these systems as administrative channels; they often imagine them as routes to the highest office-holder responsible for the relevant domain.

Participants' first-hand observations reveal a recurring citizen perception: CİMER is often imagined not merely as a bureaucratic platform, but as a channel of direct communication with the President. This perception matters because it personalizes state access. Citizens are encouraged to bypass ordinary institutional hierarchies in favour of a symbolic relationship with the highest authority. In this sense, the presidential effect strengthens co-optation by making citizens feel personally heard, while simultaneously reinforcing dependence on centralized executive power.

3.1.3.2. "Direct presidency"

The interview-based observation that citizens frequently address petitions to the President is reinforced by official discourse and the institutional history of centralized petitioning in

Turkey. Participants often attributed the popularity of CİMER not only to its accessibility and responsiveness, but also to the discursive framework through which it is promoted. The platform is not simply presented as an administrative portal; it is branded as a direct channel to the Presidency.

A closer look at the historical evolution of centralized e-petitioning in Turkey reveals how the practice mirrors the broader centralization of power under Erdoğan, increasingly aligning citizen–state interaction with his personalized leadership style. What began in the late 2000s as a digitalization initiative through the Prime Ministry Communication Centre (BİMER) gradually evolved in tandem with broader political shifts. From the start, the petitioning system was not simply a neutral administrative tool; it was branded "BİMER- Direct Prime Ministry," deliberately cultivated to be closely associated with Erdoğan's office, which he assumed in 2003. A key turning point came in 2014 when Erdoğan became Turkey's first popularly elected president. As BİMER remained under the Prime Ministry, a new channel, "Write to the President", was added to the Presidential website (2015–2018) to maintain this direct connection with Erdoğan. In 2018, with the shift to a hyper-presidential system, BİMER became CİMER, Direct Presidency, under Presidential Decree No. 1. This shift did more than administratively restructure the platform. It rebranded it as an extension of the President himself, embedding citizen-state interaction within a central, personalized, and highly symbolic relationship with the executive office.

The historical evolution of the petitioning mechanism reveals how it has consistently functioned as an extension of Erdoğan's leadership, evolving in tandem with the consolidation of political power around him. However, this personalization has not occurred passively, but it has been actively reinforced through the official discourse, which constructs a narrative that roots the system in Erdoğan's personal vision and political trajectory. The official discourse frames e-petitioning under the direct presidency as a signature product of Erdoğan's distinct leadership style, tracing its roots to his tenure as Mayor of Istanbul (1994-1998). A report by the Directorate of Presidential Communication Centre (2023) situates the system's formal origins in a state project linked to EU accession and global digital governance trends in 2001 (a year before the AKP came to power), acknowledging these factors as important catalysts in the development of e-petitioning. However, the report credits Erdoğan's "Alo Beyaz Masa" call centre implementation as the true foundation of his "governance with the public" approach, later institutionalized through BİMER and CİMER. The report further claims that Erdoğan pioneered public relations in Turkey, framing CİMER not just as administrative modernization but as a reflection of his personal governance philosophy (p.11-15). In this

narrative, the petitioning system is not only personalized but mythologized, symbolizing Erdoğan's unique bond with the people and his role as their singular voice to the state.

By immersing the CİMER system in Erdoğan's personality and leadership style through a retrospective narrative, the official discourse does more than reconstruct the history and origin of the petitioning mechanism. It actively shapes public perception of how the system is, and how it should be used. This narrative positions Erdoğan as the sole authority overseeing all institutions and frames CİMER as the vital bridge between the president and his people. According to this construction, the concentration of power brought by the transition to the presidential system has not only restructured the state but also transformed the aspirations and expectations of citizens. In this new configuration, CİMER is portrayed as the necessary and natural channel through which those expectations are conveyed and fulfilled:

> With the introduction of the Presidential Government System, the strengthening of the executive branch has also shifted public expectations. In this context, CİMER has become a public communication system that contributes positively to building trust in state-society relations in Turkey. It facilitates the implementation of concepts like collaborative governance, participation, and accountability. When citizens apply to CİMER, they often address their petitions to the highest office of the state, expressing feelings of love, respect, and trust toward the President and the Presidency and expecting their requests to be addressed at the highest level (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2023 p.88).

In this self-contradictory account, the platform departs significantly from the good governance principles it claims to promote, such as participation, collaboration, and accountability. Rather than functioning as a neutral tool for democratic engagement, e-petitioning is framed as something far more symbolic: the institutional embodiment of the president's direct connection to the public. This personalistic appeal is visible in the petitions themselves. MinistryStaff2 described applications that begin with declarations of loyalty:

> Many applications open with declarations of loyalty: "Dear President, I've been a member of the AK Party for ten years; my whole family has always voted for you." Others stress devotion to party and faith: "I've never supported anyone else, I pray regularly, I live by certain values—yet you didn't hire my child; you hired someone else." Still others voice frustration over unfulfilled promises: "Why are we still subcontracted? Why haven't you given us permanent positions? Who are you giving these jobs to?" (10 October 2024).

This account shows how petitioners translate political loyalty, party support, and religious-moral belonging into claims for recognition and reward. The language of loyalty does not simply express support; it becomes a basis for entitlement. Citizens present themselves as deserving subjects who have fulfilled their side of the political relationship and therefore expect the state, personalized through Erdoğan, to respond in return. CourtStaff1 gave a similar example:

> Many complaints and denunciations start with "Dear President." For example, someone might write: "Dear President, I work at the AKP provincial office, my son is a village guard [a village guard armed against the PKK], I'm an AKP supporter—I request a transfer or a job placement" (09 September 2024)

This example makes the clientelist dimension even clearer. The petitioner does not approach the state as an anonymous rights-bearing citizen, but as a loyal supporter embedded in the regime's political and security networks. Party work, family service to the state, and support for the AKP are mobilized as credentials that justify access to employment, transfer, or bureaucratic favor.

These accounts demonstrate not only how personalistic connections manifest but also a clientelist relationship that underpins petitioning behaviours. It shows how direct presidential narrative transforms CİMER into a channel that legitimizes centralized authority while reinforcing citizen dependence on a personalized model of leadership. Instead of fostering an empowered and informed citizenry engaged in collaborative governance, the platform positions citizens as clients of presidential power, appealing to the leader, not through institutions but through a personal, symbolic relationship.

The co-optative function of this arrangement operates by binding citizens to centralized authority through petitioning. CİMER offers the experience of access, recognition, and responsiveness, but this access is mediated through a personalistic relationship with the Presidency rather than through strengthened institutional accountability. Instead of cultivating citizens as autonomous participants in collaborative governance, the "direct presidency" narrative encourages them to approach the state as clients of presidential power. In this sense, the presidential effect transforms e-petitioning into a mechanism of co-optation: it absorbs grievances, individualizes demands, and reinforces the image of the President as the ultimate guaranor of justice, service, and state responsiveness.

4. Legitimation through the reporting mechanism

Legitimation is both a process of garnering support and a strategy of justification, materializing through policy choices and political discourse (Marquez, 2016). Co-optation operates within this framework as one of the regime's core tools of legitimation. Policy decisions and rhetoric designed to draw actors into the regime's fold project an image of inclusiveness. In doing so, they not only secure compliance but also generate justificatory legitimacy, reinforcing the regime's broader claim to authority.

The study demonstrates that legitimation strategies are embedded at the core of both the policies and discursive narratives surrounding the reporting mechanism. The regime seeks to garner broad support not only from its core base but also from the broader population by establishing a system that is inclusive, responsive, and accessible. Appealing to the public through platforms like CİMER is also accompanied by a justificatory discourse that frames responsiveness as empowerment and participation as democratic engagement. Moreover, the

widespread public use of the system goes beyond a measure of its functionality. It is reinterpreted as a popular endorsement. This usage is then mobilized by the regime as evidence of legitimacy, with the participatory veneer of the reporting mechanism serving to justify the consolidation of centralized control and the personalization of governance.

While legitimation operates through the reporting system as outlined above, the justificatory normative power of the mechanism is rooted in a logic of democratic legitimacy. In principle, democratic legitimacy derives its normative power from the will of the people. This will is represented in governing bodies through a democratic process that relies on rules, procedures, and institutions. Therefore, democratic legitimacy rests on two key pillars: the people's will as the foundational principle, and procedures as the primary mechanism through which the democratic process functions.

The analysis so far has shown that both of these pillars are reflected in the discourse and operation of the reporting mechanism. The analysis shows that at the macro level, political discourse is overwhelmingly framed by democratic rhetoric, with a strong emphasis on the national will. This narrative functions not only as the justificatory basis for the regime's claim to legitimate rule, but also as a means of legitimizing policies, even when they are illiberal. Similarly, at the meso level, the discourse around the reporting mechanism places the national will at its core while also placing a pronounced emphasis on the procedural aspects of the system's creation, maintenance, and continuity.

The previous section showed how, in the official discourse, the reporting mechanism is justified and framed with democratic principles of inclusion, participation, and the people's will. Here, the analysis turns to procedural legitimacy, which is equally crucial: for a politically engineered system to sustain itself, it must not only invoke democratic ideals but also disguise its operations in a democratic veneer through procedure and due process.

4.1. Procedural Legitimation through law and judiciary

4.1.1. Legality

This thesis shows that the reporting mechanism in Turkey is embedded within existing nominally democratic institutions, operating primarily through the judiciary and bureaucracy. Institutionalized in this way, the system is firmly grounded in law, with its implementation facilitated through a range of bylaws, regulations, and administrative executive orders. The foundational legal basis of the mechanism rests on the constitutional *Right to Petition and Access Information*, as well as the right, and at times, the duty, to complain and report.

The right to petition is a constitutionally recognized and protected right in Turkey. Article 40 of the constitution guarantees the right to apply to relevant authorities in cases of rights violations, while Article 74 specifically addresses the Right to Petition. Positioned under the section titled "Political Rights and Duties," this right is grouped alongside other mechanisms of political participation, highlighting its role as a vital channel through which citizens can engage with and influence public governance. A later amendment to Article 74 expanded its scope to include the Right to Information, broadening the traditional understanding of petitioning beyond grievance submission to encompass state transparency and access to public data. The right to lodge a criminal complaint is regulated through criminal law and criminal procedure. For offences whose prosecution depends on a complaint, the victim or other entitled person must normally exercise that right within the statutory period. However, within the Turkish legal system, crime reporting is regarded not only as a right but also as a legal duty and obligation, with potential criminal liability for failure to comply. Article 278 of the Turkish Penal Code criminalises failure to report an offence that is still in progress, or whose consequences may still be prevented or limited. Related and more specific duties apply to public officials and certain health professionals under Articles 279 and 280.

As shown, Turkey's legal system creates a dual structure of citizen reporting: one grounded in political participation, through the right to petition and access information, and the other based on legal duty and obligation, particularly in the context of crime reporting. However, the system is designed to hold these two components together, blurring the line between voluntary civic engagement and compelled cooperation with the state, where citizen participation becomes a mechanism that can simultaneously uphold democratic ideals and facilitate state surveillance and control.

All regulatory processes and institutional structures of the reporting mechanism derive their legitimacy from these legal foundations, rendering the system democratic in principle and highly procedural in practice. While the constitutional basis of the mechanism serves as the overarching legal justification for its existence, a legitimate public face for the reporting mechanism is maintained by an illusion of justice, despite the judiciary being one of the primary mechanisms of repression. This is discussed in the next section.

4.1.2. Illusion of Justice

Whether based on their own professional experience or on cases they had observed, legal experts repeatedly pointed to a paradoxical perception of justice. Despite its deep flaws, the judicial system remains the primary route through which people seek redress, file appeals, challenge dismissals, or attempt to alter the course of events. Several participants described

individuals who continued to pursue legal remedies despite long delays, procedural uncertainty, and limited trust in the courts, because favourable outcomes remained possible. Acquittals, reinstatement to public-sector jobs, dismissals due to insufficient evidence, and the postponement of verdict announcements were all mentioned in interviews as examples that sustain the belief that justice may still be delivered. These moments of relief or reversal, even when exceptional, help preserve the impression that the system remains responsive and capable of fairness.

This creates what I call the illusion of justice. As shown in the previous chapter, the legal framework produces its own distinct form of repression through delayed prosecutions, procedural violations, and other adverse consequences for individuals. Yet the possibility of a favourable outcome continues to draw people into legal action because, in practice, the courts often remain the only available route. The interviews suggest that the Turkish judiciary maintains a legitimate façade not because it consistently delivers justice, but because it occasionally produces outcomes that appear fair, corrective, or favourable. Acquittals, reinstatements, or case dismissals can therefore have effects beyond the individual case: they help sustain public engagement with the courts and reinforce the appearance of the rule of law, even as the broader system remains deeply politicized and coercive.

In this sense, the illusion of justice operates as a legitimating mechanism. It keeps citizens invested in a system that may harm them, delay them, or expose them to further vulnerability, while still appearing capable of correction. The regime does not need the judiciary to be uniformly fair; it only needs the system to retain enough moments of apparent fairness to preserve belief in its procedural legitimacy. While this broader illusion is sustained through occasional justice-delivering outcomes, the regime also takes additional steps to maintain a legitimate public face for the reporting system. The next subsection demonstrates this by examining legislation introduced to regulate unfounded denunciations.

4.1.2.1. Perception of due process: The Decision on Obviating Investigations (SYOK) (CPC Art. 158/6)

In the Turkish penal system, a criminal investigation ordinarily begins when the prosecutor becomes aware of circumstances giving rise to an initial suspicion that an offence may have been committed. This is a lower threshold than the evidentiary standard required for indictment.

However, recent political developments prompted the government to regulate the pre-investigation phase, in which prosecutors decide whether to act on a report. A 2017 Decree-Law, enacted in 2018 (Decree-Law No. 694), introduced a pre-investigation screening mechanism. Where it is immediately apparent that the alleged conduct does not constitute an

offence, or where the allegation is abstract and general and unsupported by concrete facts, the prosecutor may issue a decision that there is no ground to conduct an investigation. The amended Article 158 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which governs reporting and complaints (158/6) states:

> If it is clearly understood, without the need for investigation, that the act in question does not constitute a crime, or if the report is vague and general, a decision of no grounds for investigation shall be issued.

The amendment to Article 158 grants prosecutors' discretion to issue a *Decision of No Grounds for Investigation* (SYOK) under two conditions: (a) if the allegation does not clearly constitute a crime, and (b) if it is vague or generic. This effectively places the "obligation to investigate" under prosecutorial review, aiming to filter out baseless denunciations and prevent misuse of the reporting system. It also introduces safeguards for individuals named in such reports. When a SYOK decision is issued, the person is not labelled a "suspect," and the decision remains confidential, accessible only to the prosecutor, judge, or court. This mechanism ensures that unfounded reports are dismissed early, without advancing to formal investigation.

The need to regulate reporting and complaints within the judiciary, alongside the timing of the presidential decree, reflects broader societal and political dynamics, especially after the 2016 coup. This period saw a sharp shift in the political landscape, marked by deepening polarization and widespread suspicion. Following the designation of the Fethullah Gülen movement as a terrorist organization (FETÖ), a surge of denunciations emerged, with citizens accusing one another of affiliation, often on weak or baseless grounds. The new legal norm can thus be seen both as a response to and a product of this climate.

This is confirmed by political actors who repeatedly acknowledged the widespread issue of baseless denunciations. Highlighting the increase in false accusations, the Minister of Justice warned that in the existing legal landscape, the presumption of innocence for thousands was seriously undermined (Gül, 2018). In another address, he explained how unfounded complaints and slander had become especially common during operations against alleged FETÖ members, often leading to serious social and professional harm (Gül, 2019). As a response, the legal adjustments to protect the "right to remain untainted" were introduced. Accordingly, based on this principle, a mechanism of a threshold for processing reports was introduced to protect individuals from defamation and to safeguard the presumption of innocence. By withholding the "suspect" label in baseless cases, the reform aimed to prevent harm to a person's reputation and dignity (Gül, 2019).

Even though the legal adjustment is justified to protect the "right to remain untainted", legal scholars point out that the aim was to reduce the workload of the public prosecutors in the

face of the surge in baseless denunciations (Kizilarslan, 2019). This is not only confirmed by the statements of the Minister of Justice but also by the data shared on the official ministry website. According to figures, following the amendment to Article 158, a total of 1.3 million tip-off files have been opened since 2017, and in 977,570 of these cases, SYOK was issued (Adalet Bakanlığı, 2024).

The legal adjustment to Article 158 demonstrates attempts to construct an image of a fair and protective legal system. Introduced to uphold the presumption of innocence and protect individuals from reputational harm, the amendment simultaneously seeks to serve pragmatic interests. By introducing a formal threshold for investigation and allowing prosecutors to filter out vague or unfounded denunciations through SYOK decisions, the state signals procedural restraints. However, this image of procedural fairness also masks deeper structural issues: the reform is largely a response to the overwhelming surge of politically charged and often baseless denunciations in a post-coup climate of suspicion and polarization. Thus, the regime cultivates a perception of legal integrity and due process while managing the burdens created by its own politicized surveillance culture. This duality reveals how legal reforms can simultaneously serve to streamline prosecutorial efficiency and maintain a façade of judicial impartiality, even in a context marked by widespread misuse of legal instruments for political ends.

5. The co-optive logic of the reporting mechanism

This section has shown that the reporting mechanism operates not only as an instrument of co-optation but also as a key site of legitimation within Turkey's contemporary authoritarian governance. By enabling direct and personalized interaction with the presidency, the mechanism functions as a vessel for Erdoğan's populist appeal, presenting the state as responsive, accessible, and attentive to citizens. This performance of proximity and care is central to the regime's broader social contract, which promises protection and problem-solving in exchange for loyalty and participation.

Co-optation takes different institutional forms. Within the judiciary, it is secured through ideological gatekeeping: courts position themselves as protectors of the Nation, reinforcing the ruling ideology and rewarding those aligned with it. Within the bureaucracy, co-optation operates more inclusively. The petitioning system offers ordinary citizens a sense of influence, procedural fairness, and empowerment, elevating them symbolically to the status of stakeholders in governance. These channels absorb dissent, redirect grievances, and integrate the public into state structures on terms set by the regime.

Legitimation emerges through these same processes, but it is reinforced by the legal and constitutional framework in which the reporting system is embedded. By situating reporting within a formal architecture of rights, procedures, and targeted legislation, the regime cloaks the mechanism in a legal veneer that presents it as a legitimate avenue for justice and civic engagement. The system's responsiveness, whether real, selective, or symbolic, further creates an appearance of accountability and inclusion. Occasional positive or corrective outcomes, even when exceptional, sustain the illusion that the mechanism delivers justice and that the state can act impartially. Predictable procedures and consistent feedback cultivate procedural trust, encouraging citizens engagement even if they are critical of it. Thus, participation becomes normalized across ideological divides, turning everyday interactions with the state into quiet affirmations of its authority. Citizens become not only co-opted participants but also contributors to the regime's legitimacy, reinforcing the social contract through practices framed as empowerment but structured around control.

Collectively, these dynamics demonstrate how the reporting mechanism functions as a strategic tool within the regime's hybrid social contract: it co-opts citizens by drawing them into state practices and legitimizes authority by performing responsiveness. In doing so, it sustains authoritarian rule under the guise of participatory governance, reinforcing a hegemonic order through the very interactions framed as empowering the public.

Chapter VIII. Repression, Participation, and the Ordinary: A Micro-Level Analysis of Denunciations

1. Introduction

Building on the macro- and meso-level analyses, this chapter examines how the state's witch-hunt project evolved into a reporting regime that reshaped everyday life. If the previous chapters showed how suspicion was constructed discursively and made actionable through legal and bureaucratic procedures, this chapter turns to how this reporting regime is experienced by ordinary citizens in their personal, professional, social, and bureaucratic encounters. By focusing on lived experiences, the chapter demonstrates how the reporting regime, as an authoritarian project, unfolds at the micro level, crystallizing its core mechanisms: by co-opting citizens into the state machinery, generating repression for its targets, and drawing legitimacy from its users. Its analytical value lies in revealing dynamics that remain invisible in discourse or institutional analysis: the motivations behind reporting, the emotional and material consequences that follow denunciations, and the ways in which individuals internalize or contest state power. Because such processes cannot be captured through aggregate patterns, the chapter adopts a more flexible and exploratory approach, privileging depth over breadth to illuminate how denunciations operate in practice.

Repression and its afterlife occupy a substantial part of this analysis, demonstrating the long shadow cast by a single report and the diversity of forms of victimisation. At the same time, user accounts highlight the system's reach as a tool of co-optation and legitimation, revealing the material, ideological, affective, and strategic incentives that sustain participation from below. These experiences illuminate the everyday workings of authoritarian governance, showing how citizens become both subjects and agents of state power.

This chapter builds directly on the previous analyses by situating individual experiences within the broader macro-level discourses and meso-level institutional arrangements that shape them. It begins with an outline of the methodological approach, describing how the interviews were conducted and analysed. The chapter then proceeds in two parts: the first examines the consequences of repression for those who are denounced, and the second explores how reporting becomes a site of co-optation and legitimation, explaining why citizens choose to engage with the system.

2. Implementation of semi-structured interviews

At the micro level, semi-structured interviews were chosen to capture individual experiences, perceptions, and feelings, as they provide the characteristic format for personal narratives (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Conducted within a constructivist paradigm, the interviews are understood as a co-production of meaning through dialogue rather than a simple extraction of information (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach enables interpretive depth, allowing for the tracing of motives, dilemmas, informal practices, and emotional and material consequences that are often obscured in broader structural analysis of authoritarian systems.

The aim here is not breadth of coverage, but analytical insight: individual cases illuminate the diversity and, in some instances, the severity of repression experienced by those who are denounced, as well as the forms of co-optation and legitimation that take shape among those who engage with the reporting system. Studying a phenomenon such as denunciations requires interviews to capture lived experience, as meanings, dilemmas, and motivations cannot be documented through official records or institutional data alone. Even where official data exist, they cannot speak to how individuals interpret or navigate these processes. Privileging depth, therefore, allows for a fuller understanding of how citizens experience and enact state power in their everyday lives.

Throughout the research process, I practised reflexive objectivity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) by examining how my positionality, assumptions, interactions with participants, and interpretative decisions shaped the production and analysis of the interview material. Rather than treating researcher subjectivity as something that could be eliminated, I sought to make its role visible and to remain accountable for the analytical choices through which meanings and themes were constructed.

2.1. Sampling, Participant Cohorts, and Interview Design

A total of twenty-four participants were interviewed, including nine users of the petitioning system and fifteen individuals who had been reported through various channels for different reasons. Recruitment took place through multiple channels, including referrals, WhatsApp groups, and direct contact with individuals who had shared their experiences on social media. Except for two, most interviews were conducted online, which made it possible to reach participants across different districts. The sample represents a diverse range of educational and cultural backgrounds.

In the thematizing phase, the purpose and themes of investigation were formulated in line with the overarching concepts of repression, co-optation, and legitimation, as in the preceding levels. Interview questions were designed around anticipated themes that varied by cohort. For participants who had been denounced, the primary focus was on the consequences of being denounced and the forms of victimization they experienced. For users of the system, questions centered on their incentives for reporting (co-optation) and their overall perceptions of the system (legitimation). Flexibility was maintained across cohorts to allow new themes to emerge organically. The semi-structured format enabled in-depth exploration while also ensuring comparability across cases.

2.2. Analysing interviews with Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019), a flexible interpretative method that combines coding with the development and refinement of themes. In RTA, theme construction is an organic and evolving process, shaped by ongoing analytical engagement with the data. Following RTA, in this study, themes were developed as "patterns of shared meaning organised around a central concept". During the initial stages, I also used "domain summaries" (p.593) to organise descriptive information concerning reporting channels, allegations, institutional responses, and outcomes. These summaries served as data-management tools rather than final analytical themes and supported the subsequent development of interpretative themes.

I organized domain summaries early in the process and differentiated them across cohorts. For participants who had been reported, codes included *channels of reporting*, *grounds for reports*, *discursive framing*, and *consequences*. For users of the system, codes covered the *reporting channel*, *type of submission*, *grounds for reporting*, *institutional responses and outcomes*, and *justifications offered or inferred*. Combined with the interpretative themes developed through sustained engagement with the data, these descriptive summaries helped identify both commonalities and variations across participants' experiences.

2.3. Summary of Interview Data

This section presents an overview of the domain summaries derived from interviews with reported citizens and users of the petitioning system. Although not yet fully contextualized, these summaries highlight common patterns across cases, including repressive outcomes, incentives and justifications for reporting, and the tangible results obtained. They provide an initial empirical map of how the reporting regime operates on the ground, showing how individual experiences connect to the broader dynamics analyzed in the chapter.

2.3.1. Reported citizens

The dataset captures a diverse range of reporting cases involving individuals working in various professional contexts, including teachers, doctors, civil servants, freelancers, and students. The cases reflect a wide spectrum of reporting grounds, framing, and consequences, illustrating how formal and informal mechanisms of monitoring, surveillance, and moral policing operate in contemporary Turkey, resulting in varying outcomes.

Across the interviews, CİMER was most frequently described as the channel through which reporting took place. Participants also recalled other routes such as social media, institutional blacklists, the prosecutor's office, the police, and informal mechanisms. The diversity of denouncers, including colleagues, patients, students' parents, and anonymous actors, highlights how reporting can arise in different everyday settings, even if in varying ways and intensities.

Reporting grounds refer to the actions, behaviors, or situations that trigger complaints or denunciations. These grounds span a wide spectrum, from everyday activities that would not normally be considered misconduct, such as performing music in venues that serve alcohol, posting on social media, or engaging in private conversations, to more politically/morally charged acts like activism or creating adult content. In many cases, whether a behavior becomes reportable depends not on the act itself but on its perceived alignment with political, moral, ideological, or professional norms. Such grounds often function as proxies for deeper conflicts, such as political, moral, or personal, especially when the behavior is seen as deviating from the values of the ruling ideology.

On the other hand, the framing of wrongdoing refers to the discursive strategies individuals use to justify their complaints. It also refers to an institutional or legal lens through which these complaints are processed in judicial or bureaucratic proceedings. Common frames are terrorism and morality-related accusations, defamation, and alleged professional misconduct. Framing operates not only to justify the allegations but also to amplify them, enhancing the likelihood of an institutional response. Regardless of the severity of the allegations, the claims are situated within the broader moral and political context.

Institutional consequences varied considerably. Some participants experienced criminal investigation, police custody, pre-trial detention, prosecution, trial, or imprisonment following conviction. Others faced administrative investigation, dismissal, demands for a written defense, or closure of the file without further action. While some individuals faced career repercussions, such as forced withdrawal or the denial of positions, others experienced no negative consequences beyond a written defence. Notably, several cases resulted in dismissals,

highlighting the serious personal cost that denunciation can incur, even in the absence of legal conviction.

The current status entries demonstrate the afterlife of denunciation, revealing a wide spectrum of individual outcomes resulting from denunciations. Reported outcomes range from forced migration and social or professional withdrawals to ongoing trials. A few cases resulted in acquittal; however, the intensity and duration of the proceedings suggest a form of punishment in themselves.

Based on the interview material, the reporting landscape appears deeply moralised and politicised, with participants describing highly repressive consequences for those who are reported. In the cases shared, participants frequently interpreted the denunciations against them as arising from personal grievances, ideological hostility, or a combination of the two. While these accounts do not encompass the full spectrum of denunciation practices, they offer valuable insight into how reporting is experienced, interpreted, and mobilized by those directly involved.

Table 6: Summary Data on Reported Individuals: Profiles, Allegations, Reporting grounds and Outcomes

Summary of Denunciation Cases

Case ID	Role	Institution	Reporting channel	Denouncer	Alleged reporting grounds	Discursive framing of allegation	Reported institutional consequences	Status at time of interview
RepFem1	Teacher	Public school	Social media	Colleague	Literary production featuring Kurdish characters or themes	Framed as pro-terrorism	Required to step down as chief editor	Withdrew from literary circle
RepFem1			Informal reporting	Colleague	Alcohol consumption and clothing described as immoral	Moral deviation	Required to step down from project-management role	Withdrew from project-management role
RepFem2	Civil servant	Public sector	CİMER	Unknown	Music performances in venues serving alcohol	Undermining the dignity of public servants; harming the reputation of state institutions; alleged improper income	Required to submit a written defence; administrative inquiry closed without sanction	Withdrew from music performances
RepFem2			In-person petition	Unknown	Making tea during working hours	Neglect of duties / idling at work	Required to submit a written defence; workplace kettles were subsequently prohibited	Self-regulation at work
RepMale3	Engineer	Municipality	Institutional blacklisting	Colleague	Past political activism and documentation of conflict-related destruction in an official capacity	Aiding and abetting terrorism	Dismissed through institutional discretion, without a criminal trial	Migrated abroad
RepMale4	Flight attendant	Private airline	Social media / CİMER	Colleague	Private social-media post	Incitement to hatred and hostility; insulting religion or religious values	Dismissal from employment; criminal proceedings	Sought asylum
RepMale5	Doctor	Public hospital	CİMER	Unknown	Music performances in venues serving alcohol	Undermining the dignity of public servants; harming the reputation of state institutions; alleged improper income	Required to submit a written defence; administrative inquiry closed by a superior without sanction	Continued performing
RepFem6	Freelancer	Not applicable	Prosecutor's office	Mayor	Social-media activity	Defamation / insult allegation	Criminal investigation opened	Investigation ongoing
RepFem7	Teacher	Public school	CİMER	Parent of a student	Request for a shift change for childcare reasons	Alleged professional negligence	Required to submit a written defence; administrative inquiry closed without sanction	Withdrew from the class
RepMale8	Humanitarian worker	UN project	Informal reporting	Colleague	Political activism and past litigation	Alleged terrorist affiliation	Employment position denied	Unemployed
RepFem9	Flight attendant	Public / private airline	CİMER	Unknown	Social-media activity	Divisive speech; alleged defamation of state officials and the president	Dismissal presented as a fait accompli; criminal prosecution	Unemployed; acquitted
RepFem10	Doctor	Military institution	CİMER	Patient	Alleged insulting treatment of a patient	Professional misconduct / mistreatment	Required to submit a written defence; administrative inquiry closed by a superior without sanction	No further repercussions
RepMale11	Retired state inspector	None	Prosecutor's office	Member of parliament	Social-media activity	Defamation / insult allegation	Criminal investigation; 24 hours in police custody	Decision of non-prosecution
RepFem12	Freelancer	None	CİMER	Unknown	Creation of content for adult platforms	Obscenity; corrupting public morality; alleged unreported income	Criminal proceedings initiated	Indictment pending
RepMale13	University student	None	Police	Friend	Private conversations	Alleged PKK recruitment / terrorism involvement	Criminal investigation and trial; 11 months in pre-trial detention	Acquitted
RepFem14	Teacher	Public school	CİMER	Parent of a student	Alleged professional negligence	Exposure of children to immorality	Administrative complaint closed by the school principal without sanction	No further repercussions
RepFem15	Nurse	Public hospital	CİMER	Patient	Alleged discriminatory treatment	Favouritism and discrimination	Required to submit a written defence; no disciplinary sanction reported	No further repercussions

2.3.2. Reporting citizens

The data for the reporting citizen cohort involves nine citizens, the majority of whom submitted petitions multiple times for various reasons, primarily through CİMER. The type of submission was primarily framed as complaints, aside from a few "information demand" and "opinion-suggestion" petitions. While some reports were related to crime reporting, particularly in cases of scams, drug-related observations, or sexual misconduct, others involved service grievances or professional misconduct, such as ill-treatment, fraud, or infrastructure issues. A few entries involved demands for explanation or policy input, revealing that citizens also utilised reporting platforms to seek institutional transparency or influence policy decisions.

The justifications for reporting varied by case. Administrative accountability serves as a common justification, especially for perceived misconduct by public service personnel, such as mistreatment. Many participants expressed a sense of civic duty in crime reporting, particularly when they felt at risk for themselves and others. Notably, the pursuit of justice emerged as a common justification across cases involving more serious accusations, such as sexual harassment or military mistreatment, as well as information denial related to job dismissals.

Institutional responses also varied by case. Some reports triggered administrative investigations, resulting in tangible outcomes such as disciplinary actions or preventive measures to resolve the issue. However, some participants reported generic or symbolic responses, either by citing the ongoing judicial process or by providing an acknowledgement without offering a substantial solution. Within this small cohort, reports framed in terms of crime or immediate safety concerns were more likely to receive a response that participants regarded as tangible, although the pattern was not uniform. In one instance, the fraud by the family doctor did not trigger a tangible solution. In others, an engagement is signalled by a formal explanation.

Overall, the data point to a dynamic form of state–citizen interaction, with users engaging in the reporting mechanism largely out of a desire for state intervention in perceived misconduct or crime. Participants often framed their motivations in terms of pursuing justice and holding others accountable. While some reports resulted in tangible outcomes and others remained procedural or unresolved, the act of engagement itself demonstrates how petitioning incorporates citizens into the state apparatus through a form of proxy accountability, functioning as a mechanism of co-optation.

Summary of Reporting Cases

Case ID	Occupation	Reporting channel	Type of submission	Reported issue / allegation	Reported institutional response or outcome	Stated or inferred justification
UserFem1	Accountant	CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Online scam	Outcome pending at time of interview	Protecting others; civic duty
UserMale2	Municipality worker	CİMER	Request for information	Dismissal from employment	Formal response citing ongoing judicial proceedings	Pursuit of justice; seeking a formal explanation
UserMale3	University student	CİMER	Complaint	Alleged mistreatment by health workers	Outcome pending at time of interview	Administrative accountability
UserMale3		CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Online scam	Participant reported that criminal proceedings were initiated	Pre-emptive self-protection
UserFem4	University student	CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Alleged fraud involving a family doctor	Generic formal response; no tangible resolution reported	Administrative accountability; civic duty
UserFem4		Institutional website	Complaint	Infrastructure problem	Complaint acknowledged but unresolved; participant reported official criticism of the responsible officer	Service-related grievance reporting
UserFem4		CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Alleged sexual harassment by a teacher	Administrative investigation; participant reported suspension and relocation of the teacher	Pursuit of justice; protective intervention against abuse
UserMale5	University student	CİMER	Complaint	Alleged mistreatment by military superiors	Administrative and disciplinary investigations; participant reported dismissal of the staff member concerned	Pursuit of justice; administrative accountability
UserMale5		CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Suspected drug use in the neighbourhood	Participant reported that police installed CCTV cameras	Civic duty
UserFem6	Retired civil servant	CİMER	Complaint	Perceived fraud involving a doctor	Formal reply providing information; administrative inspection reportedly conducted	Administrative accountability
UserFem6		CİMER	Complaint	Alleged mistreatment by a hospital receptionist	Formal reply referring the matter to internal supervisors	Administrative accountability
UserFem7	Municipal engineer	CİMER	Request for information	Dismissal from employment	Formal response citing ongoing judicial proceedings	Pursuit of justice; seeking a formal explanation
UserMale8	Civil servant	CİMER	Complaint / suspected crime report	Reported unlawful cutting of trees	Participant reported police intervention and initiation of criminal proceedings	Civic duty; environmental concerns
UserMale8		CİMER	Opinion / suggestion	Confidential policy issue	Submission acknowledged but unresolved; response cited legal limitations	Desire to influence policy; civic duty
UserMale9	Activist	CİMER	Demand / policy appeal	Reported killing of animals, described by the participant as a massacre	Generic formal response	Desire to influence policy and create public pressure

3. Repression

This section examines the lived experiences of repression triggered by denunciations, highlighting dynamics that remain obscured in institutional or legal analyses alone. It is organised into three interrelated parts. The first focuses on the immediate encounter with the state, tracing how individuals move from the shock of suddenly becoming suspects to the prolonged uncertainty, unpredictability, and at times absurdity that characterise the ensuing process. The second part turns to the afterlife of repression, showing how denunciation produces forms of civic death through irreversible career rupture, denial of employment, and broader social and professional marginalisation. The final part examines how authoritarianism is reproduced in everyday life, exploring horizontal surveillance, malicious reporting, the strategic use of the state to settle personal grievances, and the moral policing through which lifestyle, expression, and identity are rendered suspicious, reportable, and potentially subject to administrative or criminal scrutiny. These subsections reveal how repression unfolds not only through formal procedures but also through the ordinary practices and social relations that shape daily life under authoritarian rule.

3.1. Facing the state after denunciation

3.1.1. From citizen to suspect: the shock of state encounter

Interviews reveal a disorienting encounter with state power, once denunciations lead to serious consequences like criminal proceedings. From the early stages onwards, individual experiences are characterised by shock, paralysis, and panic, as, for almost all participants, it was their first encounter with the state as "suspects" of an alleged crime.

The entire process, from the initial notification to giving a statement at the police station and, in some cases, proceeding to trial or detention, was intimidating for participants regardless of the outcome. The notification stage, during which individuals were contacted by the police either by phone or through home visits to provide an initial statement, marked the first encounter with the repressive machinery of denunciation. Participants described this moment as shocking in itself, leaving them in a state of paralysis because they often did not know what they were being accused of. RepFem6 and RepMale13 recalled being unable to process what the police were telling them over the phone. RepFem9 similarly described the moment as one in which "the world stopped, and everything froze."

Crucially, irregularities and arbitrariness intensified the negative impact for some, transforming an already stressful procedure into a traumatic experience. RepMale4 recounted the very night he was collectively lynched on social media for allegedly insulting religion with a picture he posted on his private account, saying: "Three police cars arrived at my house, as if I were a

terrorist" (2024). In two cases, participants were arrested due to procedural failures: either they were not notified to provide an initial statement, or the statements they had given were not processed by the police.

RepFem12, whose client was denounced for creating adult content on online platforms, described how the client had a meltdown over an unlawful raid on her mother's house. It was a deeply unsettling situation, not only for the fear and panic it triggered but also because it exposed her name and circumstances to her mother and neighbors, marking her as a suspect and causing shame and distress to her family. The impact was so significant that the client, who was abroad on holiday at the time, considered seeking asylum there. Upon disclosure of the investigation, RepFem12 had to reveal her career to her mother, which she had been hiding for a long time.

Similarly, RepMale11, a retired high-ranking bureaucrat who was accused of defaming an MP on social media, recounted how he was detained twice by the police at the airport simply because his previous statements had not been processed. He was denied his flight on two occasions and endured humiliation in front of numerous people. However, the real trauma struck him when he was held in a cell for eight hours:

> I was truly victimised. I'm not even talking about the money I lost, the wasted time, or the missed flight. I spent eight hours crammed with people I'd never otherwise be near. Turned out, one of them had killed a police officer. Psychologically, it was devastating. All these young guys knew each other; they were from the same neighbourhoods and circles. One was a thief, another a mugger, chatting like old friends. Then one of them looked at me and said, "This guy might be an informant." I was a man in my sixties, surrounded by guys between 18 and 25. I just sat there in silence, not knowing what would happen. They were completely at ease, while I was terrified (14 February 2025).

The highlighted cases demonstrate that the judicialization of denunciations can be inherently intimidating from the outset, particularly when compounded by a lack of due process. More importantly, they also reveal the types of charges that trigger swift and punitive state action as soon as they appear on the state's radar, where penalties are effectively imposed in advance.

Allegations that prompt immediate judicial response, such as terrorism, insulting religion, or defamation, also reveal citizens' incentives: by invoking such charges in their denunciations, they can ensure state responsiveness and amplify the consequences for those denounced. For example, RepMale4 was denounced by a colleague over a personal matter, who disseminated his private social media post to ultra-religious accounts for allegedly insulting religion. Even if he voluntarily went to the police station to give his statement, he was arrested after the prosecutor pointed to 10,000 CİMER complaints against him, citing "suspicion of escape." Similarly, RepMale13, a Kurdish college student, was denounced on terrorism charges by his girlfriend's best friend and classmate. He was put in detention following his very first

interrogation, where he stayed for eleven months. He recalls how his life was abruptly upended on what had begun as an ordinary day, even one in which he sat an exam:

> I went in with my lawyer to give my statement. I was shocked by the questions. The police had wiretapped my phone. The questions weren't neutral; they pushed me toward certain answers, like I was a criminal. Just sitting in that chair was unbearable. You're not prepared for something like that. You can't even think straight. If I had done something wrong, maybe I would've expected it. But hearing my everyday conversations turned into accusations, being treated like a criminal by the state, it was devastating. I was stunned. I struggled to answer some of the questions. They even brought up deeply personal conversations with my girlfriend and her family. Knowing someone had listened to and dissected them was a terrible feeling. That evening, I'd just finished an exam. One moment, I was a student giving a statement; the next, I was standing before a judge. I can't even recall exactly what they asked or how I answered. It's all a blur. Years have passed, but that feeling still lingers (23 April 2025).

The cases demonstrate that the judicialization of denunciations unfolds in various ways; however, the initial encounter with the state often carries a significant emotional weight. Participants described a range of experiences at this stage. Some recounted moments of fair or even empathetic treatment, for instance, RepFem6 recalled an officer expressing frustration at the injustice of her denunciation. Others, however, emphasized that "the first encounter" was deeply disempowering. For many, the shock of interrogation, detention, or even the mere act of being summoned by the police produced acute fear and lasting anxiety.

While these accounts reveal how repression can be embedded in the process from the outset, with varying intensity and form across individuals, for some, the consequences extended well beyond the case itself. RepMale11, for example, left his job as an expert despite his defamation case being dropped in a non-prosecution decision; he explained that he could no longer endure the anxiety of attending court, even in a professional capacity. What begins as a disorienting first encounter often deepens into a broader sense of uncertainty, an uncertainty that forms the core of what can be called the tyranny of unpredictability.

3.1.2. The Tyranny of Unpredictability

3.1.2.1. Life in limbo

For many, denunciation marks the beginning of a descent into uncertainty, an abrupt rupture that suspends normal life and places individuals in a prolonged state of shock, confusion, and suspense, making uncertainty a form of repression. In many cases, denunciation triggers a series of unpredictable events, in which people are punished before they even understand what they are being accused of, in the absence of a clear official process. Participants recounted being shocked by the abruptness of these events, which left them disoriented and unable to make sense of what was happening to them, a situation exacerbated by the opacity of the institutional response.

For example, RepFem9, a flight attendant, was informed that all of her scheduled flights for the month had been cancelled. While trying to understand what had happened, she was summoned to her workplace, where she was handed a termination letter without prior explanation or any formal procedure. She only understood what had happened when a second denunciation later triggered criminal proceedings against her. Even then, she was not formally notified of the original accusation; she learned of it only because it appeared in the case file. Similarly, a flight attendant, RepMale4, was taken into custody solely on the basis of collective denunciations through a social media petitioning campaign. He was dismissed before any substantive investigation into his case had taken place. Municipality employees UserFem7 and UserMale2 were removed from their posts without warning, trial, or clear charges. In the midst of this uncertainty, they were left without knowing what had happened, what they were accused of, or what action they could take. RepMale3 learned of his dismissal through a presidential decree after the coup and was banned from travel, without even having set foot in a courtroom. He found about his travel ban only when he tried to pass border check at the airport. RepMale13 spent months in custody before an indictment was even prepared, living in uncertainty about the charges, the timeline, and the possible outcome. By the time he was acquitted, he had already spent eleven months in jail, effectively serving a sentence for a crime of which he was never convicted.

Participants described how the initial shock of being denounced was followed by an even more disorienting experience: the slow, dragging weight of uncertainty. Often prolonged and opaque, judicial and procedural processes left them suspended in time, unsure of what would happen next. Many recounted how their lives came to a standstill, as they waited in the dark, sometimes for years, caught in a state shaped by fear, confusion, and anticipation. RepFem9, a flight attendant, has been trapped in a cycle of legal harassment stemming from a denunciation that escalated into a criminal defamation case. Although she has been acquitted twice, the acquittals were repeatedly appealed, and the case continues to move through higher courts with no resolution after several years. RepFem9 describes how the prolonged uncertainty has extended her sense of victimization, while at the same time, it keeps dragging her back and forth between hope and despair:

> I am waiting for the reinstatement case to be resolved at the Constitutional Court. Then I need to be acquitted by the Court of Cassation, which is the final stage… But they just keep dragging it out. Nothing is being done. There's no progress at all. And you feel completely powerless. There's nothing you can do. I check the e-justice platform from time to time to see if there have been any developments, but there never are. Thoughts come and go. That loss just lingers there, like someone died. Like something was taken, and I never got justice for it. Nearly ten years of effort have just been left behind (11 February 2025).

RepMale3, who faced a travel ban without a court trial or conviction, waited four years for his ban to be lifted so he could reunite with his wife and newborn child abroad, checking in

person every month. He knows he has been entangled in a legal battle since 2016, which he will ultimately lose:

> After four years, you really start to lose hope. I mean, is four years a short time? Think about it, over a thousand days. Then, eventually, my travel ban was lifted. I went abroad and built a life there. My case is still ongoing. It's currently with the relevant appellate court, but it will most likely be rejected. Then it will go to a higher court, which will probably reject it too. At this rate, it could end up at the European Court of Human Rights (13 September 2024).

The highlighted cases show how uncertainty itself operates as a form of repression, disempowering individuals by rendering them dysfunctional in both professional and private life. However, even in rare instances where "justice" was formally delivered, the process was often undermined by new obstacles that prolonged insecurity. Delays and drawn-out procedures in accessing legally guaranteed compensation only deepened the burdens participants faced. A college student, RepMale13, for example, was wrongfully imprisoned for almost a year upon a baseless denunciation. However, he was unable to file a compensation lawsuit for months because the notification of his acquittal was never delivered to his lawyer. Similarly, RepMale4, who had to seek asylum after his collective denunciation on social media triggered a criminal proceeding and even detention, has yet to receive his severance pay. Currently, he is living in a van as an asylum seeker, and the money, even if granted, has lost much of its value due to currency devaluation. He recounted how he was forced to borrow a large sum to pay human traffickers to take him abroad, illustrating how uncertainty and delay compound repression by pushing individuals into ever more precarious circumstances. For many, this unpredictability was compounded by an even deeper frustration: the feeling of being left to wander inside an unresponsive system, a theme taken up in the next section.

3.1.2.2. Repression through *institutional ghosting*: A Kafkaesque dynamic

Kafka's *The Castle* has come to be a metaphor to describe impenetrable, opaque, and endlessly deferring bureaucratic systems in which individuals search for answers that never arrive. The post-denunciation experiences described by participants echoed this dynamic. They recount being trapped in processes where institutions stop responding, procedures stall without explanation, and decisions disappear into silence, an experience that reflects the inaccessible and repeatedly delayed bureaucracy captured in Kafka's book. In these accounts, an ordinary inquiry or administrative request gradually dissolves into a void of non-communication, leaving individuals uncertain about the status of their cases or whether any progress is being made at all. This sense of abandonment through institutional stonewalling emerged as a recurring pattern across interviews, compounding the anxiety, stress, and confusion already triggered by being denounced, revealing how bureaucratic silence itself becomes a tool of repression.

In many cases, participants were unable to find a responsive channel as they descended into an informational void. A flight attendant, RepMale4 recounted how no one within the company responded to his calls after he learned he was facing a disciplinary process triggered by a denunciation. RepMale11, who was denounced for insulting a state official on social media several times, was sent back and forth in an effort to determine where he could submit his statement. In one case, he was arrested at the airport just because his statement was not processed. RepMale3, UserFem7, and UserMale2 were unable to contact the relevant authorities to file an appeal, as they were denied basic information about why they had been dismissed or by whom.

RepFem9's experience is illustrative. A senior flight attendant, RepFem9, suddenly discovered that all her flights for the month had been cancelled by the airline's automated system. When she sought clarification from her unit, no explanation was provided. Only later did she informally learn that she had been referred to the ethics committee for a disciplinary matter, yet no one would tell her why:

> They called me, saying, 'Ms. RepFem9, you have a case with the ethics committee. It's a disciplinary matter. You're not supposed to call anyone, just wait.' I looked up the ethics committee regulations to understand my responsibilities. It said I'd be called to give a defence. But how could I defend myself without knowing what I was accused of? When I called the ethics committee, they responded harshly: 'Stop calling and wait.' The process felt unethical. The airline left me waiting for a week, during which I was extremely anxious. After a week, I received a formal summons by email. I called again and said I needed to know the issue to prepare my defence. They replied, 'We won't tell you.' So, I went in anyway, only to be forced to sign the termination of employment contract (11 February 2025).

This case demonstrates how institutional ghosting functions as an additional form of punishment beyond the denunciation itself. More than a simple administrative delay, the case shows a refusal to provide information. RepFem9 was told not to reach out, denied the details of the allegation, and ultimately summoned without an opportunity to prepare a defense. Information denial effectively prevented RepFem9 from appealing the process, leaving her disoriented and unable to exercise the basic procedural rights.

During the post-coup purges, dismissal procedures were widely criticized for denying individuals meaningful access to the reasons and evidence underlying the measures taken against them. Amnesty International reported that dismissed public-sector workers were often not given reasons for their dismissal and lacked an effective means to challenge the decisions, while later reviews by the State of Emergency Inquiry Commission were criticized for failing to provide sufficiently individualized reasoning (Amnesty International, 2017, 2018). This broader pattern of non-disclosure, delayed review, and ineffective remedy can be understood as a form of information denial. Although RepFem9's case occurred in 2019 and involved a private company rather than a direct emergency-decree dismissal, it reflects the extension of

this logic into employment relations beyond the public sector. By withholding clear reasons, formal notification, or transparent procedures, the employer effectively prevented her from understanding the accusation and appealing her dismissal. Institutional ghosting through non-communication, lack of transparency, and procedural delay thus became part of the wider repressive environment. Whether through silence, delayed procedures, or evasive communication, these methods limited scrutiny and obstructed legal appeal.

3.1.3. Manufactured legality: Cloaking absurdity in legal form

Interviews illustrate how politically motivated repression is often concealed beneath a carefully constructed legal façade that sometimes defies logic. This dynamic was especially evident in political denunciations, where an autocratic legalistic mindset shaped outcomes. Reported individuals often described being subjected to repercussions concealed under a legal façade, giving politically motivated repression a veneer of legitimacy. Their stories echoed those of legal experts: Many recounted how, once targeted, the process seemed to run in reverse: charges were retroactively justified, personal histories selectively weaponized, or evidence fabricated to fit the accusation. A legal "cover" was quickly manufactured to legitimize a punishment that had already been decided. Some of these cases resembled dystopian fiction in their far-fetched severity, while others carried an absurdity of dark comedy, revealing how absurdity was cloaked within autocratic legalism.

A college student, RepMale13's case captures both dynamics and illustrates the extent to which ordinary speech could be reinterpreted through a criminalizing lens. After being denounced by a friend, his phone was wiretapped, and private conversations with his girlfriend were later presented as evidence. In one call, he asked for a "silicone gun" for home repairs, which was interpreted literally as a request for a weapon. In another romantic message, he told his girlfriend that he "imagined her as another star in the sky"; this was construed as an attempt to recruit her into a terrorist organization. Once suspicion was activated, even mundane or intimate language were stripped of context and transformed into incriminating evidence.

At times, the absurdity reached an extreme point where reality itself became secondary to bureaucratic fiction: a passport physically in the participant's hands was rendered unusable because the system had classified it as "lost," turning an administrative fiction into an effective travel ban. RepMale3's passport was confiscated at the airport after he was told that it had been registered as lost, even though he was holding it at the time. Unable to convince security officials that the document had not been lost, he was denied boarding. He later discovered that the authorities had used a legal loophole to impose an indirect travel ban on individuals

purged by decree, bypassing the need for a formal judicial ruling. What mattered was not that RepMale3 physically held his passport, but that the system had classified it as "lost."

The absurdity of some cases emerged in the gap between the actual conduct and the official grounds used to justify punishment. RepMale4, a flight attendant, was dismissed after posting a photo on his private social media account in which he was drinking alcohol on a religious holiday, accompanied by a humorous caption. The post was leaked by a co-worker to fundamentalist religious social media accounts, turning a private act into a public moral controversy. Although this was the real reason behind his dismissal, the employer formally justified the decision under Article 46 of Labour Law No. 4857, citing "theft and disclosure of company secrets" as the official grounds. In this case, private conduct that was considered morally offensive was first exposed through interpersonal denunciation and then translated into an unrelated legal category, allowing the employer to present an ideological sanction as a lawful disciplinary measure.

A similar logic appeared in RepFem9's case. She was dismissed over old social media posts from the Gezi Protests, including pro-LGBT statements and references to Erdoğan as a "dictator." Not only did she face a defamation lawsuit in 2019, but her reinstatement appeal was also rejected. The court reasoned that, because the airline she worked for was state-owned and Erdoğan was the head of state, her comments were tantamount to insulting her employer. To obstruct her future employment, she was registered as having been dismissed on the grounds of a "disgraceful offence." Here, the absurdity becomes even more pronounced: criticism of a political leader was retroactively converted into workplace misconduct, while the boundaries between president, party leader, state authority, and employer collapsed into one personalized figure of power. RepFem9 explained this absurdity:

> The president of the country files a lawsuit against me, and the letter arrives at home, stating: "Suspect: RepFem9, Victim: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan." Something inside me breaks. Are you my president? The head of the AKP? Or my employer? The reason I lost my reinstatement case was this: Since Turkish Airlines is tied to the Wealth Fund, and Erdoğan is its head, he is legally considered your employer. So, because you called him a dictator, it's treated as if you insulted your boss (11 February 2025).

These cases illustrate how politically motivated repression could be concealed beneath a manufactured legal façade. While this dynamic was most visible in judicial proceedings, participants' accounts suggest that similar logics also operated within private and state institutions, where denunciations could contribute to dismissals justified through formal legal or disciplinary categories. Although the cases examined here cannot capture the full scope of the post-coup crackdown, they show how its logic extended beyond alleged Gülenists to encompass Kurds, seculars, Gezi protesters, and other groups marked as politically suspect. For those affected, the experience often felt absurd or surreal. Yet the underlying logic was

not simply irrational: the cases point to a patterned use of legality to punish designated adversaries, intimidate potential ones, and signal the costs of dissent. This use of legal and bureaucratic formality disoriented individuals while contributing to a broader chilling effect. When rules are applied unpredictably and consequences are severe, the sense that one may become vulnerable to accusation becomes itself a mechanism of control.

This section explored the forms of repression that unfold once an individual is denounced, beginning with the initial encounter with the state, in which citizens suddenly find themselves treated as suspects. It showed how this first moment, which is marked by shock, fear, and paralysis, functions as an immediate form of punishment. The analysis then traced how this disorientation deepens into a longer period of unpredictability, as stalled procedures and prolonged uncertainty suspend the flow of everyday life. This unpredictability was shown to be compounded by bureaucratic ghosting, with institutions withholding information in ways that hinder appeals and obstruct even the most basic procedural rights. Finally, the section examined how politically motivated repression is cloaked in a manufactured legal façade, at times reaching levels of severity or absurdity that participants struggled to comprehend. Together, these lived experiences reveal repressive dynamics that can remain obscured in institutional or procedural accounts alone. The next section turns to the afterlife of repression, its lingering psychological, social, and material consequences, which similarly cannot be captured through macro-level perspectives.

3.2. *Civic Death*: Erasure from Public Life

Political denunciations lie at the heart of state-led witch-hunts, operating with the logic of sidelining unwanted groups. Historically, they have been effectively leveraged by repressive regimes to justify large-scale purges, from the Stalinist USSR to the Stasi trials, providing a legal veneer to political repression. As shown in earlier chapters, a similar trajectory unfolded in Turkey: on the path of autocratization, political rhetoric and practice revealed clear plans to cleanse the state of dissenters, ambitions that were explicitly pre-legitimized even before the coup attempt. What began as a *de facto* means of marginalizing opponents soon evolved into a *de jure* process, institutionalized through measures that not only purged citizens but also sought to erase them entirely from public life. Denunciations were at the heart of this process.

With the state of emergency, the post-coup political landscape was marked by waves of mass purges, with lists of public sector workers released overnight through emergency decrees. Without trial and by executive order, thousands of citizens lost their jobs and had their civil rights revoked (Amnesty International, 2017, 2018). These purges functioned not only as punitive measures but as mechanisms of exclusion designed to remove dissent from

economic, social, and political life through blanket bans on public-sector employment, passport confiscations, loss of employment benefits, and the enduring stigma of blacklisting. Sertdemir Özdemir and Özyürek (2019) conceptualize this process as civic death, a form of punishment distinct from civil death. They argue that, unlike *civil death* which is historically rooted in the sovereign's power to "make die" after stripping individuals of their legal personhood, the Turkish case is better understood as *civic death*, which operates through the sovereign's power to "let die" by cutting dissidents off from the economic, social, and political conditions that make life livable (p. 699).

Post-coup emergency decrees initially targeted public sector workers. However, their scope extended beyond the original scale, becoming a model replicated by the private sector and even informal networks. Our data reveals that the logic of civic death was implemented against individuals across various sectors and professional fields, with measures imposed in varying degrees of severity depending on the context. These measures aimed to facilitate the erasure of targeted individuals from the public sphere or to minimize their presence in strategic positions, both formally, through dismissals and blacklisting, and informally, through stigma and exclusion.

Drawing on participants' accounts, this section shows how the state of exception became the norm in the post-coup political landscape, with the logic of civic death extending into both public and private institutions and embedding itself in the social fabric through the exclusion of purged individuals. It elaborates on how civic death unfolded in practice by tracing three interrelated mechanisms: the irreversible rupture of careers, the denial of employment and positions even outside the public sector, and the broader ideological exclusion and social erasure that marked denounced individuals as permanently outside the moral and political community.

3.2.1. Irreversible career rupture

Interviews reveal how denunciation triggered abrupt and irreversible career ruptures, often manifesting as dismissals in both the public and private sectors. But most importantly, the cases underscore the logic of civil death with a deliberate prevention of future employment. RepMale3, an engineer at a municipality, was dismissed by emergency decree after being blacklisted by a superior under the justification of "institutional discretion." UserFem7, another engineer in a municipality, was dismissed through a text message she received, notifying her that the grounds were "shameful" disciplinary crime in the absence of trial or conviction. RepMale4, a flight attendant for a private airline, was dismissed through a disciplinary procedure following a social media lynching for allegedly insulting religion. RepFem9, who worked for a state-owned yet commercial airline, faced dismissal after a

complaint about her private social media posts, which led to a similar disciplinary process. What unites these cases is not only the top-down nature of their job terminations in the absence of a conviction but also the permanent consequences they faced. The dismissals closed off future employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors, effectively cutting short their professional lives through a deliberate act of bureaucratic stigma and depriving them of employment benefits.

RepMale3 recounts how the "decree-dismissal" label in his personal records severely hindered his job prospects, creating a state-imposed stigma that extended far beyond the original ban on public sector employment:

> This part was especially devastating: we were dismissed, and every time we obtained an official document from the Social Security Institution, it clearly stated that the reason was a "decree law." Imagine applying for a job. You bring your CV, and they ask for documentation about your previous employment, where you worked, for how long, and so on. As soon as you hand it over, they see the dismissal reason and say, "Oh, you were let go by decree. I cannot hire you." Some would even say, "If I do, I'll be in trouble. I'll go down with you." As if you were toxic, cursed: "Stay away from me." That effectively tied people's hands. They couldn't find work anywhere. And they couldn't leave the country either (13 September 2024).

In RepMale3's case, "dismissal by decree" operated as a stain that was deliberately inscribed on his personal records, deeming him unemployable not only by law but also due to pressure felt by private employers. This produced a form of punishment that extends beyond the law and into everyday economic survival. The same logic was applied to private sector workers: RepFem9 and RepMale4 were prevented from securing employment and accessing unemployment benefits by their employers, who registered disciplinary charges as official grounds for dismissal. RepMale4 was dismissed under Article 46 of the Labor Code (No. 4857), citing "theft and disclosure of company secrets," and RepFem9 was dismissed "on the grounds of disgraceful offense." RepFem9 describes her descent into civic death, saying:

> What does it mean to push a citizen into a position with absolutely no source of income? They classified me under disgraceful offenses, so I'm not even eligible for unemployment benefits. I can't return to aviation. For me, that career is over. There's no way back for me in any form, because I now carry a disciplinary penalty. What would have happened if I didn't have my family? How am I supposed to earn a living? How am I supposed to survive? Weren't these things considered when this legal system was put in place? I've been seriously wronged (11 February 2024).

RepFem9's account shows how civic death is experienced as the collapse of multiple life routes at once: income, unemployment benefits, professional identity, future employability, and even the basic ability to plan for survival. Her repeated questions "How am I supposed to earn a living? How am I supposed to survive?" capture the existential uncertainty produced when administrative punishment extends beyond dismissal and closes off the means of lawful recovery.

RepMale3's account underpins the forced informality behind the civic death mindset:

> So, you're essentially condemning people to death. You're taking away their jobs. You're not allowing them to work in the private sector either. Let the man go abroad—you're not allowing that either. So, what is he supposed to do? You're directly pushing people toward working illegally (13 September 2024).

RepMale3's account highlights the structural contradiction produced by this form of punishment. Individuals are excluded from public employment, made undesirable to private employers, and prevented from leaving the country, while still being expected to survive. His reference to illegal work shows how civic death can push people into forced informality, where exclusion from lawful economic life becomes itself a further mechanism of control.

These cases demonstrate that the state not only purged individuals from their institutions but also effectively erased them from professional life, a process in which denunciations played a central role. The civic-death logic that crystallized during the post-coup state of emergency did not fade with the lifting of formal measures; rather, it persisted and became routinized, extending well beyond the public sector as the stigma of denunciation led private employers to block future employment and access to professional benefits. This exclusionary mentality was further reproduced informally through everyday caution and gatekeeping. The next section examines this dynamic.

3.2.2. Denial of employment & positions

Cases reveal how the logic of civic death operates through the bureaucratically recorded stigma of dismissals. Yet, it also functions in the absence of formal purges, as individuals internalize the state's purge mentality and use denunciations to block local recruitment. In the former, denunciation produces stigma through dismissal; in the latter, the stigma of being criminalized as the political "other" fuels denunciations. RepMale8, an experienced humanitarian worker of Kurdish origin, illustrates this dynamic. Having worked on numerous projects in NGOs under international organizations such as the United Nations, he was prosecuted on terrorism charges and imprisoned during his trial for his activism, effectively serving a sentence for a crime he was never convicted of. Even after his release and acquittal, the stigma persisted, and his search for employment turned into yet another form of repression:

> I was unemployed for four months. I went through 37 interviews, including written tests and interviews for all of them. In total, I must have applied to around 500 jobs. I was shortlisted for 37 of them (30 January 2025).

This account shows that acquittal did not restore RepMale8's social or professional standing. Although he formally cleared the legal process, the accusation continued to operate in the labour market as a mark of suspicion. The scale of his job search reveals how punishment persisted beyond the courtroom, turning employability itself into a site where stigma was

reproduced. However, in many cases, searching his name was enough to informally blacklist him. On two occasions, though, his employment was obstructed by the same colleague who labelled him a terrorist to the recruiting NGO, citing a past lawsuit in which he was acquitted:

> Employment in NGOs is determined by your testimony regarding your previous conviction. I passed on this multiple times when I applied for positions because I had been acquitted… There was an opening at W. NGO, and they called me to offer the position, stating it fit perfectly with my expertise and that they were considering hiring me. I applied, got shortlisted, and had the interview. The interview really went well, but I realized something suspicious had occurred when I didn't get the job. Someone from HR, whom I even hosted in my home, went ahead and denounced me to the hiring board based on a Google search he conducted, stating: "It's all on Google. I searched, and there's plenty of stuff about him being prosecuted for terrorism. If you hire him, you'll get into trouble." (30 January 2025).

This example shows how denunciation can continue to operate after the formal legal process has ended. The colleague's intervention transformed an acquitted case into a renewed accusation, allowing stigma to travel from the judiciary into employment decisions. The logic of suspicion was therefore not confined to state institutions; it was reproduced informally through professional networks, HR decisions, and risk-averse institutional behaviour. In this sense, the accusation became more durable than the acquittal: what mattered was not the legal outcome, but the searchable trace of having once been associated with terrorism. RepMale8 further explained how the stigma persists and how the mindset operates even within the humanitarian sector, driven by state fear and triggered by denunciation:

> Humanitarian organizations never want to come into conflict with the state — in fact, they're often more pro-state than the state itself. These institutions are incredibly submissive… even the UN, honestly, it's shockingly compliant. From the outside, it may seem principled and independent, but it's really not. International organizations are the same. Even local NGOs doing humanitarian work operate this way, because the state can revoke their work permits at any time. Sometimes the government even scolds us, saying, "Why aren't you working for us? There are so many families, why didn't you provide hygiene assistance?" It's absurd, really (30 January 2025).

This account highlights the broader ecology through which civic death is reproduced. Organizations that might appear independent or rights-oriented become risk-averse actors operating under the shadow of state power. Their dependence on permits, access, and official tolerance makes them cautious, compliant, and susceptible to denunciatory claims. As a result, repression does not need to be enacted directly by the state in every instance. Once the stigma of accusation circulates, employers and organizations may pre-emptively exclude marked individuals in order to protect themselves. RepMale8's case therefore shows how acquittal can fail to undo social punishment: the accusation remains active as a reputation marker, while fear of state retaliation turns third-party institutions into agents of continued exclusion.

RepFem1's case presents a similar yet compelling example of how stigma triggers denunciations and shapes both professional trajectories and creative lives through exclusion and erasure. RepFem1 is a literature teacher at a state school and, in parallel, an accomplished

writer with numerous publications and prestigious awards. Owing to her professional reputation and consistent productivity, she was offered a project management position at the provincial level, overseeing participation from 39 districts. However, she was forced to step down after a series of denunciations were made to her superiors regarding her secular and "dissolute" lifestyle, one of them filed by a close colleague:

> A deputy provincial director found photos from my time as a school principal. These weren't inappropriate, no risqué outfits or immoral content. In one, I'm casually leaning back in my office chair. In another, I'm tagged in a photo taken in a friend's garden, with a beer on the table. We're not even pictured together. The absurd part: my friend's name is Ufuk, a gender-neutral name, and they assumed it was a man. Through a moralistic, male-dominated lens, the photo was seen as improper, and I was denounced for it. These weren't public posts but Instagram stories. Screenshots — around 10 to 15 — were compiled into a PDF and handed to the provincial director. The deputy placed them on his desk and said, "Sir, is it appropriate for someone like this to be working for you?" (24 August 2024).

In this case, denunciation operated as a form of moral and gendered surveillance. Ordinary images from RepFem1's private or semi-private life were extracted from their original context, compiled into a file, and presented to institutional superiors as evidence of professional unfitness. The allegation did not concern her teaching capacity, administrative competence, or literary record; rather, it targeted her lifestyle, gendered respectability, and perceived distance from conservative moral norms. In this way, stigma travels through professional hierarchies: a colleague's denunciation transforms private conduct into an institutional problem, allowing moral judgement to produce career consequences. Here, denunciation functioned as a mechanism of erasure, undermining a woman's professional authority and creative identity by recasting her as morally unsuitable for public responsibility.

In another case, RepFem1 became the target of a distinct form of *reputational denunciation*, which also had serious repercussions for her writing career. At a young age, she was unexpectedly appointed as the chief editor of one of Turkey's oldest literary magazines, a position that carried both prestige and good pay. Her appointment provoked backlash within her literary circle. Enraged that a woman they perceived as having "low morality" had been selected for such a role, two amateur writers from her literary circle launched a smear campaign on social media. They singled out a short story titled *"The Kurd"* from her award-winning book, presenting it as supposed evidence of pro-terrorist sympathies. Just two days after her official appointment, she was forced to step down. Reflecting on the incident, RepFem1 explained how greed, competitiveness, and moral policing converged to undermine her reputation and derail her literary career before it had even begun, using politics merely as a convenient framing device:

> In these literary circles, when it was said that RepFem1 was being appointed as the managing editor of the magazine, one of them, especially someone who seemed interested in the material side of things, took issue with it. I mean, we already earn our salaries from our main professions, but this

> role also came with a hefty monthly stipend. They didn't see me as deserving of it, not financially, not in terms of lifestyle or stance. In their eyes, I was, quote-unquote, "too free," "too relaxed," "not respectable," "not moral." Long before it came down to literary merit, it was already about my perspective, the way I lived and carried myself. But of course, they needed an excuse, a political one. So those who had praised my book when it came out two years earlier did this reputational assassination (24 August 2024).

The cases of RepMale8 and RepFem1 illustrate how stigmas are produced, reinforced, and sustained within the state's political and moral order, an order shaped by a political discourse that casts Kurds as "terrorists" and secular critics as morally corrupt. These discursive categories provide ready-made interpretive frames that individuals draw on when making denunciations, enabling stigma to function as a tool of authoritarian control and structuring the incentives for reporting. Whether motivated by ideological conviction or personal agendas, individuals mobilize these state-sanctioned narratives in their reporting practices, acting in line with the moral and political boundaries the regime has set. The next section will discuss how this deepens the existing marginalization of the dissent.

3.2.3. Ideological exclusion, marginalization, and social erasure

Denunciations operate on premises of ideological boundaries set by the political discourse, reinforcing existing marginalization. In many cases, participants described how accusations were not simply reactions to specific actions, but rather products of broader efforts to push them aside, socially, professionally, and politically. This mechanism proved especially effective when the targeted individual was already perceived as ideologically deviant or socially undesirable. Participants recounted being treated as outsiders in their professional or social circles due to their political beliefs, lifestyle choices, or ethnic identity.

RepFem1 exemplifies this pattern. She was treated as an outcast in the conservative professional and literary circles where she worked, largely due to her openly secular lifestyle. In her case, denunciation functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism to prevent her ascent into strategic positions. Similarly, RepMale8 described how his Kurdish identity remained a source of vulnerability, even within supposedly progressive human rights circles. He explains how, combined with the stain of terrorism charges, his exclusion became unbearable:

> The person who denounced me comes from a Kemalist, nationalist upper class… And of course, someone like me, a Kurd, someone they view more through a class lens, isn't someone they're willing to share common ground with. So, in that sense, they're a bit racist…. But this feeling of being excluded [for past litigation]. It's incredibly painful. For example, when I'm excluded for being Kurdish, it feels like you're part of a larger, universal category; it's not personal; it's more indirect. Of course, that hurts. Actually, it hurts a lot. But imagine being at work and someone says, "I hate RepMale8." Now it's not abstract, it's direct and personal. It's your identity, your existence, being targeted. And believe me, as someone who knows what exclusion and discrimination feel like, that kind of attack burns even more (30 January 2025).

In RepMale8's account, denunciation personalized and intensified existing hierarchies of exclusion. While discrimination based on Kurdish identity is experienced as part of a broader

structural pattern, denunciation transforms that generalized stigma into a direct attack on the individual. The accusation does not merely mark him as politically suspect; it attaches hostility to his name, reputation, and professional presence. In this way, denunciation converts background prejudice into actionable exclusion, making stigma carried across workplaces, networks, and institutional settings.

These two cases illustrate the pattern where marginalized identities are pushed further to the peripheries of social life due to being perceived as morally or politically contaminated by their lifestyle, beliefs, or visibility, which then leads to denunciations. However, there is a second pattern, where denunciation itself generates stigma, similarly leading to a social erasure. Participants described how, after being denounced, they were gradually pushed out of their social and professional environments. Friends and colleagues began to distance themselves, fearing association. In some cases, such as those of RepMale3 and RepMale8, the social erasure led to a form of social untouchability, where they were treated as if contact with them could be dangerous or compromising. RepMale3 explained:

> During the initial dismissal process, it was like wearing a shirt of fire. People didn't want to come near us. They looked at us in a certain way, as if we had killed someone, as if we had committed theft or other criminal acts. Like I said, it was like wearing a shirt of fire during that time. People we used to sit with, have tea with, and talk to as friends, those people distanced themselves from us. Some started giving us the cold shoulder (13 September 2024).

RepMale3's metaphor of a "shirt of fire" captures how stigma became embodied and socially visible. Dismissal did not simply remove him from work; it marked him as someone whose presence carried danger. The withdrawal of friends and colleagues shows how repression travelled through everyday relations, producing isolation without the need for formal sanctions. Social distance became a protective strategy for others, while for the dismissed person it deepened the experience of exclusion, shame, and abandonment.

In this sense, the cases reveal a dynamic in which stigma, whether produced through denunciations or mobilized to justify them, operates firmly along ideological lines. This stigma facilitates the social erasure of targeted individuals, who are avoided out of fear of political or moral contamination. In doing so, it deepens existing marginalizations and embeds the logic of civic death within the social fabric, as individuals internalize and reproduce this exclusionary order, whether out of conviction, conformity, or self-protection.

Building on the previous section's discussion of how civic death structured formal and informal exclusion, the next section examines how the authoritarian logic permeated everyday life through denunciations, shaping interactions between citizens through horizontal surveillance, malicious reporting, the strategic use of state power in personal disputes, and the moral policing of lifestyles.

3.3. Everyday Authoritarianism

3.3.1. Horizontal surveillance

Participants describe a social landscape shaped by fear and suspicion, in which everyday interactions are conditioned by the repressive climate. Trust in social, professional, and institutional relationships has eroded, as individuals navigate an environment where surveillance functions as a quiet but pervasive instrument of repression. At the heart of this landscape lies the sense of being constantly monitored, watched, followed, or tracked not only by strangers but also by colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Both professional and private spheres are subject to scrutiny, often becoming grounds for denunciation.

The spectrum of reporting in the dataset reveals a wide-ranging and diffuse presence of surveillance in daily life, stretching from bureaucratic settings to workplace politics, from online spaces to intimate relationships. Awareness of surveillance emerges as a prominent theme, though individuals develop it differently. Marginalized groups such as Kurds, women, and LGBTQ individuals often described an already internalized awareness of being watched, as did public sector workers who, while not marginalized, remain acutely vulnerable to denunciations. Others came to understand this repressive gaze only retrospectively, after being reported.

Regardless of when it emerged, the experience of being reported intensified the feeling of surveillance and interpersonal distrust, particularly because, in most cases, participants were denounced by people they already knew or by someone within their immediate social or professional circles, even in cases of anonymous reporting. RepMale13, for example, was reported by his girlfriend's best friend; RepFem1 by a trusted colleague with whom she used to socialize; RepMale8 by a colleague he liked and had once hosted in his home; RepFem15 by a regular patient with whom she developed a friendship; RepMale4 by a colleague who was also in their social circle, Lawyer8 by a colleague from same department. The proximity of denouncers had a crippling effect on participants' perceptions of work, relationships, and everyday safety, leaving them in a disoriented state of distrust, unable to tell where danger might come from or whom to rely on.

In cases where the denouncer remained anonymous, this uncertainty turned into a persistent psychological burden. RepFem2, who was denounced twice, once anonymously for performing music at a venue that served alcohol, described how this experience eroded her ability to trust her colleagues:

> Currently, at work, I suspect someone. I believe I know who reported me. But of course, at first, you go through that phase: Was it this person? Was it that one? Since it's an anonymous complaint, you start getting upset with people. At this point, I believe it was my own supervisor who filed the

> report. I still don't officially know who it was, of course, but I think it was them. And naturally, your opinion of that person changes. Your attitude toward them changes, too (07 September 2024).

In RepFem2's account, anonymity extended the harm of denunciation beyond the formal complaint itself. Because the denouncer remains unknown, suspicion becomes diffused across the workplace, attaching itself to colleagues, supervisors, and everyday interactions. The inability to know who reported her prevents closure and transforms ordinary professional relationships into potential sites of betrayal. In this way, anonymous denunciation produces a lasting atmosphere of mistrust, where the uncertainty surrounding the accusation becomes part of the punishment.

The fear of being watched and denounced functions as a subtle but powerful form of repression also by shaping behaviour through self-regulation and censorship in daily internet interactions, at work, in social situations, and even within private life. Participants described various measures of self-restraint, including limiting their presence on social media, avoiding political expression, or silencing themselves in routine interactions. RepFem2 explains how she must self-regulate in the face of growing conservatism. Her case illustrates how, in institutional settings where surveillance is normalized and internalized, the boundaries between private and professional life blur, reinforcing this everyday repressive environment:

> The feeling of being watched affects daily life. For example, sometimes you go to work hungover. Your blood pressure's all over the place. But you can't say, 'I'm hungover.' You have to say, 'I'm sick.' It wasn't always like this. People used to be able to say it openly: 'Yeah, I'm hungover.' (07 September 2024).

In RepFem2's case, self-censorship extended beyond overtly political speech. The case illustrates how even ordinary admissions about lifestyle, bodily experience, or social life become risky when they are interpreted through moralized expectations of proper conduct. The need to replace "I'm hungover" with "I'm sick" captures how surveillance reshapes everyday language: individuals learn to translate their experiences into safer, more acceptable terms. In this way, repression operates not only by prohibiting dissent, but by narrowing the range of ordinary self-expression within professional life.

These accounts show how surveillance, outsourced to ordinary citizens, sustains the state's political and moral order by encouraging people to monitor one another across both professional and private spheres. In this dynamic, repression is reproduced from below: individuals internalize the possibility of scrutiny and act accordingly, extending authoritarian control far beyond those who are directly denounced. The pervasive sense of being watched thus becomes a mechanism through which the regime's repressive logic penetrates everyday life, shaping behaviour, relationships, and the boundaries of permissible expression.

3.3.2. Malicious Reporting

Interviews reveal the incentives for reporting, indicating that many denunciations stemmed from personal motives and were used as instruments to settle scores rooted in prior interpersonal disputes. Participants cited a range of motivations behind these acts, including hostility, professional rivalry, material interests, workplace grievances, moral policing, retaliation, and petty conflicts. Rooted in personal motives, denunciations acquire the force of repression once channelled through the state, allowing individuals to weaponize the reporting system against others. Even in cases where participants could only speculate about the motives behind their denunciation, they were often convinced of its malicious intent.

RepMale5's case offers a striking example. A medical doctor working at a state hospital, RepMale5, also leads a parallel career as a musician, performing outside of work hours. Like RepFem2, he was denounced multiple times, four in total, for his musical performances on the grounds of "unfair income," while in fact he makes little money. In the most recent case, the report even included his concert poster. Although he has no concrete evidence about the reporter's identity or motives, he is certain the intent was malicious:

> A parallel musical career for public service workers is so common that it generally goes unpunished. But I was denounced. Sure, on paper, "unfair income" might be considered a crime, but it's not something that causes any real harm to anyone. How could someone playing music possibly harm anyone? I have no proof of the denouncer; everything beyond this point is speculation. If the person who filed the complaint is a musician, maybe they saw me as a threat to their livelihood. Either way, it was a malicious denunciation (04 November 2024).

Under the law, public-sector employees are restricted from earning unauthorized income outside their official employment. However, RepMale5 emphasized that parallel artistic work among public servants is common and generally tolerated in practice. This is what made the denunciation significant. The accusation did not simply expose a clear violation; it selectively activated a rule that is often ignored in practice. This allowed a potentially personal, competitive, or moral grievance to be translated into an official legal category. The formal language of "unfair income" gave the complaint institutional legitimacy, while obscuring the deeper motives behind why this ordinary practice was reported in the first place.

RepFem2's case reveals a similar logic. Like RepMale5, she was denounced for performing music outside her public-sector job, whom she suspect to be her manager, but the complaint was framed through a different official register. Rather than focusing on "unfair income," the denouncer invoked the disciplinary expectations attached to public employment, arguing that performing in venues serving alcohol was incompatible with the dignity and conduct expected of a civil servant. This framing drew on the broad moral language of the Civil Servants Law No. 657, which regulates disciplinary offences, including conduct considered incompatible with the dignity of public office or with the status of being a civil servant. The striking point is

that the complaint did not merely activate a legal rule; it mobilized a moralized understanding of what kind of lifestyle a public servant should embody. In this way, a musical performance in a venue serving alcohol was recoded as a matter of professional propriety, allowing personal or moral disapproval to appear as a legitimate administrative concern.

These cases illustrate how personal grievances can become entangled with the state's punitive power once channelled through denunciation. What is striking is not only that private resentments, rivalries, or moral judgments are reported, but that they are translated into official grounds that make institutional intervention possible. In RepMale5's case, a possible professional or personal rivalry was framed through the language of "unfair income." In RepFem2's case, moral disapproval of performing music in venues serving alcohol was translated into the disciplinary language of conduct unbecoming of a public servant. Denunciation therefore works by converting private motives into administratively recognizable claims, allowing everyday conflicts to acquire coercive consequences.

This dynamic corresponds to a dominant pattern in the literature on mass denunciations: malicious reporting. Personal grievances and rivalries are weaponized through the reporting system, guided by a strategic logic of using the state to serve private ends, almost like employing a "contract killer" (Kalyvas, 2006, p.14). In highly politicized contexts marked by strong state responsiveness, citizens can flag their enemies and place them on the state's radar by invoking dominant ideological or legal frames, such as religion, morality, public-sector discipline, unauthorized income, or terrorism. In this process, the boundary between private motives and political accusations becomes blurred, a phenomenon Gross (2002) conceptualizes as the "privatization of the state" (p. 118).

The cases of RepFem1 and RepMale4 are illustrative, as their denunciations were caused by personal hostility and rivalry, and the accusations were framed with ideological triggers that aligned with the state's priority issues: terrorism and religion. However, these cases present a distinct form of malicious reporting, where denunciations were escalated into public lynchings on social media, heightening the impact and the consequences. RepFem1 was accused of supporting the PKK after one of her short stories titled *the Kurd* was circulated online by denouncers. RepMale4 faced accusations of insulting religion when a colleague, seeking revenge for an old conflict, took screenshots from his private social media account showing him drinking alcohol with a satirical caption about a religious day. These images were shared on ultra-religious platforms to incite outrage. Within hours of their appearance on *Misvak*, a pro-government, ultra-conservative outlet, more than 10,000 denunciations were submitted to CİMER demanding his arrest. The consequences were severe: RepFem1 was dismissed from

her legally confirmed position as chief editor, and RepMale4 was arrested and fired from his job.

In these cases, the participatory repression dynamic was further amplified through social media, where an initial denunciation sparked broader waves of public participation. What began as individual reporting escalated into mass engagement, intensifying the pressure and extending the reach of informal punishment. In RepFem1's case, the state was not even directly involved; her dismissal was carried out by the family who owned the literary magazine, who responded to the mounting online backlash, perhaps out of fear of becoming targets themselves. Yet the sanction was still applied, showing how the diffusion of power enables ordinary citizens and institutions to internalize and reproduce the state's punitive logic. Authoritarian control operates, even without formal intervention. Individuals act as if they were the state, enforcing ideological boundaries and punishing perceived deviance.

These cases echo the grassroots dynamics observed in mass denunciation campaigns under 20th-century dictatorships, illustrating phenomena long identified by denunciation scholars to explain bottom-up repression. At the same time, they shed light on contemporary incarnations of these practices, showing how they have adapted to new technologies. Concepts such as "self-policing" (Gellately, 1996, p. 931), "participatory repression" (Bergemann, 2017, p.386), and state-society alliance (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 365) continue to capture the joint production of repression by citizens and the state. The cases also reveal how ordinary citizens act as extensions of the state, taking it upon themselves to report perceived deviance or wrongdoing. Such acts of informal policing illustrate what Fulbrook (2005) calls the "diffusion of power" (p.235) whereby citizens exercise micro-level authority by actively engaging in surveillance and punishment. By voluntarily and often enthusiastically assuming these roles, citizens help sustain the system itself, a dynamic Fulbrook terms "participatory dictatorship" (p.12).

3.3.3. Beating Others with the State's Stick: Strategic use of the state

Retaliation stands at the other end of the malicious reporting spectrum as a dominant incentive for citizens to report public sector employees during routine bureaucratic interactions. In these cases, individuals frustrated by perceived service failures invoke formal complaint mechanisms to frame personal grievances as professional misconduct. Angry parents, impatient citizens, and disgruntled patients frequently turn to CİMER not only to demand redress but also to retaliate for what they perceive as unjust treatment.

The dataset includes several such cases, involving participants like RepFem7, RepFem14, RepFem2, and RepFem15, all of whom were denounced in acts of retaliation, with varying degrees of consequence. RepFem7, for example, was reported by an angry parent for allegedly

"prioritizing her own family" after she requested a shift change due to parenting responsibilities. As a result, her class had to be dismissed to satisfy the complainant. RepFem15, a dialysis nurse, was repeatedly denounced by a regular patient for "discrimination" when she was unable to reschedule his sessions earlier.

While these cases reveal how ordinary citizens become enforcers of authoritarian control in daily bureaucratic life, they do so not as isolated individuals but as nodes through which the broader system operates. In Fulbrook's terms, they act as "microstructures of power" (Fulbrook, 2005), embodying and reproducing the wider authoritarian order through their everyday actions, navigating, enforcing, and exploiting reporting mechanisms. RepFem2's case illustrates how *everyday authoritarianism* (Dukalskis & Lee, 2020) penetrates routine interactions, sanctioning even the most mundane acts. RepFem2, a public servant working at a tax office in a small province, refused to process an unlawful demand; in retaliation, she was denounced for making tea during work hours. As a result, kettles were banned across all workplaces in the province:

> After being told he wasn't entitled to something, the man stormed into the manager's office and started yelling. The manager pushed back. I was making tea at the time. Then the guy left and went to the governor's office. Apparently, there's a complaint section there, and probably some people he knows. He filed a written complaint. And that's how the whole thing ended up: when the case got reviewed, it turned into, "The employee wasn't working; they were making tea and coffee for themselves." That's how it was framed. And by the end of the day, the governor's office sent a notice to all institutions: "No tea or coffee preparation at the workplace. Kettles are prohibited." And just like that, all the kettles were confiscated. Completely absurd (07 September 2024).

RepFem2's account shows how reporting mechanisms can magnify petty conflicts into formal administrative interventions. The original dispute was not about tea-making, but about a citizen's frustrated demand and the refusal of a public servant to act unlawfully. Yet once channelled through the complaint system, the incident was reframed as workplace misconduct and produced a generalized administrative response. The case therefore captures the absurdity and reach of everyday authoritarianism: even ordinary acts such as making tea can become actionable when they are filtered through bureaucratic responsiveness.

These anecdotes point to a social landscape in which a culture of reporting has become an integral part of everyday interpersonal interactions. Across all participant cohorts, including those who had used the complaint mechanism themselves, the prevalence of petty and malicious denunciations emerged as a prominent theme. To describe the opportunistic use of CİMER for malicious personal ends, many participants referred to a common Turkish idiom: "Beating others with the state's stick" to emphasize the system's weaponization. Some also pointed to CİMER's broader role in deepening social polarization, interpreting it as part of the regime's "divide and rule" strategy. UserFem6 explained:

> It completely undermines society. When you look back over the past 20 years, just as we've witnessed growing social division, this system mirrors that, like telling people, 'She's your neighbor, but go ahead and report her to CİMER.' It's a system where anyone can report anyone just because they're annoyed. It deepens division, it deepens polarization. How many people use it for reasonable complaints like you or me? Believe me, there are so many people who report their neighbours (19 April 2025).

UserFem6's reflections echoed Jan T. Gross's (2001) concept of the *institutionalization of resentment (p.4),* a tactic historically used by dictators like Stalin and Hitler, who pitted citizens against each other by encouraging them to act on their basic instincts of suspicion and hostility. In these contexts, regimes do not rely solely on formal force; they weaponize social tensions, using individuals' fears, grievances, and frustrations as political tools. The regime extends its influence into daily interactions by encouraging people to police one another, turning ordinary conflicts into acts of political punishment. In this way, denunciations are not just reports. They serve as weapons of authoritarian control, dividing society while strengthening the state's power through fear, distrust, and the constant threat of being reported.

3.3.4. Criminalization of lifestyle: Moral policing

In the interviews, a form of moralized surveillance, in which monitoring that scrutinizes not only private lifestyles but also professional conduct through a moral lens, was predominant. Interviews reveal a recurring pattern of denunciations based on participants' private social media posts, often dredged up retrospectively to construct accusations. In many cases, such intrusions into private life carried tangible consequences, effectively criminalizing the personal sphere. In professional contexts, moralized surveillance takes shape in reports of alleged misconduct framed in moral terms. For example, RepFem14 was denounced by the village imam for allegedly exposing students to "immoral content" on a classroom smart board, a claim presented as professional negligence but rooted in moral suspicion.

Among the most common triggers for morally charged accusation is alcohol consumption. Accounts show that alcohol-related denunciations stand out as one of the most frequent and symbolically loaded forms of surveillance, often treated as indicators of moral-political deviance or professional misconduct. Participants such as RepMale4, RepFem2, RepFem9, RepFem1, and RepMale5 were all reported for alcohol-related behaviors and faced serious consequences. RepFem2 describes the intensity of this scrutiny in her workplace:

> It's that transformed mindset within the bureaucracy that really unsettles me. People in state institutions have reached a point where they say things like, 'That person drinks alcohol.' I mean, why is that even something to mention? What are we implying by saying someone drinks? Where are we living? Is it illegal to go to a place that serves alcohol? Is drinking alcohol forbidden? What is this? Are we living under Sharia law? (07 September 2024).

RepFem2's account shows how alcohol becomes more than a matter of personal conduct. Within a conservative bureaucratic environment, it is transformed into a moral signifier through which colleagues assess respectability, loyalty, and professional belonging. Her account expose how discourse inform moral policing. Although alcohol consumption is not prohibited by law, the political landscape transforms it into socially and professionally risky. In this sense, denunciation allows moral conservatism to operate administratively: private lifestyle choices are recoded as evidence of improper conduct, making secular visibility vulnerable to institutional sanction.

Since the Gezi Protests, which were sparked in part by public backlash against alcohol restrictions, alcohol consumption has been heavily politicized in Turkey. Within the current moral and political order, it is framed not only as a moral transgression but also as a marker of political disloyalty, making it a key lens through which individuals are judged on both moral and ideological grounds. Yet alcohol is not the only such marker. Whether in appearance, speech, or online expression, a wide range of perceived moral deviations can serve as red flags, sufficient to brand someone as oppositional or anti-regime. RepFem9's case exemplifies this variation:

> These were posts shared during the Gezi protests. Apparently, the fact that I wrote the word "dictator" is a problem for them. But I see dictatorship as a type of regime, and Turkey is definitely one. Other than that, there's a photo of me holding a beer, another photo of me in San Francisco posing under an LGBT flag, and a tweet where I talk about women's rights and freedoms. These are all collected as evidence (11 February 2024).

Following the lawsuit, RepFem9 discovered that the proceedings had been triggered by a denunciation based on a sweeping review of her personal online activity. The material included content from her blog, tweets, photographs, and even old Instagram stories, posts that would normally disappear within 24 hours. She was stunned to learn that posts from years earlier had been collected, preserved, and compiled as evidence. In her case, moral and political surveillance had a retrospective reach. The denunciation did not respond to a single recent act; rather, it searched backward through her digital archive to construct a profile of deviance. In this archive, political dissent, secular lifestyle, LGBT solidarity, and feminist expression were assembled into a single evidentiary package. As RepFem9 put it, she had "checked all the boxes" on the ruling ideology's list of politicized moral red flags.

4. Individual Co-optation and Everyday Legitimation

The second cohort of interviews consists of individuals who actively use the reporting system, most commonly CİMER, for a range of everyday purposes. Among the nine respondents, only three expressed full confidence in the mechanism, while the majority conveyed scepticism, frustration, or outright distrust. Yet despite this ambivalence, their accounts show

that petitioning continues to operate as a powerful tool of co-optation, offering citizens meaningful incentives to engage. The primary motivation is problem-solving: users learn how to navigate institutional blockages by playing by or strategically around the rules of the system. Central to this dynamic is the instrumental use of presidential authority through CİMER, which allows individuals to bypass bureaucratic obstacles, mobilise the state's punitive capacity, and rely on the platform's relative procedural responsiveness.

This section examines how such practices contribute to the co-optation and everyday legitimation of the reporting mechanism. It first analyses the perceived efficiency of CİMER and its role in users' daily problem-solving strategies. This includes how individuals leverage the presidential effect to resolve grievances and hold institutions accountable, how they draw on the state's punitive power to address crime and misconduct, and how some use the platform to influence policy outcomes. The section then turns to the question of legitimation by exploring users' procedural trust in the mechanism, trust that persists even amid broader institutional disillusionment. Taken together, these practices illustrate how citizen engagement with the reporting mechanism extends beyond individual problem-solving to reinforce its everyday use and normalization, thereby contributing to the reproduction of authoritarian dynamics at the societal level.

4.1. Perceived efficiency and everyday use

4.1.1. Leveraging the "presidential effect"

Shared accounts reveal a common recognition of the presidency as an omnipotent office wielding unquestionable influence over state institutions. Whether expressed positively or critically, participants consistently described CİMER as an extension of central authority, given its direct association with the president. This perception shaped their engagement with the system in line with the officially promoted discourse of "direct presidency," which frames CİMER as a personalized bridge connecting citizens to the president. Participants reflected a strategic understanding of this dynamic: by appealing through CİMER, they sought to activate the highest level of authority and trigger top-down pressure that compelled institutions to act. In bypassing intermediaries, users attempted to cut through bureaucratic barriers, knowing that a directive perceived as coming from the presidency was difficult for lower-level officials to ignore. As UserMale5 explained:

> In Turkey, when you file a complaint through the usual organizational structure, starting from the lowest level, it rarely ever reaches the higher levels. Or more accurately, it almost never does. No action is taken; it's ignored. And even if it does reach them, it's still often disregarded. But when a complaint is filed through CİMER, the process is reversed: it comes from the top down. That kind of directive, coming from higher authorities and sent down the chain, is taken much more seriously (20 April 2025)

UserMale5's account illustrates the common perception of CİMER as a direct presidential channel, while also revealing the institutional distrust that makes this perception meaningful. For him, ordinary complaint routes were ineffective because they moved upward through bureaucratic hierarchies where grievances could be ignored, blocked, or diluted. CİMER, by contrast, appeared powerful precisely because it reversed this direction of movement: the complaint returned from above as an instruction that lower-level officials were expected to take seriously.

This perception was shaped by his own experience during military service. After he and fellow soldiers suffered verbal abuse and physical violence from superior officers, they asked their families to submit complaints to CİMER on their behalf, using their credentials, because smartphones were not permitted. The response was swift. Within days, high-ranking military officials visited the unit, took statements, and confronted the accused commanders. The soldiers' testimonies were corroborated by others, leading to the commanders' dismissal. The entire unit was later assembled and reassured that they should not fear reporting abuse and that their rights would be protected, especially if they reached out through CİMER.

Crucially, the case illustrates how *proxy accountability* (Dimitrov, 2014) operates through the complaint mechanism, where citizens are shielded from institutional abuse. Even in relation to deeply hierarchical and traditionally untouchable institutions, such as the military, CİMER functions as a channel of accountability and empowerment. As an extension of presidential authority, it exerts influence over institutions that once stood beyond civilian oversight, including the military, which maintained significant autonomy and a history of intervention until Erdoğan consolidated control in the 2010s. Despite the military's intimidating environment, where physical and verbal abuse are widely known to occur during mandatory service, RepMale5 found the courage to act by relying on CİMER's capacity to trigger an institutional response. His complaint not only resolved his own problem but also addressed a collective issue affecting other soldiers in his unit. He described the system's problem-solving power with fascination:

> CİMER stepped in and did what needed to be done. After that, everything stopped. All the problems ended. Honestly, I would say CİMER is like something promised, almost like a godsend in this kind of situation (20 April 2025).

The positive outcome of this petition appears, at first glance, to confirm the official discourse surrounding CİMER as a mechanism of accountability and responsiveness. However, UserMale5's account suggests that the resolution was driven less by institutional commitment to soldiers' rights than by fear of the presidency and the public visibility that a CİMER

complaint could generate. Paradoxically, this fear-based responsiveness enhances CİMER's perceived legitimacy. It appears empowering because it delivers results, yet the source of this empowerment lies not in democratic accountability or ordinary institutional protections, but in the weight of presidential authority. This becomes clear in UserMale5's account of the military's reaction to the complaint:

> When the commanders took my statement, they strongly criticized one thing: 'Why did you tell your family? Why didn't you report it yourself?' But we could not, we didn't have smartphones. I explained that. He responded, 'When families of soldiers start getting involved, it can create a negative public perception.' He added, 'You should've tried to reach us through other channels' (20 April 2025).

This response reveals the anxiety generated by complaints that bypass internal hierarchies and reach the presidential communication system. The commanders' concern was not only that abuse had occurred, but that the matter had travelled outside the institution and risked producing public or presidential scrutiny. In this sense, CİMER creates a form of *proxy accountability*: it can protect citizens from institutional abuse, but it does so by mobilizing fear of higher authority rather than by strengthening ordinary channels of rights protection. This makes CİMER highly effective as a co-optative mechanism. Citizens experience it as a responsive and protective channel, while institutions learn to respond because they fear escalation to the presidency. The result is a deeply personalistic form of redress: citizens are not primarily protected by the rule of law, but by access, real or imagined, to the president as the ultimate arbiter. CİMER therefore embodies a central paradox of authoritarian personalization: it offers moments of protection and recognition while simultaneously weakening institutional trust and reinforcing dependence on centralized executive power.

4.1.2. Activating the state's punitive capacity

Almost all respondents recounted at least one instance of using CİMER to report a crime, ranging from scamming and sexual harassment to professional fraud and drug use. In most of these cases, their reports led to tangible outcomes, which participants found satisfying. Several also pointed to high-profile criminal investigations they knew had been initiated through CİMER, reinforcing their perception of its effectiveness. Underlying these accounts is a clear awareness of the state's strong punitive capacity and a strong incentive to activate it through CİMER. Rather than turning to the police, many participants preferred to use CİMER, viewing it as a more direct and effective channel. As UserMale3 put it, "In situations like this, CİMER is the first thing that comes to my mind."

Despite differing views, the interviews underscore the consequential impact of CİMER in crime reporting. UserMale8, who studied law, reported the illegal cutting down of a tree. He recounted a swift criminal proceeding initiated by his report. From a legal perspective, he

genuinely believes that CİMER facilitates the exercise of the right to complain with an effective capacity to fight criminality, often in ways more immediate or forceful than conventional law enforcement.

UserFem6, by contrast, offered a more critical account of CİMER as a tool for fighting crime, even though she herself had used the platform to report professional fraud:

> CİMER is a system built entirely on the logic of threat. There shouldn't have to be a need for CİMER; that's the problem. For example, there was that hospital scandal in Turkey involving newborns. It spread through CİMER. And that's unfortunate: both the fact that it spread that way, and that it was tracked and exposed through CİMER (19 April 2025).

UserFem6's account captures the ambivalence of CİMER's responsiveness. On one hand, the platform can expose wrongdoing and activate institutional action. On the other hand, its necessity points to the weakness of ordinary regulatory, professional, and law-enforcement mechanisms. In this view, CİMER becomes effective not because institutions function properly, but because citizens must bypass them through a centralized complaint channel. Its crime-fighting capacity is therefore inseparable from a broader logic of threat, exposure, and escalation.

While these cases demonstrate citizens' pragmatic use of the system, UserFem1 highlights the state's own pragmatism in exploiting the platform to extract information in ways that ultimately serve its interests. An accountant who reported an online scam, she observed that the state appeared less concerned with protecting victims than with using complaints to identify liabilities and impose penalties, often disproportionately, primarily as a means of generating revenue:

> The state responds to and follows up on certain reports, carefully monitoring legal and financial liability, especially when a complaint would bring revenue, such as taxes. While investigating a grievance, if they uncover misconduct or irregularities on the other side, they impose a disproportionate penalty. They follow up on these penalties to protect state interests without providing compensation. In the end, it's something that benefits the state (12 April 2025).

UserFem1's account adds another layer to the analysis, highlighting the state's extractive logic in mobilising CİMER to resolve informational gaps. Her case shows how the state draws on citizen reports to obtain information that serves its interests, in this instance, to recover lost revenue. Here, responsiveness is selective and interest-driven: the state is more likely to act when a complaint generates administrative, fiscal, or punitive value. In such cases, CİMER does not simply empower citizens to seek remedy; it also converts citizen input into usable information for the state. The platform therefore operates as a dual mechanism. It allows citizens to pursue grievances, but it also enables the state to harvest complaints, identify violations, impose penalties, and protect its own institutional interests. This reinforces the co-

optative logic of the reporting mechanism: citizens experience the system as responsive, while the state benefits from the information they provide.

UserFem1's account A similar dynamic emerges in RepFem6's case. An online adult content creator on the OnlyFans platform, she was denounced for allegedly corrupting public morality, and a criminal proceeding followed. Her lawyer, interviewed on her behalf, explained that the denunciation likely came from one of her subscribers, who submitted screenshots of content otherwise accessible only to paying members. Yet the case quickly expanded beyond morality: authorities also targeted her for untaxed income. This development came right after the Ministry of Finance issued a public call for citizens to report tax fraud. Even more striking, several other content creators working in her specific genre were denounced collectively and subjected to the same criminal proceedings.

These dynamics mirror those observed in political denunciations involving so-called "enemies of the state." Across cases, a broader pattern of mutual instrumentalization becomes visible: once citizens supply information, the state opportunistically acts on it to advance its own agenda, whether by recovering lost revenue, enforcing compliance, or identifying and pursuing perceived political threats. At the same time, citizens strategically activate the state's punitive capacity to resolve disputes, pursue grievances, or advance personal aims (Kalyvas, 2006). The relationship thus becomes reciprocal: both sides instrumentalize the mechanism for their own ends, though from profoundly unequal positions of power.

4.1.3. Influencing policy

Interviews reveal that CİMER co-opts citizens not only by solving individual problems and shielding them from institutional abuse but also by offering them a perceived avenue, real or imagined, to influence public policy by submitting opinions, suggestions, and proposed solutions to perceived problems. The data reflects a common motive to influence policy rooted in differing civic mindsets. For example, UserMale8, a law graduate, reported submitting repeated applications, which he framed as complaints, proposing policy changes in areas he viewed as problematic, although he did not disclose the content. While none of his proposals resulted in concrete policy change, UserMale8 expressed a clear understanding of the system's constraints and remained satisfied with the process:

> Looking back, there were some complaints that didn't lead to any solution. In fact, in a few cases, the responses I received said things like, 'The relevant legislation doesn't allow for your request to be fulfilled.' So, the outcome I wanted couldn't be achieved, but they justified it. Or sometimes it wasn't possible due to practical limitations. I got those kinds of replies. But as I said, in all these cases, the explanations, and I say this as a lawyer, were convincing enough for me. That's why I don't consider them negative experiences (29 April 2025).

UserMale8's account shows how procedural responsiveness can generate satisfaction even in the absence of substantive change. The platform did not empower him to shape policy directly, but it provided explanations that made refusal appear legitimate. This is important for understanding the legitimating function of CİMER: participation is sustained not only when the state grants requests, but also when it offers reasoned rejections that affirm the citizen as heard, processed, and answered. In this sense, the system produces a form of procedural inclusion, where the experience of being addressed can matter as much as the outcome itself.

On the other hand, participants who are deeply critical of CİMER and its overall function similarly submitted petitions for a policy change. UserFem1, for example, recounted submitting petitions to enforce climate law with many of her friends, stating her motive as "standing up against an issue that concerns all humanity". UserMale9, an LGBTQ and animal welfare activist, describes himself as left-wing and anti-regime. He shared his observations on the active use of CİMER among animal rights activists to create societal pressure against the state's animal massacre. Even though he is against CİMER in principle, UserMale9 similarly submitted a petition:

> Animal rights activists use CİMER a lot. They use it heavily to apply pressure on the state. In leftist circles, there's often a strong reluctance to use CİMER, a sense of, 'Who are you complaining about to whom anyway? What's even going to come of it?' There's also an aversion to engaging with the state in this kind of way. However, I've submitted something too against animal massacre (23 May 2025).

UserMale9's account shows how CİMER can be used pragmatically even by those who distrust or reject the system. For oppositional actors, petitioning does not necessarily signal belief in the platform's democratic legitimacy; rather, it can function as a tactical attempt to generate pressure, create a record, or force a response from the state. This reveals one of the co-optative effects of the mechanism: even critical citizens may be drawn into its channels when other routes of influence appear limited.

Reflecting on his use of the system, UserMale9 further distinguished between animal rights activism and LGBTQ activism, explaining why CİMER felt usable in one field but risky in the other:

> I'm a part of the LGBTQ movement. And within this movement, CİMER is not actively used. It's a bit problematic for the LGBT field. Here's why: you're exposing yourself there, you're revealing your identity. But with the issue of animal massacres, we did use CİMER. This isn't snitching or anything like that. It's about creating public pressure (23 May 2025).

This distinction is analytically important. It shows that the decision to use CİMER depends not only on political orientation, but also on the perceived risks attached to different identities and causes. Animal rights activism could be framed as a relatively safer issue through which activists sought to create public pressure. LGBTQ activism, by contrast, involved heightened

exposure because petitioning would require individuals to disclose a stigmatized and politically targeted identity to the state. In this sense, CİMER can appear as a tool of pressure in some causes while functioning as a site of vulnerability in others. The case underpins the ambivalence of petitioning under authoritarian conditions: citizens may use the platform strategically, but this use takes place within a field structured by fear, stigma, and unequal exposure to state power.

In none of the cited cases did petitions create a tangible result. For critics like UserMale9, this is not surprising but still valuable since the state "gauges the public sentiment through CİMER." However, for those who genuinely believe in CİMER and its raison d'être, like UserMale8, it might produce an effect in the long run:

> I view those cases like this: My petition might lead to future legislation. Perhaps I've helped broaden their perspective a bit. They might contemplate it internally. Therefore, I don't see it entirely negatively for that reason. That's how it was in the other cases where no solution was provided as well (29 April 2025).

UserMale8's account shows how CİMER can sustain participation even without immediate results. The absence of policy change does not necessarily undermine the platform's perceived value, because the user imagines that the petition may still circulate internally, shape bureaucratic thinking, or contribute to future legislation. This is where the co-optative function of CİMER becomes visible. The platform does not need to produce concrete policy outcomes in order to generate engagement; it only needs to preserve the sense that citizens' voices are registered, considered, and potentially consequential. Whether used strategically by critics or sincerely by believers, CİMER offers a perceived pathway into policymaking, turning participation into a feeling of influence even when no tangible change follows.

4.2. Procedural trust

Interviews show that, sometimes, trust in CİMER is rooted, not in outcomes, but in its procedural regularity. Regardless of participants' broader views on the system, a distinct form of *procedural trus*t emerges in their accounts, one grounded in the system's consistent responsiveness, perceived transparency, and predictable process. The fact that every petition receives a response, even when generic, is seen as a meaningful feature, lending a sense of legitimacy and institutional reliability in the eyes of users. Crucially, it maintains their engagement with the system.

UserFem6's account captures the paradox at the heart of procedural trust: even those who are deeply critical of CİMER continue to use it because of its structured process and guaranteed response. She articulates her ambivalent view of the system as follows:

> With CİMER, you get a reply to everything you write; they really do follow up. It's a well-functioning system in that sense: it's operational, and things are forwarded somewhere, and you do receive a response. That doesn't mean I think the system is dysfunctional, but the fact that such a system is needed in this country feels absurd to me. I do trust it to some extent. I'm sure my two complaints were forwarded to the hospital. I trust that part. But I don't think its functionality is healthy. So yes, the system is trustworthy in terms of procedure, but its actual effectiveness is questionable. That may sound contradictory, but to me, it's accurate (19 April 2025).

UserFem6's account makes an important distinction between procedural reliability and substantive effectiveness. After reporting mistreatment at a hospital, she received confirmation that her complaint had been forwarded to the relevant superiors. Although she could not know whether any concrete action was taken, she was confident that her petition had not disappeared into the void, unlike traditional petitioning processes where follow-up was often rare or non-existent. Her trust, therefore, was not rooted in belief that CİMER necessarily delivers justice, but in the expectation that it registers, routes, and acknowledges complaints. This limited form of trust is politically significant: the platform can generate confidence in procedure even when citizens remain sceptical of its outcomes and critical of the system that makes such a mechanism necessary.

Her case was echoed by many others. UserFem7 similarly emphasized:

> I had been dismissed from my job. I wrote a petition, asking why they fired me, hoping they might respond through official channels. There was a generic response, as expected. I knew nothing would come of it, but I just wanted it on record. I wanted my letter to reach that institution, for someone there to respond. That's all. I just wanted the letter to be delivered and registered in their system (18 April 2025).

UserFem7 lodged a petition to find out why she had been dismissed from her municipal job. Her reasoning reveals how procedural predictability can create an incentive to use the system, even when users do not expect a substantive remedy. What mattered was not necessarily receiving a meaningful answer, but ensuring that her grievance entered the official record and compelled the institution to acknowledge it. In this sense, CİMER offered a minimal but politically significant form of recognition: the complaint would be delivered, registered, and answered, even if only through a generic response.

This perceived procedural predictability sustains engagement with the system. For many users, the expectation that CİMER will generate some form of response makes participation worthwhile, even when they distrust the broader system or doubt its fairness. Procedural trust therefore does not depend on belief in justice or effectiveness. It can rest on the more limited assurance that the state will receive, process, and formally respond to the complaint. This

helps anchor CİMER as a normalized channel of citizen–state interaction, including for those who approach it with scepticism or resignation.

5. What micro-level reveals

This chapter studied Turkey's mass reporting landscape by focusing on the everyday experiences of individuals, both as victims and as users of the system. From a micro-level perspective, it illuminated how authoritarian surveillance and control are reproduced on the ground, while also showing how citizens actively engage with and sometimes instrumentalize the reporting system to insert themselves into the workings of the state. These dynamics of agency would remain obscured from a purely institutional or procedural perspective. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates that citizen practices are not merely reactive, but play an active role in shaping how authoritarian governance operates in practice.

The micro-level perspective shows that reporting in Turkey is not experienced merely as a formal mechanism but as part of a broader ecosystem woven into daily life. Within this ecosystem, denunciations circulate both through official state channels and through informal networks embedded in everyday power relations. The enemy-from-within narrative makes ordinary associations politically meaningful, turning personal histories, professional ties, workplace encounters, neighbourhood relations, and everyday interactions into potential sources of suspicion. In both arenas, the consequences can be equally severe. Authoritarian control is not only exercised from above but also taken up and reproduced from below, as reporting becomes a normalized practice and a way for citizens to engage with the state. Equally importantly, individuals do not engage with this system passively. They navigate its structures strategically, driven by a range of motives: from personal grievance to moral policing to instrumental goals. These individual acts of reporting, while seemingly fragmented, accumulate into a collective phenomenon that produces repression at the grassroots level and reinforces the state's reach. They reshape everyday political practices by normalizing surveillance, redistributing accountability across society, and blurring the boundaries between participation and control.

At the same time, by highlighting the individual incentives for engaging with the system, the chapter shows how CİMER functions as a mechanism of co-optation that helps sustain the social contract on the ground. It draws citizens, including those critical of the regime, into the state machinery by offering swift problem resolution, responsiveness, security, proxy accountability, and a sense of empowerment through the presidential effect. In this sense, the reporting regime does not only punish its targets; it draws ordinary users into state processes of monitoring, problem-solving, and accountability and, in denunciatory cases, can also enrol

them in the identification, exposure, and disciplining of persons framed as wrongdoers or political threats. The widespread reliance on these channels, regardless of users' intentions or mindsets, feeds back into the system and lends it legitimacy. In this way, popular engagement, even when ambivalent or critical, reinforces the image of a responsive state and helps sustain authoritarian rule under the guise of participatory governance. More broadly, these dynamics illustrate how de-democratisation unfolds not only through institutional manipulation, but through the cumulative effects of everyday citizen practices, whereby participation itself becomes a mechanism through which authoritarian rule is reproduced and normalized.

Chapter IX. Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that denunciations, far from being relics of the past, have been revived and adapted as contemporary tools of governance in hybrid regimes, reproducing authoritarian control through democratic norms, institutions, and processes. By examining mass denunciations in Turkey's hybrid context, operating within its nominally democratic setting under a participatory façade, the study shows how they are deeply authoritarian, activating the intertwined dynamics of repression, co-optation, and legitimation. These findings contribute original theoretical and empirical insights to the study of authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, democratic backsliding, and everyday political life, illuminating dynamics that existing scholarship that focused mainly on totalitarian or long-established autocracies did not capture. It advances current debates by showing not only how denunciation practices are justified discursively and operationalized institutionally, but also how citizens themselves reproduce authoritarian logics through both formal and informal reporting.

The remainder of the conclusion reviews the key findings and synthesizes the thesis's theoretical and empirical contributions. Then it presents methodological reflections, situates the results within wider comparative debates, outlines future research trajectories, and closes with a final reflection on the study's contribution to understanding authoritarian governance.

1. Theoretical Contributions

The thesis's theoretical contributions unfold across four themes, each highlighting a distinct dimension of authoritarian governance revealed through denunciations. The first shows how democratic institutions and participatory norms can be re-engineered to serve authoritarian ends. The second traces how denunciations operate at the intersection of repression, co-optation, and legitimation, bringing these pillars into a single analytical frame. The third identifies what is specific to denunciations in hybrid regimes, where digital petitioning, legalistic procedures, and moralized boundaries produce forms of participation not captured in studies of totalitarian or long-standing autocracies. In doing so, the thesis clarifies the analytical and normative distinctiveness of denunciation in hybrid regimes, by demonstrating how denunciations are routed through institutions that retain democratic form while producing authoritarian effects different from democracies and closed autocracies. The fourth examines how populist, moralizing, and fear-based discourses mobilize citizens and sustain denunciatory practices. These themes articulate the thesis's conceptual contribution to understanding how contemporary authoritarianism is engineered by political actors and

sustained through everyday practices. Crucially, they show that citizen agency is not merely reactive but constitutive: participation in denunciatory practices actively reproduces authoritarian rule while reshaping democratic norms.

The first theoretical contribution concerns how authoritarianism is enacted through the very democratic norms, institutions, and participatory mechanisms that are presumed to limit it. This finding aligns with broader debates on authoritarianism, which show that regime resilience can be sustained through exchange-based relationships between rulers and supporters. Research on authoritarian responsiveness, which is predominantly focused on China, and on authoritarian information-gathering in single-party communist regimes demonstrates how citizens provide information, loyalty, and compliance in return for responsiveness, problem-solving, and selective protection. Yet this strand of literature pays limited attention to hybrid contexts, where state institutions remain formally democratic. In turn, scholarship on hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding highlights how such regimes rely heavily on legalistic and procedural mechanisms to maintain control. However, it has devoted far less attention to how these tools are mobilized through participatory channels that retain the language and appearance of democratic engagement.

Building on these insights, the thesis extends existing literature by showing how ostensibly democratic mechanisms become instruments of authoritarian governance when channelled through mass denunciations. The analysis demonstrates that denunciations in Turkey function as part of a wider participatory apparatus embedded within a nominally democratic setting. Portrayed as instruments of civic engagement and anchored in transparency, problem-solving, and responsiveness, these mechanisms nonetheless generate repressive outcomes, enabling regimes to elicit information about dissent as part of an exchange that reinforces authoritarian control. This is where the hybrid configuration matters analytically: denunciation is neither simply a democratic act of reporting constrained by accountability, nor an openly coercive practice imposed through a totalitarian surveillance apparatus. Rather, it becomes a transformed practice in which democratic procedures, legal-bureaucratic channels, and participatory norms are repurposed to generate authoritarian outcomes. The study further shows how the judiciary is instrumentalized to sustain this arrangement: legal procedures provide protection and symbolic affirmation for loyal groups while exposing perceived opponents to harassment and prolonged legal uncertainty. Repression produced through denunciations thus takes a procedural and legalistic form, revealing how democratic norms and participatory institutions are appropriated to consolidate authoritarian rule.

The second theoretical contribution examines how denunciations bring together repression, co-optation, and legitimation, demonstrating that these pillars of authoritarian governance are

not discrete mechanisms but mutually reinforcing processes, and that they operate in this intertwined manner not only in established authoritarian regimes but also in hybrid contexts. Drawing on Gerschewski's (2013) formulation of the pillars of authoritarian stability, the thesis shows how denunciations activate these dynamics simultaneously within a hybrid regime. The analysis operationalizes the triad empirically by illustrating how repression is co-produced with citizen participation, how co-optation draws citizens into this process through platforms that promise responsiveness and access, and how legitimation underpins both dynamics, both by framing denunciation as a civic and moral duty grounded in patriotism and procedural trust, and by unfolding through participation itself, as citizen engagement translates into regime legitimation. In doing so, the thesis also fills a significant gap in the study of hybrid regimes. While repression and legitimation have received sustained attention, co-optation, especially the incorporation of ordinary citizens into authoritarian projects, remains comparatively underexamined. The findings demonstrate how co-optation in hybrid regimes operates not merely through elite alliances but through participatory mechanisms that encourage ordinary citizens to report, monitor, and police others. By tracing how responsiveness and personalized access incentivize citizen collaboration, the thesis shows that co-optation functions as a mass, everyday process embedded in routine governance. In this way, the findings show that citizen participation does not simply extend authoritarian control, but also contributes to the gradual reconfiguration of democratic practices, as participation, accountability, and civic engagement are redirected toward mechanisms of surveillance and control.

The thesis further shows how these dynamics unfold through both top-down and bottom-up processes. From above, state institutions generate repression for designated out-groups while rewarding and selectively shielding supporters within a moralized and bureaucratized framework. From below, citizens engage with this framework by drawing on its promises of responsiveness and protection, while simultaneously taking up state cues to monitor, report, and police others in ways that reproduce and extend authoritarian logics, contributing to the diffusion and social embedding of these practices beyond formal institutional boundaries. Crucially, denunciations reveal how repression, co-optation, and legitimation feed into one another: repression is framed as morally justified, legitimation encourages participation, and participation itself expands the reach of repression. Together, these interactions show how denunciations transform the pillars of authoritarianism into mutually reinforcing practices, aligning with insights from participatory repression and participatory co-optation scholarship while extending them to the context of hybrid regimes. This highlights how de-democratisation unfolds not only through institutional manipulation from above, but through

the cumulative effects of citizen practices that normalize and sustain authoritarian rule from below.

The third theoretical contribution identifies what is distinctive about denunciations in hybrid regimes. By situating the analysis in contemporary Turkey, this thesis highlights how denunciations operate differently in hybrid regimes than in the 20th-century totalitarian cases and long-standing autocracies that dominate existing scholarship. In contrast to systems where denunciations are embedded in deeply institutionalized authoritarian traditions, hybrid regimes rely on democratic norms, procedures, and participatory mechanisms to mobilize reporting. At the same time, these practices differ from reporting, petitioning, or whistleblowing in democratic contexts, where accusatory practices are normatively tied to accountability and are expected to be constrained by legal safeguards, rights protections, and institutional oversight. In hybrid regimes, those safeguards are weakened, selectively applied, or subordinated to authoritarian objectives. The Turkish case demonstrates how denunciations acquire a distinct character when they are embedded in institutions that claim transparency, responsiveness, and civic engagement; participation is solicited not through coercion, but through the language of democratic duty and access, giving denunciations a façade of participatory governance. Digitalization further differentiates this environment. An ecosystem of online and offline reporting channels, most prominently the hyper-centralized petitioning platform CİMER, expands the reach of denunciations and intensifies their authoritarian effects. Digital affordances heighten horizontal surveillance by enabling citizens to report others through everyday interactions and through social media, where visibility makes lifestyle and moral transgressions more easily detectable. They also facilitate co-optation by offering rapid problem-solving and direct executive access, thereby strengthening the perception of a responsive state. While the technological dimension echoes aspects of China's contemporary surveillance practices, the Turkish case diverges in the ideological logic guiding participation. Here, denunciations are intertwined with Islamist-populist moral governance, which criminalizes lifestyle choices and embeds moralized surveillance into everyday life. This ideological framing broadens the repertoire of denunciable behavior beyond political dissent, producing a hybrid form of denunciation that is simultaneously political, moral, and social. These moralized forms of denunciation also carry significant political effects. By framing repression as the defence of a shared moral order, they enhance legitimation among the conservative support base and deepen co-optation by encouraging citizens to act as guardians of that order. This, in turn, broadens the social base that participates in monitoring and makes repression more diffuse, socially anchored, and ultimately more effective. These dynamics show that denunciations in hybrid regimes are not a diluted version of totalitarian denunciation or a corrupted version of democratic reporting. They are a transformed practice

produced by the coexistence of participatory form and authoritarian function. Denunciations in hybrid regimes therefore represent not a residual authoritarian practice but a contemporary adaptation: a mechanism that leverages democratic norms, digital infrastructures, and moralized discourse to extend authoritarian control through citizen participation.

The fourth theoretical contribution examines how populist discourse mobilizes denunciation practices: emotionally, through moralized and fear-based narratives, and institutionally, through incentives that encourage participation. This thesis contributes to the study of populist authoritarianism by demonstrating how populist discourse not only structures political rhetoric but also shapes state policy and citizen behaviour. While existing scholarship has extensively examined the symbolic and performative dimensions of populist communication, it has paid far less attention to how its core narratives are institutionalized and translated into everyday governance. The first contribution lies in showing how divisive, moralizing, and fear-based narratives operate as psycho-political tools that prepare citizens for participation in denunciatory practices. Through enemy-making, collaboration-seeking, and fear-mongering, the regime cultivates an emotional and moral climate that normalizes participation in state-led witch-hunts. I conceptualize this as *authoritarian conditioning*: a discursive process through which citizens are ideologically primed to perceive reporting not as repression, but as civic duty, loyalty, and moral obligation against designated enemies. The second contribution concerns the institutionalization of these discursive boundaries. The core us-versus-them logic of populism is embedded in judicial and bureaucratic practices that provide protection, responsiveness, and symbolic affirmation to in-group members while exposing out-groups to scrutiny and repression. This institutional appeal has a communicative function. When citizens see that their grievances, whether ideological or service-related, are addressed with high responsiveness, this creates a reinforcing effect that encourages further engagement with the state. I conceptualize this dynamic as *responsive conditioning*: a process through which state responsiveness incentivizes collaboration, normalizes reporting, and embeds the populist moral order into everyday administrative practices. Together, these two mechanisms show that populist discourse extends beyond rhetoric. It becomes a framework for governing, shaping both the emotional foundations and institutional pathways through which citizens are mobilized into practices of denunciation. This dual conditioning illuminates how populist authoritarianism is sustained through the interplay of discourse, institutions, and citizen participation. Although the thesis is not situated primarily within the populism literature, the analysis shows that the discursive foundations of denunciations in Turkey draw heavily on populist rhetorical strategies. The findings show that denunciations provide a crucial site where discursive and institutional forms of populist rule converge.

These contributions demonstrate that denunciations are not only instruments of authoritarian governance, but also mechanisms through which citizen participation becomes integral to the reproduction of authoritarian rule and the transformation of democratic practices. The thesis therefore shows that the analytical value of the hybrid regime category lies in capturing precisely this configuration: authoritarian control is reproduced not outside democratic institutions, but through their legal, bureaucratic, and participatory forms.

2. Empirical Contributions

The empirical contributions of this thesis are threefold. First, the study presents one of the first systematic investigations of mass denunciations in Turkey and, more broadly, in a contemporary hybrid regime. Second, it offers new multi-level data that capture how denunciations are produced, processed, and experienced across macro, meso, and micro contexts. Third, it maps a multi-channel reporting ecosystem that spans formal, semi-formal, and informal pathways, revealing dynamics that have not been documented in existing scholarship. Together, these contributions provide an empirical foundation for understanding denunciations as a dispersed and networked governance practice.

The first empirical contribution lies in offering one of the first[24] systematic investigations of mass denunciations in Turkey and, more broadly, within a contemporary hybrid regime. This thesis offers one of the first systematic empirical investigations of mass denunciations in a contemporary hybrid regime, addressing a notable gap in a literature that has focused predominantly on historical totalitarian cases or long-standing autocracies. By documenting how denunciations operate at scale in Turkey, the study demonstrates that such practices not only persist but can thrive within institutional settings that retain the language and procedures of democracy. The Turkish case adds empirical urgency: the magnitude and severity of denunciations, coupled with their embedding in participatory and legalistic mechanisms, reveal a repressive phenomenon that has thus far remained empirically underexplored. In doing so, the thesis brings new evidence to the study of everyday authoritarian practices disguised as democratic engagement.

Building on this foundational contribution, the thesis's second empirical contribution offers new multi-level data that illuminate how denunciations operate across different sites of governance. The thesis generates original empirical data across macro, meso, and micro levels,

[24] While this thesis was being finalized, a French-language policy report on denunciations in Turkey was published: Ayşen Uysal, La délation en Turquie (2006–2021): Un dispositif de surveillance et de répression, Les Études du CERI, no. 279 (Paris: Sciences Po/CERI, 2025). As this study appeared at the end stage of my research and was not accessible during fieldwork or analysis, it did not inform the empirical or theoretical development of this thesis. Its publication nevertheless underscores the growing scholarly interest in denunciations in contemporary Turkey.

offering a multi-level empirical account of the reporting ecosystem that has not been documented before. At the macro level, it draws on systematically collected and coded political texts to reveal the discursive foundations of denunciations. No prior study has mapped how enemy-making, collaboration-seeking, and fear-mongering narratives are deployed to justify and normalize reporting practices. At the meso level, the study combines expert interviews with legal professionals, bureaucrats, and union representatives with analysis of laws, policy documents, and reporting channels. These data provide first-hand insight into how denunciations are operationalized through judicial and bureaucratic routines, exposing the institutional pathways through which reports are processed, amplified, or weaponized. At the micro level, new first-hand accounts from victims of denunciations and users of petitioning mechanisms illuminate how ordinary citizens experience and navigate the reporting system. These accounts reveal not only the consequences of formal reports but also the informal ways denunciations circulate through workplaces, neighbourhoods, and social media. These multi-level data offer a detailed empirical mapping of denunciations as a governance practice, evidence that has been largely absent from existing scholarship.

The insight drawn from multi-level of analysis, also reveal the often-overlooked aspects of repression, showing how denunciations generate long-term, cumulative harms that extend beyond the initial act of reporting. This thesis introduces the notion of an *afterlife of repression* to capture how harm unfolds long after the initial act of reporting, a dimension largely overlooked in existing accounts of authoritarian control. In particular, the documentation of lived experiences at the meso and micro levels uncovers how these harms unfold over time, illuminating consequences that are largely missing from existing accounts of authoritarian control. Beyond visible outcomes such as arrest or dismissal, the empirical findings reveal that denunciations generate prolonged and cumulative forms of harm, opening space for novel, empirically grounded conceptualizations of how repression unfolds over time. Judicial repression extends into judicial harassment, where individuals endure years of uncertainty, repeated investigations, and procedural entanglement. Job loss evolves into social erasure and civic death, reshaping individuals' relationships to work, community, and the state. Alongside these established categories, the empirical findings enable the articulation of two additional dynamics: *institutional ghosting* and *weaponized accountability*, which capture forms of bureaucratic and administrative repression that have received little attention in existing scholarship. Individual accounts revealed the strategic withholding or denial of information, preventing citizens from contesting accusations or accessing due process, a phenomenon which I term as *institutional ghosting*. The findings also uncover a novel form of vulnerability among public-sector workers, conceptualized as *weaponized accountability*, in which oversight mechanisms, framed as democratic scrutiny, expose them to frequent, unfounded complaints

with serious professional and personal consequences and create complaint anxiety. These accounts illuminate how denunciations produce long-lasting, layered, and often informal forms of repression that extend far beyond the initial act of reporting.

Finally, the study maps a reporting ecosystem that spans formal, semi-formal, and informal channels, an empirical terrain that has not been systematically documented in the Turkish context. The analysis shows that denunciations are deeply embedded within CİMER, a platform designed to absorb a wide spectrum of citizen input, from routine complaints and service requests to policy suggestions and crime reporting. This architecture allows politically and morally motivated accusations to enter the system as routine citizen input, facilitating their translation into either complaints or crime reports and blurring the boundary between the two. The findings further demonstrate that reporting is not confined to CİMER but occurs through police hotlines, judicial procedures, and specialized administrative channels that operate with similar efficacy. Equally important, denunciations take place informally through personal, professional, and online relationships, among neighbours, colleagues, school communities, and across social media platforms. These informal pathways reveal a reporting culture that extends beyond institutional design, reflecting the internalization of surveillance norms and the diffusion of denunciatory practices into everyday life. By tracing these multiple entry points, the study provides an empirical account of denunciation as a dispersed and networked phenomenon rather than a singular institutional mechanism.

3. Methodological Reflections

This thesis employed a multi-level, multi-method research design to examine the complex dynamics of denunciation in hybrid regimes. It combined critical discourse analysis of political texts, institutional analysis focusing on bureaucratic organization and procedures, analysis of policy and legal documents, and interviews with experts and ordinary citizens, including victims of denunciations and petitioners.

Guided by the theoretical premise of a demand–supply mechanism, where political actors generate demand for information and participation, and citizens supply it through denunciatory practices, the multi-level approach was designed to capture denunciation as both a top-down and bottom-up phenomenon, bridging perspectives from comparative politics and political sociology. Within this framework, the triad of repression, co-optation, and legitimation served as an analytical anchor across the three levels of analysis, structuring the interpretation of how state strategies and citizen practices interact to sustain authoritarian control. The multi-method design, in turn, enabled the triangulation of macro-level discourse,

meso-level institutions, and micro-level experiences through three distinct yet interrelated datasets.

This integrated framework revealed how macro-level dynamics shape and restructure meso-level institutions, which together condition and constitute micro-level behaviours and perceptions on the ground. Conducting research in Turkey posed challenges of access, sensitivity, and ethics due to the politically delicate context. These challenges were addressed through strict adherence to ethical protocols, careful anonymization, and the researcher's familiarity with the field and linguistic and cultural context. Prior experience in human rights research and local knowledge proved invaluable in building trust and ensuring participant safety.

At the same time, the study's methodological scope is shaped by several limitations. The interpretive nature of discourse analysis and the sensitivity of the topic make parts of the research difficult to replicate, particularly in a context where political pressures constrain access to data and informants. The interview samples at the micro level were necessarily small, shaped by self-selection and risk considerations, and therefore cannot be considered representative of all experiences within the reporting system. A similar constraint applies to expert interviews at the meso level, where access to state officials and bureaucratic actors remains limited. These factors, taken together with the idiosyncrasies of Turkey's political and cultural environment, limit the generalizability of specific empirical findings beyond the Turkish case. However, rather than undermining the study, these constraints highlight the value and rarity of gaining insight into practices that are typically hidden, sensitive, and politically risky to investigate.

Beyond its empirical contributions, the study's methodological value lies in its rigor, adaptability, and analytical leverage. The layered and comparative structure offers a robust framework for investigating similar practices of everyday authoritarianism in other hybrid contexts, where repression and participation intersect in the governance of citizens. Because the concepts of repression, co-optation, legitimation, and the demand–supply dynamic of denunciation are analytically abstract, they can in principle be applied across a wide range of institutional and cultural settings. At the same time, it should be expected that these dynamics to unfold or intersect differently depending on various factors such as the political history, ideological environment, societal polarization, and administrative capacity of each case. Applying this approach to another context could therefore illuminate how the same authoritarian mechanisms manifest in distinct configurations, allowing for meaningful cross-case comparison and theory-building.

4. Broader Implications and Comparative Insights

Drawing on the Turkish case, the thesis shows that mass denunciations do not arise spontaneously but are cultivated within a political landscape deliberately engineered to merge repression with societal participation. The state's demand for information drives the establishment of multiple reporting channels and incentives that frame engagement as both moral and democratic, constituting a transactional, exchange-based relationship between citizens and the regime. What distinguishes Turkey, however, is the ideological and institutional environment within which this relationship takes shape.

A central feature of this distinctiveness lies in the Islamist–populist moral discourse that extends denunciation beyond political dissent and into lifestyle, identity, and moral comportment. This produces a moralized framing of threats that differs from earlier authoritarian contexts, where denunciations were predominantly political or ideological. In Turkey, the boundaries of denunciable behavior expand to include social and cultural transgressions, embedding surveillance within everyday moral judgments.

These dynamics are further amplified by the country's highly digitalized institutional infrastructure. An ecosystem of online and offline reporting channels, most prominently the hyper-centralized petitioning platform CİMER, renders denunciation both accessible and legitimate. CİMER's design enables politically and morally motivated accusations to be submitted as routine citizen input, while its digital responsiveness and personalized executive access create the perception of a participatory and effective state. This blend of digital petitioning, moralized discourse, and institutional responsiveness produces a uniquely hybrid form of denunciation that is part bureaucratic, part ideological, and part participatory.

Within this system, repression operates less through overt coercion and more through the routinized bureaucratic handling of citizen reports. The judiciary and bureaucracy institutionalize denunciation and operationalize the social contract crafted at the discursive level, translating it into everyday administrative routines that sustain authoritarian control under the guise of participatory governance. When these mechanisms are articulated through the procedural language of democracy such as transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, they legitimize surveillance as civic participation. Under the guise of democratic governance, citizens become both agents and subjects of repression, enacting a "social contract" that sustains authoritarian rule while preserving its democratic façade.

The findings of this thesis speak to wider debates on democratic backsliding and the adaptive strategies of contemporary authoritarian regimes. They show that denunciations are not merely historical artefacts but have been reconfigured as versatile tools of governance that

thrive within institutional settings that remain formally democratic. Rather than relying solely on familiar instruments such as legal engineering, institutional restructuring, or the erosion of checks and balances, hybrid regimes sustain authoritarian resilience by actively incorporating citizens into the work of surveillance and control.

In this sense, the study highlights how civic participation itself can be transformed under authoritarian rule. By outsourcing monitoring to citizens and normalizing horizontal denunciation, regimes can generate repression through practices that appear participatory, responsive, and ostensibly democratic. The Turkish case illustrates this dynamic vividly: state-led reporting mechanisms are mobilized to police dissent, discipline deviance, and legitimize repression under the procedural language of accountability and responsiveness.

The conditions under which this system succeeds in Turkey offer insight into when similar dynamics may or may not take hold elsewhere. Several enabling factors are particularly important. First, deep political polarization and the post-coup climate of insecurity created a fertile environment for enemy-making narratives that justified vigilance and reporting. Second, the presence of digital infrastructures, most notably the hyper-centralized CİMER platform, allowed denunciations to be scaled, routinized, and legitimized as democratic input. Third, the fusion of populist and Islamist moral governance expanded the repertoire of denunciable behaviour beyond political dissent to lifestyle and identity, making denunciation both politically and morally charged.

These enabling conditions suggest that denunciation-based governance is most effective in hybrid regimes where democratic procedures remain in place, political discourse is moralized and divisive, digital infrastructures are readily available, and citizens perceive responsiveness or protection from the state as personally valuable. Conversely, such mechanisms may prove less effective in contexts with strong horizontal trust, low polarization, cohesive civil society, or where digital petitioning systems do not confer political benefits to participants.

More broadly, these insights underscore the need to reconsider civic participation as a double-edged phenomenon: one that can empower citizens, but can also be instrumentalized to sustain authoritarian control. In highlighting how participation, legitimacy, and repression become intertwined in hybrid regimes, the study contributes to a comparative understanding of the mechanisms through which contemporary authoritarianism endures.

5. Future research directions

This study opens several promising avenues for future research. First, while the concepts and analytical tools employed here draw on established frameworks, the thesis demonstrates their value when applied systematically to denunciations in a hybrid regime. The multi-level design

that links macro-level discourse, meso-level institutions, and micro-level experiences offers a flexible analytical approach that can be adapted for comparative work across other contexts experiencing democratic backsliding. Cases such as Hungary and Poland are especially instructive, not only because of their institutional and ideological parallels with Turkey, but also due to their communist pasts, where cultures of informality and denunciation were historically embedded. Future research could examine whether contemporary states reactivate or repurpose these practices, and under what political or technological conditions they become effective or remain dormant.

Second, the findings invite interdisciplinary exploration, particularly at the intersection of political science, anthropology, sociology, and media studies. An anthropological perspective could investigate the social meanings, moral economies, and relational dynamics of reporting, including how experiences of denunciation differ across gender, class, or community. Digital anthropology and media studies, in turn, offer valuable tools for tracing how online spaces shape cultures of surveillance.

Finally, future research could incorporate experimental or survey-based methods to systematically measure attitudes toward denunciation, motivations for reporting, and behavioural tendencies under varying political and moral cues. Such approaches would deepen understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms that drive participation in denunciation systems, a dimension that remains underexplored in both authoritarianism and hybrid regime scholarship.

Collectively, these avenues would extend the thesis's empirical and comparative insights, enriching our understanding of how everyday participation contributes to authoritarian resilience in diverse political and technological environments.

6. Closing Reflection

This study offers a foundation for reimagining denunciations as instruments of participatory repression that have been effectively mobilized in the twenty-first century. It demonstrates that autocratic regimes endure, not in spite of democracy but through its language, institutions, and mechanisms, turning these into empty signifiers that legitimize and facilitate repression. The findings invite reflection on how such practices reshape the public imagination of citizenship and political engagement, thereby turning democratic norms and processes themselves into contributors to democratic backsliding. In doing so, it underscores the need to reconsider the boundaries and vulnerabilities of civic participation, revealing how democratic practices can be appropriated to sustain authoritarian rule. By presenting ordinary

citizens both agents and subjects of control, this study underscores the fragile line between participation and repression in contemporary politics.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The categorisation of political speeches in the dataset

The categorisation of all political speeches (delivered between 2012 and 2023) in the dataset, with speeches classified according to the six fields of action identified in the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA).

Formation of public attitudes (Code1)	Political executive (Code2)	Party internal (Code3)	Political advertising (Code4)	Law Making (Code5)	International (Code6)
Opening ceremonies	Parliamentary inauguration	Party congress	Party membership ceremony	NA (replaced by Mukhtar meetings)	United Nation addresses
National address	District governor meetings	Party group meeting	Post-election "Balcony address"		International summits/forum/ symposiums
Cultural events	Cabinet meeting press conference	Events/gathering/ receptions	Rally		Joint press conference with leaders
Public addresses during domestic visits	Presidency evaluation meeting	Party provincial addresses			NATO meetings/summits
Receptions/ dinners	Academic/institutional Inauguration	Party representative meetings			
Rallies	Professional/business general assemblies	Regular party evaluation and consultation meeting			
Meeting with groups (youth/students/ professional groups)	Councils on various topics (law, family, etc)	Party municipality representatives meeting			
National celebrations/ ceremonies					
Public address in disaster zones					

Appendix B: Sampling decisions of speeches that are selected from pre- and post-incident.

1. Gezi Protests (June 2013)

Incident	Pre-incident	Date	Field of action	Occasion	Notes
Gezi protests (28 May-20 August)	1) AB Bakanlığı Ulusal Ajans Proje Festivali 10.Yıl Kutlaması	İstanbul | 10 May 2013	Code1	Ministry of EU National Agency Project Festival 10th Anniversary Celebration	❖ Speeches are selected from the available fields of action that are closest to the Gezi protests. ❖ Selected speeches fall under four fields of action.
	2) Ulusal Egemenlik ve Çocuk Bayramı Nedeniyle TBMM Genel Kurulu Özel Oturumu	Ankara | 23 April 2013	Code2	Special Session of the Parliament for National Sovereignty and Children's Day	❖ One speech is selected from each field of action. ❖ However, there are two speeches from Code2. Speech2 is selected for our sample due to its significance of the field of action. The mentioned speech is delivered in the parliament for a special occasion.
	3) Dünya Çiftçiler Günü ve TZOB Yönetim Kurulu Toplantısı	Ankara | 13 May 2013	Code2	World Farmers Day and Union of Chambers Board of Directors Meeting	
	4) AK Parti TBMM Grup Toplantısı	Ankara | 28 May 2013	Code3	Party parliamentary group meeting	❖ Speech5 is part of a series of public addresses named as *On the Path of Serving the Nation*. It is a speech delivered for public appeal where the president communicates his accomplishments, sets the agenda and give messages on the various topics.
	5) Millete Hizmet Yolunda*	İstanbul | 30 April 2013	Code4	"On the Path of Serving the Nation" public address	
	Post-incident	**Date**	**Field of action**		**Notes**
Gezi protests (28 May-20 August)	1) 17. Akdeniz Oyunları Tesislerinin Açılış Töreni	Mersin | 09 June 2013	Code1	Opening Ceremony of 17th Mediterranean Games Facilities	❖ Speeches from available fields of action have been selected for our sample. They are speeches delivered in the immediate aftermath of the Gezi protests. ❖ Selected speeches fall under four fields of action. ❖ One speech from each field of action is selected for the sample. ❖ Speech2 is delivered at the general assembly of a religious/educational society, İlim Yayma Cemiyeti. This society belongs to a religious brotherhood which are allies with Erdoğan. ❖ All the "*Respect National Will*" rallies (5) are selected for sample given their contextual significance. They are organized as a reaction to the Gezi protests. ❖ If needed, further speeches will be analysed from post-incident group.
	2) İlim Yayma Cemiyeti 59. Olağan Genel Kurulu	İstanbul | 1 June 2013	Code2	59th Ordinary General Assembly of a religious educational Society	
	3) AK Parti TBMM Grup Toplantısı	Ankara | 11 June 2013	Code3	Party parliamentary group meeting	
	4) "Millî İradeye Saygı" mitingi	Ankara | 15 June 2013	Code4	"Respect the National Will" rally	
	5) "Millî İradeye Saygı" mitingi	İstanbul | 16 June 2013	Code4	"Respect the National Will" rally	
	6) "Millî İradeye Saygı" mitingi	Kayseri | 21 June 2013	Code4	"Respect the National Will" rally	

	7) "Millî İradeye Saygı" mitingi	Samsun | 22 June 2013	Code4	"Respect the National Will" rally	
	8) "Millî İradeye Saygı" mitingi	Erzurum | 23 June 2013	Code4	"Respect the National Will" rally	

2. Corruption Scandal (17-25 December 2013)

Incident	Pre-incident	Date	Field of action	Occasion	Notes
Corruption Scandal (17-25 December)	1) AK Parti TBMM Grup Toplantısı	Ankara | 3 December 2013	Code3	Party parliamentary group meeting	❖ Speeches are selected from the dates closest to the Corruption Scandal. ❖ Speeches prior to the Corruption Scandal are mostly delivered in opening ceremonies in nearby cities and towns. Some speeches are delivered on the same day in different nearby towns. They are delivered in subsequent days. ❖ To increase the variety among the sub-types of fields of actions, we included Speech2 delivered at İlim Yayma Cemiyeti which is a religious brotherhood with close ties to the regime. ❖ We also selected a speech from an opening ceremony in the capital city (No.2).
	2) İlim Yayma Vakfı 40. Yıl Programı	İstanbul | 5 December 2013	Code1	Anniversary of a religious-educational foundation	
	3) Edirne Valiliği ile Kahvaltı	Edirne | 8 December 2013	Code2	Breakfast with Edirne governorship	
	4) TBMM Genel Kurulu 2014 Yılı Merkezî Yönetim Bütçe Kanunu Tasarısı Görüşmesi	Ankara | 10 December 2013	Code2	Parliamentary General Assembly 2014 Central Government Budget Law Draft Discussion	
	5) Orman ve Su İşleri Bakanlığı 113 Dev Tesis Açılış Töreni	Ankara | 1 1 December 2013	Code1	Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs Facility Opening Ceremony	
	6) Aday Açıklama Toplantısı	Antalya | 14 December 2013	Code3	Candidate Disclosure Meeting	
	7) Toplu Açılış Töreni	Konya | 17 December 2013	Code1	Mass Opening Ceremony	
	Post-incident	**Date**	**Field of action**		**Notes**
Corruption Scandal	1) Toplu Açılış Töreni	Ünye, Ordu | 21 December 2013	Code1	Mass Opening Ceremony	❖ Speeches are selected from various fields of action available, from the dates closest to the immediate after of the Corruption Scandal. ❖ During sampling, some decisions are made to include diverse various fields of actions across time: ❖ Only 2 speeches are chosen from Code1 since there are a series of opening ceremonies in subsequent days in nearby cities and towns within December.
	2) AK Parti Genişletilmiş İl Başkanları Toplantısı	Ankara | 25 December 2013	Code3	AK Party Extended Provincial Presidents Meeting	
	3) Toplu Açılış Töreni	Manisa | 28 December 2013	Code1	Mass Opening Ceremony	
	4) Millete Hizmet Yolunda	Ankara | 29 December 2013	Code4	*On the Path of Serving the Nation* public address	

(17-25 December)	5) Medya Temsilcileri ile Buluşma	İstanbul | 4 January 2014	Code2	Meeting with Media Representatives	➢ 3 strategically important speeches are selected from Code4. Speech4 is from the series of "On Our Way to Serving the People" series of addresses. It is a national address where Erdoğan uses to communicate the government accomplishments. It is delivered in the immediate aftermath of the scandal. ➢ Speech8 is the first of a set of rallies delivered for the local elections. ➢ Speech9 is the victory speech of the local elections.
	6) AK Parti TBMM Grup Toplantısı	Ankara | 14 January 2014	Code3	Party parliamentary group meeting	
	7) Büyükşehir Belediyesi 214 Açılış Töreni	Ankara | 14 January 2014	Code1	Metropolitan Municipality Opening Ceremony	
	8) TÜMSIAD 2. Genel İstişare Kurulu	Brussels | 21 January 2014	Code2/7	TÜMSIAD 2nd General Advisory Board	
	9) Yozgat Mitingi	Yozgat | 22 February 2014	Code4	Rally	
	10) 30 Mart Seçimleri Sonuç Değerlendirme Açıklaması	Ankara | 30 March 2014	Code4	March 30 Election Result Evaluation Statement	

3. General Elections (7 June 2015)

Incident	Pre-incident	Date	Field of action	Occasion	Notes
General Elections (7 June 2015)	1) Van'da Toplu Açılış Töreni Konuşması	Van 14/05/2015	Code1	Mass Opening Ceremony	❖ Pre-incident speeches are chosen from the closest dates to the General elections. ❖ There is only two fields of action available preceding the General Elections in which president delivered speeches: Formation of public attitude (Code1) and Mukhtar meetings (Code5). ❖ However, pre-incident speeches are chosen from diverse occasions that fall under the Code1. ➢ Two speeches are from opening ceremonies. Speech no1 is from a Kurdish city Van which is strategically important. ➢ Speech no3 is from the anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul which potentially has rich data on ideological alignment of the president. ➢ Speech no.4 is a public address during a domestic visit to the city Sivas which was delivered just 2 days before the elections. Therefore, it is potentially an election rally for the president. ❖ Speeches delivered in Code5 are mukhtar meetings which take place regularly in the Presidential Palace. The selected speeches are delivered three months prior to the elections. However, Mukhtar Meetings are important platform for the president to communicate his stance.
	2) TUSAŞ Uzay Sistemleri Entegrasyon ve Test Merkezi Açılış Töreni'nde Konuşma	Ankara 21/05/2015	Code1	TAI Space Systems Integration and Test Centre Opening Ceremony	
	3) İstanbul'un Fethi'nin 562. Yıl Dönümü Kutlamaları Konuşması	İstanbul 30/05/2015	Code1	Celebrations of the 562nd Anniversary of the Conquest of Istanbul	
	4) Sivas'ta Halka Hitap	Sivas 04/06/2015	Code1	Public address during domestic visit	
	5) Dördüncü Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 10/03/2015	Code5	Mukhtar* meetings	
	6) Beşinci Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 23/03/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	
	7) Altıncı Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 08/04/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	
	Post-incident	**Date**	**Field of action**	**Occasion**	**Notes**

General elections (7 June 2015)	1. Dördüncü Uluslararası Öğrenciler Mezuniyet Töreni Konuşması	Ankara 11/06/2015	Code1	Fourth International Students Graduation Ceremony	❖ Post-incident speeches are selected from various fields of action available, from the dates closest to the immediate after of the General Elections. ❖ Diverse occasions that fall under Code 1 is selected for their importance. ➢ Graduation ceremony for International Students holds important as it is directed at international students as audience and provides rich data. ➢ Iftar dinner with relatives of martyrs and veterans is strategically important since it is an occasion where Erdoğan furthers his nationalist and patriotic discourse after the elections. ➢ Iftar dinner at the refugee centre is also strategically important for being an occasion potentially important for the agenda. ❖ Three speeches are chosen for analysis that fall under Code 2 (Political executive field of action). ➢ The speech delivered at the General Assembly of the Union of Chambers of Agriculture of Turkey is selected since Erdoğan's use of the platform as a head of the executive is potentially provides rich data. ➢ Speech no.5 is selected for its significance for its date and field of action. ➢ Speech no.6 is selected for its significance of field of action. ❖ Speeches delivered in Code5 are mukhtar meetings which take place regularly in the Presidential Palace. The selected speeches are delivered after the elections. However, Mukhtar Meetings are important platform for the president to communicate his stance.
	2. Şehit Yakınları ve Gaziler İftar Programı Konuşması	Ankara 18/06/2015	Code1	Iftar dinner with relatives of martyrs and veterans	
	3. Midyat Geçici Barınma Merkezi'nde İftar Yemeği	Midyat 20/06/2015	Code1	Iftar dinner at Temporary Refugee Centre	
	4. Türkiye Ziraat Odaları Birliği 26. Olağan Genel Kurulu	Ankara 08/05/2015	Code2	26th General Assembly of the Union of Chambers of Agriculture	
	5. Türkiye İhracatçılar Meclisi 22. Olağan Genel Kurulu'nda Konuşması	İstanbul 21/06/2015	Code2	22nd General Assembly of the Turkish Exporters Assembly	
	6. TBMM 25. Dönem 2. Yasama Yılı Açış Konuşması	Ankara 01/10/2015	Code2	Parliamentary inauguration	
	7. Muhtarlarla İftar Programı (7. Muhtarlar Toplantısı)	Ankara 24/06/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	
	8. Sekizinci Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 12/08/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	
	9. Dokuzuncu Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 19/08/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	
	10. Onuncu Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara 26/08/2015	Code5	Mukhtar meetings	

4. Coup attempt (15 July 2016)

Incident	Pre-incident	Date	Field of action	Occasion	Notes
	1) 'Büyük İstanbul Tarihi' Adlı Eserin Tanıtım Programı	İstanbul | 18 June 2016	Code1	Launch Event of the Work Titled 'The Grand History of Istanbul	❖ Speeches are selected from the dates closest to the Coup attempt from the available field of actions. ❖ Speeches prior to the failed coup mostly consist of iftar dinners with various groups of strategic importance and mukhtar meetings.
	2) Sanatçı ve Sporcularla İftar Programı	İstanbul | 19 June 2016	Code1	Iftar Dinner with Artists and Athletes	
	3) Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf Üniversitesi 2015-	İstanbul | 22 June 2016	Code1	2015–2016 Academic Year Graduation Ceremony of	

Coup Attempt (15 July 2016)	2016 Akademik Yılı Mezuniyet Töreni			Fatih Sultan Mehmet University	❖ Speech no.2 is selected for its strategic importance of co-optation of celebrities by Erdoğan. ❖ Speech no.4 is delivered to municipality workers and it potentially provides important messages. ❖ Speech no.5 is selected for its strategic importance for having the police as the audience. ❖ Speech no.6 and 7 are delivered to community leaders and NGOs which provides rich data in Erdoğan's attempt to co-opt strategic actors. ❖ Three Mukhtar meetings are selected for the analysis for the pre-incident category for their contextual significance.
	4) İstanbul Yöneticileri ve İl Protokolü İftar Programı	Istanbul | 16 June 2016	Code2	Iftar Dinner with Istanbul Administrators and Provincial Protocol	
	5) Emniyet Mensupları ile İftar Programı	Istanbul | 16 June 2016	Code2	Iftar Dinner with Law Enforcement Officers	
	6) STK Temsilcileri ile İftar Programı	Ankara| 21 June 2016	Code2	Iftar Dinner with NGO Representatives	
	7) Kanaat Önderleri ile İftar Programı	Ankara | 23 June 2016	Code2	Iftar Dinner with Community Leaders	
	8) 24. Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara | 19 April 2016	Code5	24th Mukhtar Meeting	
	9) 25. Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara | 4 May 2016	Code5	25th Mukhtar Meeting	
	10) 24. Muhtarlar Toplantısı	Ankara | 8 June 2016	Code5	26th Mukhtar Meeting	
	Post-incident	**Date**	**Field of action**		**Notes**
Coup Attempt (15 July 2016)	1) Millete Hitap	Ankara| 19 July 2016	Code1	Public address	❖ Speeches are selected from various fields of action available, from the dates closest to the immediate after of the Coup attempt. ❖ The Code1 speeches mostly consist of rallies that Erdoğan holds as a reaction the coup attempt which provides rich data. ❖ Speeches in Code2 category are political executive field of action which are significant in that they provide rich data on the state's reaction to coup. ❖ Speech no. 8 was selected for its strategic importance in addressing governors, as it potentially offers valuable insights into how the state delegated authority to them in managing the coup.
	2) 15 Temmuz Darbe Girişimi ile İlgili Meydan Konuşması	Ankara | 23 July 2016	Code1	Public Speech on the July 15 Coup Attempt	
	3) Beştepe Millet Kongre ve Kültür Merkezi Açılışı & Şehitleri Anma Programı	Ankara | 29 July 2016	Code1	Opening of the Beştepe National Congress and Culture Center & Martyrs' Memorial Program	
	4) 'Demokrasi ve Şehitler Mitingi	Ankara| 07 August 2016	Code1	Democracy and Martyrs Rally	
	5) 'Demokrasi Nöbeti' Tutan Vatandaşlara Hitap	Ankara| 10 August 2016	Code1	Speech Addressed to Citizens Holding the 'Democracy Watch'	
	6) Bakanlar Kurulu Toplantısı Sonrasında Basın Açıklaması	Ankara | 20 July 2016	Code2	Press conference following the cabinet meeting	
	7) 2016-2017 Adli Yıl Açılış Töreni	Ankara | 1 September 2016	Code2	2016-2017 Judicial inaguration ceremony	
	8) 81 İlin Valisinin Kabulü	Ankara| 8 September 2014	Code2	Meeting with province governors	

	9) Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi 26. Dönem 2. Yasama Yılı Açılışı	Ankara | 1 October 2016	Code2	Parliamentary inauguration	
	10) 27th Mukhtar Meeting	Ankara | 29 September 2016	Code5	Mukhtar meeting	
	11) 28th Mukhtar Meeting	Ankara | 19 October 2016	Code5	Mukhtar meeting	
	12) 29th Mukhtar Meeting	Ankara | 26 October 2016	Code5	Mukhtar meeting	
	13) 30th Mukhtar Meeting	Ankara | 1 December 2016	Code5	Mukhtar meeting	

Appendix C: Meso-level Expert Interviews Data Description

1.Overview of Expert Interview Participants by Cohort and Professional Role

Expert interviews	Cohort 1 (Legal)	Cohort 2 (Bureaucracy)	Cohort 3 (Trade Unions)
	Legal scholars & experts (3)	Hospital staff (2)	Educational union Representative (1)
	Practicing lawyers (5)	School staff (2)	Health Union representatives (2)
		Prosecutor's office (1)	Municipality union representative (1)
		Provincial Health directorate (2)	
		Provincial tax office (1)	
		Ministry legal branch (1)	
		Ministry logistic branch (1)	
Total int.	**8**	**10**	**4**
22			

2. Overview of Participant Profiles and Interview Details for Legal Cohort

Interviewee	Participant ID	Date	Location	Source	Format	Length
Legal Scholar & Expert	Lawyer1	08.08.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	104 minutes
Legal Expert	Lawyer2	09.08.24	In person	Referral by Trade Union	Semi-struct.	27 minutes
Practicing lawyer	Lawyer3	05.09.24	In person	Referral by Bar Association	Semi-struct.	46 minutes
Practicing lawyer	Lawyer4	06.09.24	In person	Referral by Bar Association	Semi-struct.	47 minutes
Practicing lawyer	Lawyer5	12.09.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	55 minutes
Practicing lawyer	Lawyer6	23.09.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	57 minutes
Practicing lawyer	Lawyer7	17.10.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	61 minutes
Legal Scholar & Expert	Lawyer8	09.01.25	Zoom	Personal contact	Semi-struct.	48 minutes

3. Overview of Participant Profiles and Interview Details for Bureaucracy Cohort

Interviewee	Participant ID	Date	Location	Source	Format	Length
Legal staff at Ministry	MinistryStaff1	05.08.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	30 minutes
Cimer Unit at City Hospital	HospitalStaff1	20.08.24	In person	Walk-in	Semi-struct.	40 minutes
Cimer Unit at Training & Research Hospital	HospitalStaff2	22.08.24	In person	Referral by Trade Union	Semi-struct.	46 minutes
State School Principal	SchoolStaff1	05.09.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	47 minutes
Cimer Unit at Prosecutor office	CourtStaff1	09.09.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	40 minutes
Head of Disciplinary Board at	HealthStaff1	11.09.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	85 minutes

Provincial Health Directorate						
Legal staff at Provincial Health Directorate	HealthStaff2	11.09.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	60 minutes
Cimer Unit at Provincial Tax Office	TaxStaff1	13.10.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	30 minutes
School Principal at Vocational High School	SchoolStaff2	11.11.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	61 minutes
Logistic expert at Ministry	MinistryStaff2	10.10.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	40 minutes

4. Overview of Participant Profiles and Interview Details for Trade Union Cohort

Interviewee	Participant ID	Date	Location	Source	Format	Length
Union administrative officer (Health sector)	HealthUnionRep1	06.08.24	In person	Walk-in	Semi-struct.	40 minutes
Union legal secretary (Health sector)	HealthUnion2	06.08.24	In person	Walk-in	Semi-struct.	47 minutes
Union Legal Secretary (Education sector)	EduUnionRep1	21.08.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	60 minutes
Union administrative officer (Municipal sector)	MunicipalUnionRep1	30.10.24	In person	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	28 minutes

Appendix D: Micro-level Semi-structured Interviews Data Description

1.Overview of Participant Profiles and Interview Details for Reported Citizens

Interviewee ID	Role	Date	Location	Source	Format	Length
RepFem1	Teacher	24.08.24	In person	Social media	Semi-struct.	104 minutes
RepFem2	Civil servant	07.09.24	Zoom	Referral by colleague	Semi-struct.	50 minutes
RepMale3	Engineer	13.09.24	In person	Referral Trade Union	Semi-struct.	48 minutes
RepMale4	Flight attendant	04.10.24	Zoom	Social media	Semi-struct.	85 minutes
RepMale5	Doctor	04.11.24	Zoom	Referral by interviewee	Semi-struct.	21 minutes
RepFem6	Freelancer	09.12.24	Zoom	Social media	Semi-struct.	49 minutes
RepFem7	Teacher	17.10.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	37 minutes
RepMale8	Humanitarian worker	30.01.25	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	62 minutes
RepFem9	Flight attendant	11.02.24	Zoom	WhatsApp Group	Semi-struct	46 minutes
RepFem10	Doctor	24.02.25	Zoom	WhatsApp Group	Semi-struct	40 minutes
RepMale11	Retired state inspector	14.02.25	WhatsApp	WhatsApp Group	Semi-struct	35 minutes
RepFem12	Freelancer	17.03.25	WhatsApp	Social media	Semi-struct	35 minutes
RepMale13	College student	23.04.25	WhatsApp	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	40 minutes

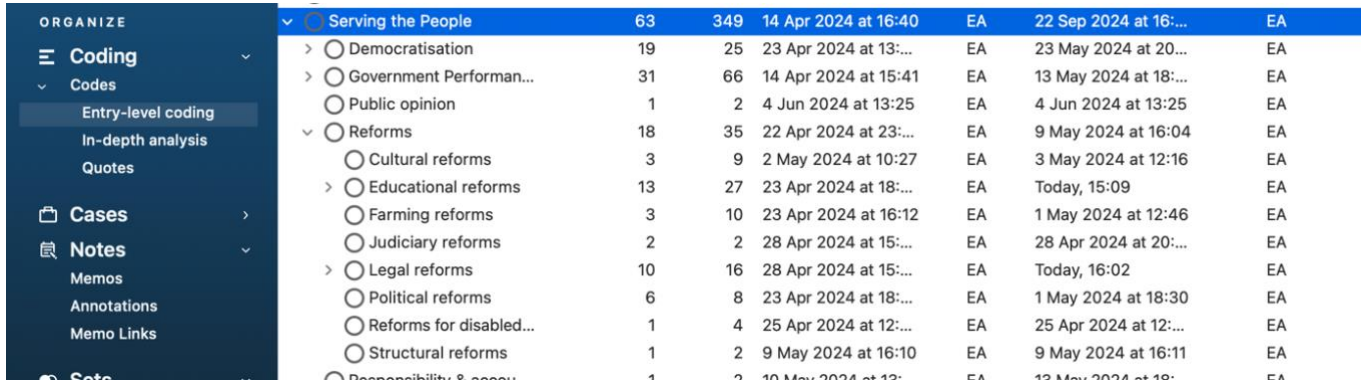
RepFem14	Teacher	28.03.25	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	43 minutes
RepFem15	Nurse	20.03.25	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	35 minutes

2. Overview of Participant Profiles and Interview Details for Petitioners

Interviewee ID	Role	Date	Location	Source	Format	Length
UserFem1	Accountant	12.04.25	WhatsApp	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	36 minutes
UserMale2	Municipality worker	13.02.25	WhatsApp	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct.	30 minutes
UserMale3	College student	05.05.25	Zoom	WhatsApp group	Semi-struct	32 minutes
UserFem4	College student	13.02.24	WhatsApp	WhatsApp group	Semi-struct.	35 minutes
UserMale5	College student	20.04.25	WhatsApp	WhatsApp group	Semi-struct	25 minutes
UserFem6	Retired civil servant	19.04.25	WhatsApp	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	30 minutes
UserFem7	Engineer	18.04.24	Zoom	Referral by personal contact	Semi-struct	30 minutes
UserMale8	Civil servant	29.04.25 Zoom	Zoom	WhatsApp group	Semi-struct	35 minutes
UserMale9	Activist	23.05.25 Zoom	Zoom	Social media	Semi-struct	43 minutes

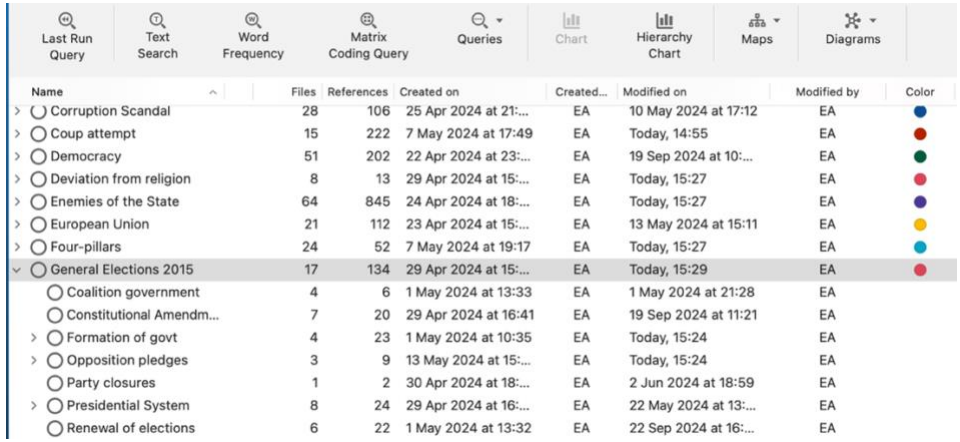
Appendix E: Snapshots of Coding Panels on NVivo for Macro-level Analysis.

Figure 4: An example of a thematic mother code "Serving the People"



Serving the People	63	349	14 Apr 2024 at 16:40	EA	22 Sep 2024 at 16:...	EA
Democratisation	19	25	23 Apr 2024 at 13:...	EA	23 May 2024 at 20...	EA
Government Performan...	31	66	14 Apr 2024 at 15:41	EA	13 May 2024 at 18:...	EA
Public opinion	1	2	4 Jun 2024 at 13:25	EA	4 Jun 2024 at 13:25	EA
Reforms	18	35	22 Apr 2024 at 23:...	EA	9 May 2024 at 16:04	EA
Cultural reforms	3	9	2 May 2024 at 10:27	EA	3 May 2024 at 12:16	EA
Educational reforms	13	27	23 Apr 2024 at 18:...	EA	Today, 15:09	EA
Farming reforms	3	10	23 Apr 2024 at 16:12	EA	1 May 2024 at 12:46	EA
Judiciary reforms	2	2	28 Apr 2024 at 15:...	EA	28 Apr 2024 at 20:...	EA
Legal reforms	10	16	28 Apr 2024 at 15:...	EA	Today, 16:02	EA
Political reforms	6	8	23 Apr 2024 at 18:...	EA	1 May 2024 at 18:30	EA
Reforms for disabled...	1	4	25 Apr 2024 at 12:...	EA	25 Apr 2024 at 12:...	EA
Structural reforms	1	2	9 May 2024 at 16:10	EA	9 May 2024 at 16:11	EA

Figure 2: An example of descriptive mother code, "General Elections 2015"



Name	Files	References	Created on	Created...	Modified on	Modified by	Color
Corruption Scandal	28	106	25 Apr 2024 at 21:...	EA	10 May 2024 at 17:12	EA	
Coup attempt	15	222	7 May 2024 at 17:49	EA	Today, 14:55	EA	
Democracy	51	202	22 Apr 2024 at 23:...	EA	19 Sep 2024 at 10:...	EA	
Deviation from religion	8	13	29 Apr 2024 at 15:...	EA	Today, 15:27	EA	
Enemies of the State	64	845	24 Apr 2024 at 18:...	EA	Today, 15:27	EA	
European Union	21	112	23 Apr 2024 at 15:...	EA	13 May 2024 at 15:11	EA	
Four-pillars	24	52	7 May 2024 at 19:17	EA	Today, 15:27	EA	
General Elections 2015	17	134	29 Apr 2024 at 15:...	EA	Today, 15:29	EA	
Coalition government	4	6	1 May 2024 at 13:33	EA	1 May 2024 at 21:28	EA	
Constitutional Amendm...	7	20	29 Apr 2024 at 16:41	EA	19 Sep 2024 at 11:21	EA	
Formation of govt	4	23	1 May 2024 at 10:35	EA	Today, 15:24	EA	
Opposition pledges	3	9	13 May 2024 at 15:...	EA	Today, 15:24	EA	
Party closures	1	2	30 Apr 2024 at 18:...	EA	2 Jun 2024 at 18:59	EA	
Presidential System	8	24	29 Apr 2024 at 16:...	EA	22 May 2024 at 13:...	EA	
Renewal of elections	6	22	1 May 2024 at 13:32	EA	22 Sep 2024 at 16:...	EA	

Figure 3: An example of a predefined discursive strategy, "Positive Self-representation" coded deductively



Figure 4: An example of a pre-defined discursive strategy, Argumentation, coded both inductively and deductively

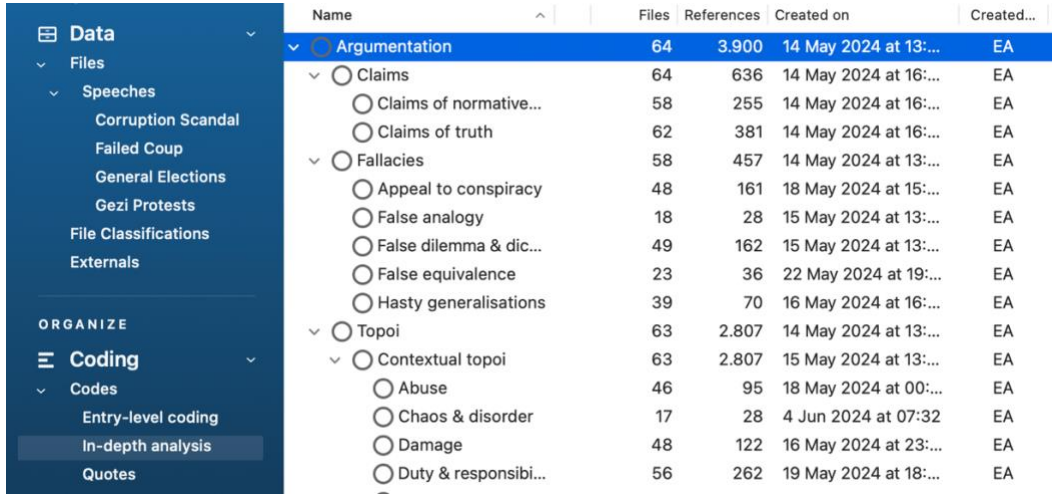
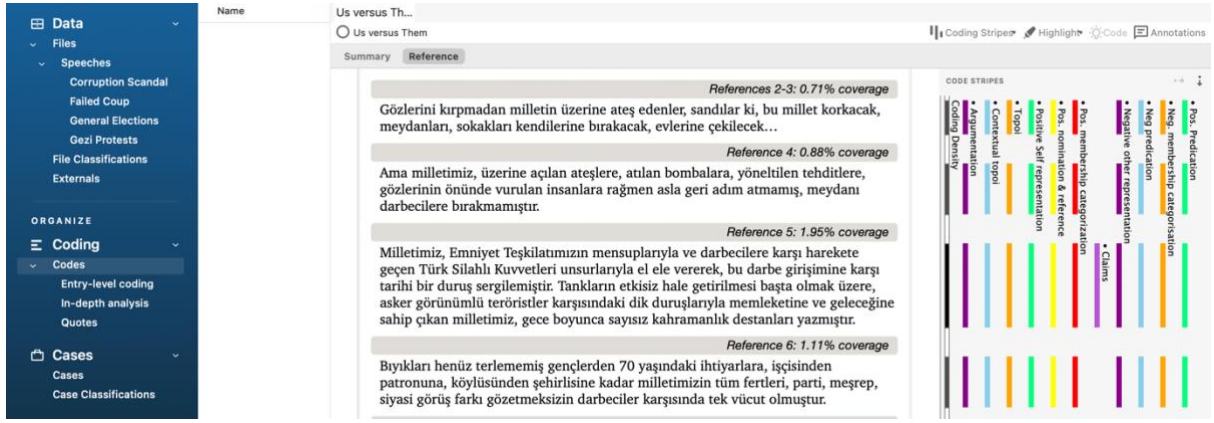


Figure 5: A snapshot of the coding panel illustrating coding clusters



Appendix F: Snapshots of Coding Panels on NVivo for Meso-level Analysis.

Figure 6: An example of a pre-defined descriptive code, "Bureaucracy of reporting," where procedural data is coded systematically across cohorts

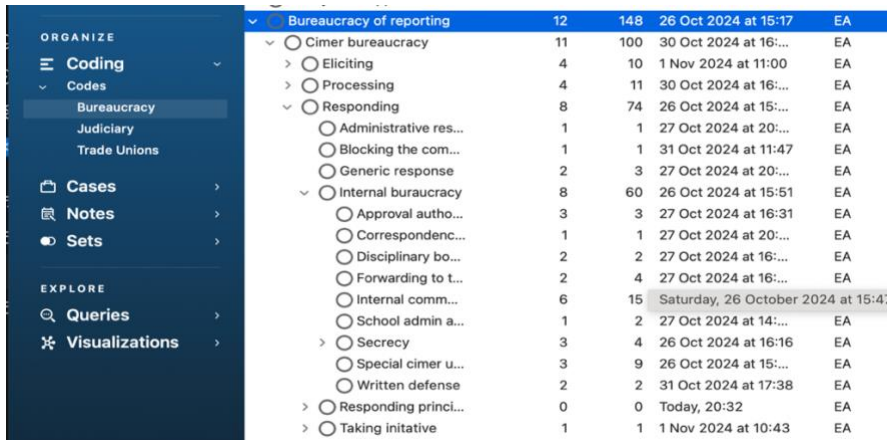


Figure 7: An example of thematic code "victimisation of public sector employees" coded inductively

