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Unravelling anti-feminist social network in Turkey: An Analysis of Actors, relationships and political influence

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ABSTRACT

The surge of right-wing populism and illiberalism has fuelled the rise of anti-feminist movements in the past decade. This phenomenon has been particularly prominent in Turkey under President Erdoğan and his conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP). However, until the past few years, existing research has largely neglected the role of social actors in Turkey, especially due to the top-down perspective of anti-feminism. Contributing the burgeoning studies, our aim is to explain anti-feminist social mobilization in the context of a strong top-down anti-feminist stance. Our findings revealed the existence of an anti-feminist social network in Turkey, which effectively exercises political influence through creating social reactions and mobilizing a broader public. This mobilization also confers legitimacy to the anti-feminist policies. Additionally, political actors shape network dynamics and interrelationships by creating exocentric hubs within the social network. Importantly, our research shows the significance of social actors in complementing strong top-down stances, even in environments characterized by pervasive ideological undercurrents.

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KEYWORDS Anti-feminism; social networks; social network analysis; anti-feminist actors; Turkey

Introduction

The surge of right-wing populism and illiberalism has contributed to an increase in anti-feminism worldwide in the past decade. Since then, anti-feminism has emerged as a prominent political and social phenomenon, bringing together religious groups, conservative civil society organizations, academics, journalists, and right-wing political parties. The anti-feminist agenda encompasses a range of priorities, including the preservation of

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traditional family values, objections to mandatory sexual education, anti-abortion, and resistance to LGBTQI+ rights.

Turkey's gender politics have been shaped by President Erdoğan and his conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which has ruled the country since 2002. President Erdoğan and the AKP have increasingly taken an explicitly anti-feminist stance, in particular over the last decade. Consequently, anti-feminism in Turkey has taken on a top-down outlook. Recently, an examination of anti-feminist reactions within Turkish society has initiated a disruption within the realm governed by the AKP. By taking advantage of the environment created by the AKP, the anti-feminist actors in Turkey were empowered and voiced a backlash to reverse legal reforms advocating for gender equality and women's rights. Initially, the anti-feminist actors have followed the AKP-initiated discourse on degeneration of family and traditional values. However, leveraging the diversity of the actors, increasing numbers of supporters, and the broadening scope of their demands, they began to set the agenda within the politics. The actors, comprising both established and emerging conservative civil society organizations, media representatives and social media users, writers and academics, celebrities, have exerted significant influence in political sphere through their amplified presence. These actors articulate anti-feminist demands through a coalition of diverse participants. They have been critical in triggering such issues as Turkey's withdrawal from Istanbul Convention, incorporating anti-LGBTQI+ discourse and repealing of alimony law into the political agenda. In broadening the scope, we recognize the importance of examining the roles played by social actors in anti-feminism as this allows for a comprehensive analysis of complex social dynamics. By understanding the influence of various societal actors, we can better grasp the multifaceted nature of societal processes and outcomes. As such, the main research question guiding this article is: 'how does anti-feminist social mobilization occur and what influence does it have in the context of a strong top-down anti-feminism in Turkey?'

Our findings revealed three key points. Firstly, we identified the existence of an anti-feminist social network in Turkey. Secondly, our research identified that political actors, though not part of Turkey's anti-feminist social network, create exocentric hubs that significantly influence the network's dynamics by shaping the interrelations among its actors. As a result, we highlight the pivotal role of the dynamic interplay between these societal and political actors in shaping anti-feminist manifestations. Third, we argue that this network exerts political influence by creating social reactions and mobilizing broader public sentiment, thereby conferring legitimacy on anti-feminist policies. In doing so, our research shows the significance of social actors in complementing strong top-down stance, even in environments characterized by pervasive ideological undercurrents. This article draws on original in-depth interviews conducted with 10 influential key informants from civil society,

media and local governance, complemented by valuable insights from relevant literature.

We use Social Network Analysis in this study as it provides conceptual tools to uncover and analyse patterns of connectivity between individuals and collective entities. Our goal in this study is to explore the relationships among actors who share similar sensitivities and discern the extent to which they engender a bottom-up mobilization. To this end, the application of Social Network Analysis proves instrumental. However, this research has also uncovered inherent limitations of Social Network Analysis. By solely focusing on relationships among a designated set of actors, Social Network Analysis tends to overlook the influential role played by external actors, who significantly impact both the network itself and the dynamics of relationships within it. To address this gap, this article introduces the concept of exocentric hubs, which captures the influence exerted by these actors on the network's functioning and the relationships between its constituent actors. This concept enhances the explanatory power of Social Network Analysis, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities within social networks.

This article also contributes to the literature on anti-feminism in Turkey and beyond. Previous studies examining Turkey's anti-feminism developed overwhelmingly party-level analysis by focusing on party's gender regime (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Güneş-Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008; Mutluer, 2019; Özkazanç, 2020; Ünal, 2021), instrumentalization of women's rights (Arat, 2021; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017), particular anti-feminist policies (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017), co-optation of female activists within Islamist-conservative camp through emerging government-based civil society organizations (Diner, 2018; Kütik-Kuriş, 2022). Studies that have shifted their focus to societal developments, however, do not keep this area entirely distant from the party (Eslen-Ziya, 2022), and they do not always demonstrate a seamless integration into an agenda without any conflict (Yabancı & Sağlam, 2023). Research concentrating on actors underscores the collaboration among them and their influence on policy formulation, predominantly spotlighting civil society as the sole actor (Çelebi, 2022; Adak, 2021; Ünal, 2024).

While these studies make significant contributions to the burgeoning literature on anti-feminism in Turkey, they leave an unclear gap regarding the diversity and the interconnected nature of actors and domains outside of the political parties. This article expands the existing literature from the analysis of policies, ideologies, campaigns and movements, and uncovers the anti-feminist network by focusing on actors in this network, their interaction with each other and current political environment. To do so, it examines the realm of anti-feminist actors, investigating the factors that mobilize them and the dynamics of their collective formation within the prevailing contemporary anti-feminist milieu in Turkish politics. By following Sanders

and Jenkins's argument, this article locates anti-feminism as a 'constitutive element' (2022, p. 370) which enables the emergence of a social network among conservative actors. To this end, this article touches an untapped feature of anti-feminism by cracking the surface to understand how the anti-feminist network functions and shapes the current anti-feminism in Turkey.

This article is divided into five sections. Following this Introduction, the second section, presents our theoretical framework for data analysis. We discuss relevant concepts in Social Network Analysis and introduce a new concept called *exocentric hub*. In the next section, we explore the development of anti-feminism in Turkey, identify key actors, and provide a general evaluation of previous studies. The fourth section provides a brief account of the methodology employed in this study. In the subsequent section, we discuss the research findings that form the basis of the arguments presented in this article. The final concluding section restates the main argument and sheds light on the broader implications of our research.

Social network analysis and the anti-feminist social network

The field of social network analysis has roots dating back to Moreno (1934) in the 1930s and has since been extensively utilized in various fields such as public health and management. Studying social networks provides researchers a way to understand social systems by focusing our attention to structured relations among actors comprising that system. This approach effectively sets social network analysis apart from the attribute-based methodologies commonly applied in social science research (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010, p. 18).

In its most basic sense, a network is a set of relationships (Kadushin, 2012, p. 17). More formally, a network consists of a set of actors, also called objects or nodes, that are tied to one another in different ways. Different levels of analysis are applicable to networks. Most often, the level of analysis is individuals but it can also be collective entities such as firms or organizations (Borgatti et al., 2018, p. 11). In this article, our focus is on both individuals and collective entities. This is because individuals (e.g., journalists) are sometimes crucial for fostering relationships, while in other contexts, collective entities (e.g., civil society organizations) take precedence in maintaining those relations within the anti-feminist social network.

Researchers identified three types of networks (Kadushin, 2012). Ego-centric networks are those connected with a single node (e.g., companies that do business with a given company). Socio-centric networks, on the other hand, are closed system networks with a clear network structure (e.g., children in a classroom). Open system networks are those networks with no boundaries. For this study, open system best suited our research focus as actors influencing anti-feminist discourse and action are less clear. While the

absence of a clear boundary makes it more difficult to study, we focused on continuously persistent relationships between the actors to determine network members. Continuously persistent does not mean the relationship never ends, but rather it is continuous while it exists (Borgatti et al., 2018). We also used saturation in data collection to enumerate the network members.

Relations in each network can take different types. Of particular importance are the *interactions* and *flows*. Interactions are events or behaviours with respect to other actors that can be counted over a period and observable by others (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010, p. 20; Borgatti et al., 2018, p. 11). Flows are the exchanges that are passed on through interactions. In a way, interactions act as the medium that enables flows. Flows may comprise of knowledge, ideas and norms as well as tangible goods such as financial resources. While flows can be unidirectional, mutual flows between pairs that do not share many attributes are important for most coalition building (Kadushin, 2012, p. 44). There are often several different flows between the actors, which has been called 'content multiplexity' (Beggs et al., 1996). Multiplexity is important in social networks as it can enhance the relationship and build trust. Researchers point to opportunity and preference as the two basic factors in tie formation (Borgatti et al., 2018), with one tie presenting an opportunity for the other type of tie to form.

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of social networks necessitates moving beyond a narrow focus solely on the structured relations among actors within that network. We contend that certain actors outside the network play a significant role in shaping the network, acting as what we refer to as *exocentric hubs*. These exocentric hubs, although detached from the network itself, may have interactions and flows with the network. Notably, they exert a profound influence by actively shaping the relationships among the actors within it and are influenced by the network's actions. Their presence is often key to the presence of the social network. Understanding the intricate workings of the social network entails recognizing the importance of these exocentric hubs, particularly in the context of open system networks where interactions with the external environment are characterized by heightened flexibility.

In feminist theorizing, women's cooperative constellations (Holli, 2008) have long been studied. These studies explore the actual co-operation of women's groups to further their aims, particularly in a policy process. In an early example, Halsaa (1991) demonstrated how women politicians, women bureaucrats and women in autonomous movements have entered in 'strategic partnerships' to explain Norwegian women's success in policy-making. In a similar way, Vargas and Wieringa (1998) explored the significance of the 'triangle of empowerment' between the feminist politicians, feminist bureaucrats and the women's movement for translating women's concerns in policy-

making and widening support for women's agenda. On the other hand, Woodward (2004) analysed the importance of informal channels of influence through her 'velvet triangle' consisting of the organizations of the state, civil society and universities and consultancies. These studies adapt a network view in some measure as they explore how the relationships between the actors constrain and provide opportunities.

By opposing feminism, anti-feminism also strengthens itself within a network setting, which develops a counter front push against gender equality. It is important to note that the terms 'anti-feminism' and 'anti-gender' are significant in their advocacy of traditional gender hegemony and exclusion of alternative views that deviate from this hegemony. As also indicated by Ünal (2021), the anti-feminist group homogenizes feminists and feminisms as a common adversary, while the anti-gender group condemns theoretical studies, empirical research, and activist perspectives rooted in the notion of gender, gender equality, and associated policy strategies. The terms 'anti-feminism' and 'anti-gender' are occasionally used interchangeably, although there are instances where they are asserted to possess distinct connotations. While Ünal (2021) expresses this difference, Çelebi (2022) employs anti-feminism in a comprehensive manner, defining it as an umbrella term encompassing anti-gender factions. Within her analysis, she categorizes government organized NGOs (GONGOs) as anti-feminist entities and grassroots groups as anti-gender associations. Çelebi (2022) emphasizes that despite their distinct origins, all these factions share an 'anti-feminist' stance, suggesting the potential for alliance among them based on their collective opposition to gender equality. Based on our empirical analysis and Çelebi's explanation, we find it more meaningful and inclusive to label the societal reaction evolving within the sphere shaped by politics in Turkey as anti-feminism.

Anti-feminism in Turkey

In recent years, feminist achievements have increasingly come under threat from right-wing political parties. When feminist political agendas become influential, resistance develops (Brechenmacher et al., 2024; Off, 2023). Since the 1990s, Europe has been seen as the epicentre of the urge of anti-feminism. So that, the anti-feminist atmosphere manifested itself in a decline in women's rights and an increasing sexist discourse in politics (Cin & Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2021). Although anti-feminism is on the rise globally with different actors and in various forms, its outcomes are similar to those observed in the European context. The contestation is derived from the actions taken by international organizations such as the UN and the EU in the struggle for women's rights enhanced feminism in the global arena. Consequently, anti-feminism constructed its resistance in this context.

Scholars in the field approach anti-feminism as a movement (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2022; Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987), backlash (Cupac & Ebertürk, 2020; Faludi, 1991), ideology (Violence Prevention Network and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2022), online activism (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Huang, 2022), and from transnational perspectives (Kováts, 2017, 2018; Kuhar & David, 2017; Rothermel, 2020). Especially rising right-wing politics in the last decade and its cooperative nature with anti-gender (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) and anti-feminism (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Korolczuk, 2022; Sanders & Dudley Jenkins, 2022), foster the research towards the growing influence and appearance of both anti-feminism and anti-genderism. While its inconspicuous relationship with right-wing politics makes these movements part of mainstream politics, this alliance successfully has captured the hearts and imaginations of a significant local population (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). In this light, Turkey has emerged as a proper empirical case for the research trend. Turkey has experienced a conservative backlash, 'masculinist restoration' (Kandiyoti, 2016), and crackdown on gender equality policies (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Cin, 2021), under the conservative AKP, with a intervention on women's rights, strong emphasis on family values and anti-LGBTQI discourse.

Over the last two decades, Turkey's gender politics has been shaped by the conservative AKP government by taking pro-feminist and anti-feminist stances in a volatile trend. However, the pro-feminist attitude disappeared soon after the AKP consolidated its power and increased self-esteem with the third election victory in 2011 (Nas, 2016, p. 168). Since the early years of its rule, the AKP failed to convince feminist activists and scholars that its government agenda would prioritize a genuine transformation towards women's rights and gender equality. Recent studies suggest that the AKP's gender agenda has become increasingly conservative and anti-feminist, with women and the LGBTQI+ community being affected the most (Hülagü, 2021; Özkazanç, 2020; Savcı, 2021; Zihnioğlu, 2024).

The signing of the Istanbul Convention in 2011 was widely lauded as a significant accomplishment for the promotion of women's rights and gender equality. However, paradoxically, during the same year, the ruling AKP abolished the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs, effectively erasing women from the name of the government agency responsible for promoting policies related to women's issues. Since then, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy has assumed this role. Despite this change, the AKP's approach to gender and women's issues has been marked by a persistent strain of anti-feminism that promotes traditional gender roles, family values, and the complementary roles of men and women, rather than equality.

Previously, the Turkish government had been the primary driver of anti-feminist attitudes in the country. However, under the AKP, conservative civil society organizations have been spreading their activism (Zihnioğlu, 2018)

and become substantive actors in the government's policy making process (Çelebi, 2022; Ünal, 2024). Recently anti-feminism has begun to coalesce at the societal level. For instance, prior to the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, conservative actors had kept the anti-feminist agenda alive in Turkey. In 2019, the Turkish Family Council, a civic initiative of conservative civil society organizations, organized a press release to declare their demands for the abolishment of the Convention, which they accused of corrupting society and being incompatible with Islamist values. The following year, conservative civil society organizations published a joint statement expressing their discontent with the Istanbul Convention. These anti-feminist reactions were consistent with President Erdoğan and the AKP's conservative identity and the government's ongoing anti-feminist stance. The President was said to have taken these reactions seriously and evaluated the situation as the Istanbul Convention being open to negotiation (BBC Türkçe, 2019). Consequently, he responded with an unwarranted action in March 2022 and the government decided to withdraw from the Convention.

It soon became evident that considering the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention as a means to appease anti-feminist demands was a simplistic notion that failed to recognize the diversity of anti-feminist actors in Turkey. The government drafted various policies which caused significant harm to gender equality, women's rights and the wellbeing of LGBTQI+ community in Turkey. However, social actors with anti-feminist views demanded further changes to be made at the constitutional level. The Great Family Gathering, an anti-LGBTQI+ street demonstration in Turkey, brought together people with vague demands but managed to draw public and political party attention to anti-LGBTQI+ issues and family protection. After the demonstration, the AKP, especially President Erdoğan, asserted that there cannot be LGBTQI+ in a strong family (Cumhuriyet, 2022). He also called on all political parties in parliament to address the issue through a constitutional amendment. As such, the AKP proposed a constitutional amendment which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman and assigns the state the responsibility of protecting the family against all kinds of threats, attacks, corruption, and deviations (Diken, 2022). Currently, the anti-feminist groups have launched another campaign against Law No. 6284, which incorporates the Istanbul Convention into domestic law to protect the family and prevent violence against women. For anti-feminist groups, both the Convention and the law failed to stem violence against women and femicide, and they assert that both have exacerbated the number of violence cases.

In short, anti-feminism in Turkey encompasses four key issues. First, it opposes gender equality and advocates instead for gender justice to emphasize the traditional roles of men and women. Second, it prioritizes the family as a cornerstone of national identity, tradition, and culture. Third, it frames women's roles primarily as mothers and caregivers in support of the family

unit. Fourth, it views sexual orientations outside of the male and female binary as deviant and a threat to the family unit. These topics unite government and societal-level anti-feminism, although they may differ in their priorities. Nonetheless, anti-feminism remains a potent force in Turkey, capable of rallying conservative actors behind a critical agenda. Therefore, this article examines the cementing role of anti-feminism in creating a social network and explores its underlying mechanisms.

Methods and sampling

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork data to analyse the anti-feminist network in Turkey and the relationship among its members. Ties among network members are not indicators of relationship in or of themselves, which are more complex and dynamic than quantitative methods alone can discover. Qualitative approach is better able to capture the perspectives and meanings that network members hold and help us better understand their beliefs and values (Hansen, 2009, p. 14).

For data collection, we conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with a total of 10 key informants (See [Appendix 1](#)). These individuals and institutional representatives, identified through preliminary examination as capable of speaking from various perspectives within the anti-feminist network in Turkey, enriched the research findings by occupying foundational, sustaining, and consolidating positions within the network. While anti-feminist actors in Turkey are unified under the overarching identity of conservatism, the operational dynamics of the network vary significantly due to the heterogeneous backgrounds of the actors and their diverse levels of engagement within these networks. While participation in the anti-feminist network may explain their shared worldviews to some extent, identities can be more fluid within an active and nascent framework. Thus, our study aims to highlight that this emerging social opposition represents a new identity that binds them together. Consequently, our selection of interviewees was based not on their shared identity but rather on their affiliation with the network.

One of the most complex challenges in social network analysis is identifying a cohesive group and drawing its boundaries in the study. This is particularly vexing in this study where anti-feminist claims are sporadically taken up by different groups at different times. Earlier, in the absence of an organized anti-feminist movement in Turkey, diagnosing the anti-feminist actors was a challenge. To overcome this challenge, we started with well-known civil society actors who have openly demonstrated their reactions against the Istanbul Convention. The group consisted of a wide range of civil society actors from established Islamist civil society organizations (*İHH* and *Özgür-der*) to Islamist business organization

MÜSİAD and various ultraconservative civil society organizations. Indeed, none of them started as an active participant of an anti-feminist campaign in their organizations. Initially, they all had different motivations to establish their civil society organization, yet they have come to articulate anti-feminist reaction into their agenda. Together with that, we contacted prominent columnists, because especially Islamist newspapers (such as *Yeni Akit*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Diriliş Postası*) are the major actors who voiced the anti-feminist reactions. The anti-feminist landscape in Turkey has expanded to social media (Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023) particularly following Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul convention. Both individuals and civil society organizations (e.g., Divorced People Family Platform) use social media very actively to convey their anti-feminist messages and demands. Especially after Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the anti-feminist actors have become publicly more visible and flourished in different domains and by framing different demands. By focusing on the emerging anti-feminist actors in contemporary Turkey and following the link among them, we conducted the interviews with the representatives of civil society actors, columnists, writers, and municipality staff where Turkey's anti-feminist network has functioned. The reason why we chose these individuals and groups is because the anti-feminist demands take various forms in Turkey. The main topics range from alimony to anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes, from demands of abolishment towards the Law No. 6284 to protection of the family against the degeneration. However, in the current form of anti-feminism in Turkey, there is no umbrella organization or a public figure that represents all these demands. Although they are in close contact with each other, the actors in the network may stand out in different topics. Therefore, diversification of our interviewees provides a broader perspective for this study and also enables us to determine and situate the actors in the anti-feminist network in Turkey.

While studying social networks with no established structure, the boundaries of these networks are often the product of the observer's analysis. One common way to approximate the boundaries in these studies is snowball sampling until there is considerable saturation (Borgatti et al., 2018). Therefore, we extended our sample with the guidance of the interviews. We are aware that the network defined in this study is dynamic and therefore its members, structures and boundaries are fuzzy. However, it represents a cohesive and comprehensive enough group in relation to our research question to represent a network as a whole.

During the interviews, we asked questions relating to their collaborations. We explored co-operation, competition, hierarchies and challenges in these relations. In addition, we probed their relations with political actors in particular with the governing AKP. We employed thematic content analysis to dissect our interview data. We first identified emerging themes from the

interview transcripts and then gathered pertinent quotes within each thematic thread. Through this approach, we examined the ideas that shape each theme and explored the interplay between them.

Findings and discussion

Social network of anti-feminism

To begin with, our research demonstrates the presence of an anti-feminist social network in Turkey. To achieve this, we examine the interconnections between the actors, focusing on the flows, interactions, and analysing how these factors both enhance relations and also impose constraint on the actors.

The interviews suggest that the actors have a continuous *interaction* on anti-feminist agenda as well as on other issues. A columnist noted that 'some are doing this consciously. Some are already being knocked on the door in one way or another' (Interview #1). The relations are continuous not in the sense that they never end but rather 'they keep in contact until they deal with and get a result on an issue' (Interview #1). The interactions take place through phone calls, institutional visits or the programmes they make. At the same time, they may interact because they happen to be in the same places such as conferences. For the conferences, the anti-feminist figures may get invitations from the organizers due to their popular images which enable public presence of the conference and network. For instance, another columnist highlighted that 'there was nothing at first, but it grew as the conference progressed. When they first invited me, most of the people who are perceived as popular in social media did not come. Of course, I went' (Interview #2). These interactions bring the actors together to eventually form a social network. However, due their flexibility, this leads to an open system network without clear boundaries.

Prior personal connections are determinative in interacting with other people demonstrating anti-feminist ideas. As such, homophily (ideologically), propinquity and previous alliances play an important role as we see in social networks and underscored by the theory (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). A civil society representative observed that in the Islamist community, we know each other, our friends whom we know. We reach out to each other, saying, 'There is a problem, can we do something together?' Here, there is a sense of personal connection and comfort that comes from being Muslim, rather than formal relationships (Interview #5). In a way, they 'meet in the context of a subject. It ends when they also move on to the next agenda' (Interview #5). As a result, there may be overlapping networks or follow-up networks as the actors take up current issues (Interview #2). These successive meetings and

interactions between individuals and groups provide valuable opportunities to build trust. As trust grows, it becomes easier for the actors involved to come together and coordinate their actions when faced with a common goal or interest.

As demonstrated by the Social Network Analysis (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Borgatti et al., 2018), these relationships entail multiple *flows* between the actors. The flows include exchanging of views (Interview #1, Interview #4, Interview #3) and experience (Interview #4), resource transaction (Interview #3) and first-hand information (Interview #9, Interview #10). This shows that, in line with the Social Network Analysis, tie formation among anti-feminist individuals and groups is influenced both by preference (due to homophily) and opportunities. In short, we argue that the existence of continuous interaction and multiple flows suggest the presence of an anti-feminist social network in Turkey. We also observed 'content multiplexity' within the network and it is not always easy to delineate clearly between the anti-feminist and other agendas. This is because some actors have multiple shared concerns (e.g., refugees) and their interaction may be for multiple issues at one and the same time. This multiplexity in flows has been important in enhancing the relationship (Beggs et al., 1996) and, in some ways, leading to a network of interests. For instance, the relationships brought about by this network help expand the target audience, increase opportunities (Interview #8) and facilitate the work of those working in civil society (Interview #3). As a result 'you can access everywhere and reach more people' (Interview #6), 'can easily be featured in the media' and even having funding applications 'pass just by a phone call' (Interview #6).

At the same time, however, other interviewees from civil society noted how being a part of this network constrains them. Interviewee working for civil society organizations expressed that these relationship networks bring a 'certain label', (Interview #6) and that 'from the outside, it is perceived as being close to this government. As if we are their backyard. This is a disadvantage' (Interview #4). As a result, the interviewees say that they take a negative attitude from certain political parties. For example, one interviewee from another civil society organization stated that when they called to meet with a political party official, they were rebuffed with the question, 'Where did you get my phone number?' (Interview #3) She also, 'was going to visit the [main opposition party] CHP, but it didn't work out. . . they didn't want to meet with us last year. [They said] we don't share the same views' (Interview #3). In fact, when they tried to introduce their NGO on the housing estate they were located, the local headman 'almost didn't even open the door' (Interview #3). Another interviewee expressed that it affects their visibility: 'Everyone from six different perspectives can get ideas from us,

but when they want to appear somewhere, they don't want to be seen with us' (Interview #6).

Anti-feminist social network and exocentric hubs

Having unveiled the presence of an anti-feminist social network, this article's second objective is to show how political actors, though not part of Turkey's anti-feminist social network, influence the network's dynamics. To fully understand the dynamics of the anti-feminist social network, their mobilization against feminism, and their influence on the AKP-led opposition to feminism, we must go beyond analysing internal network interactions and flows. The political actors of the AKP, while being outside the network, shape the interrelationships among the actors within the network and exert a significant influence on network dynamics, creating what we refer to as exocentric hubs within the network.

Political actors can shape the network dynamics either directly or in a more diffused way. A clear example of this is their ability to influence the flows within the network. For instance, various interviewees noted that the politicians from the AKP may prevent actors within the social network from criticizing them by limiting or impeding their access to certain benefits. One interviewee stated, 'Due to a politician's negative attitude towards me, a municipality stopped providing us with certain resources' (Interview #6). In a similar way, another interviewee said that when you criticize the government, this may draw attention from certain individuals and they may then face obstacles in receiving funding and support for their project (Interview #5). Moreover, the interviewees make references to politically prominent people who may act as gatekeepers in the network. One interviewee noted that they may 'blocked me. I don't know the reason. I don't know them at all, no interaction whatsoever. They just blocked me. ... I don't know, maybe they just didn't like me' (Interview #2).

However, influence also occurs in a more indirect and diffused manner. One example of this type of influence happens because of being close to the AKP and politicians. As one civil society representative noted, such proximity gives them the status of a 'VIP association' and leads people to take them more seriously (Interview #4). Accordingly, this enables them to obtain hierarchical superiority or a more privileged position within this social network. Also, almost all the interviewees referred to the central position and influence of KADEM (Women and Democracy Association), where President Erdoğan's daughter, Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar, serves as the vice president, within this social network. This type of relationship is important also in organizing meetings, arranging venues or transportation for events. For this reason, several interviewees mentioned that they frequently knock on the doors of

AKP representatives in parliament and feel compelled to do so (Interviews #2, 3, 4, 5).

At the same time, the reaction towards certain AKP politicians within the social network and the conservative base can also bring the network closer together. For instance, AKP politicians such as Özlem Zengin and Derya Yanık, who opposed the AKP's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, were collectively targeted, and actors within this network unified in their response to these politicians. In this sense, these politicians became a common target uniting the actors within this social network, thus making them an exocentric hub within the network.

Despite AKP politicians' influence on network dynamics, many participants in the study expressed a deliberate distancing from politics, explicitly stating their lack of interest in engaging in political activities. Indeed, one interviewee noted that they may bring more advantageous to actors when they are 'not involved in politics' (Interview #9). Notably, those interviewees affiliated with civil society underscored the significance of maintaining this separation. However, the relations between politics and the network are much more complex and it is essential to recognize that this disassociation does not imply a complete detachment of the anti-feminist network's endeavours from the political realm. One of the interviewees clearly addressed what they are doing is also politics and 'politics does not necessarily have to be [come to be defined as] a political party. You can do this through an association' (Interview #5). Moreover, through their collaborative efforts and initiatives, the network aims to exert influence on political processes.

Anti-feminist social network and political influence

In this final section of the analysis, we examine the way this network wields political influence. The network's strategic approach to influencing politics can be observed through two primary avenues. Firstly, they seek to create social reactions and mobilize the public as a means of exerting pressure on the government. During the interviews, participants referred to engaging with knowledgeable individuals who had conducted research on relevant matters, while also emphasizing their own media influence. Furthermore, they emphasized that their collective endeavours 'created the groundswell, and then it spread in waves naturally', which consequently, 'generated a social reaction, and our government did not remain indifferent to it' (Interview #4). A similar idea was echoed by another interviewee, who attributed the President's apparent retreat to the growing influence of public discourse initiated by their network (Interview #7). This observation underscores the network's perception that their engagement in dialogue and activism played a pivotal role in prompting political actors to reconsider their positions.

The media, as a prominent actor in shaping public discourse, played a significant role in this process. Beyond influencing the political agenda, journalists noted that the media's involvement had a multiplier effect, amplifying the social reaction generated by the network's initiatives. This interconnectedness between the media, public sentiment, and the network's activities fostered solidarity and facilitated communication, creating an environment conducive to achieving their objectives. A columnist highlighted that their work had 'a butterfly effect' where they say 'something first, laying the foundation ... [which] has an impact in the political field, a reflection in the media, triggers, and also an impact on civil society organizations. All of these are interacting' (Interview #1).

Secondly, and as a result of the social reaction they create, the network's activities had a consequential effect on the political landscape by conferring legitimacy to anti-feminist policies. For instance, as one columnist put it, Erdoğan needed a political argument against the Istanbul Convention as he 'can't just take a position on LGBT out of the blue, ... [but] he can say that there is such a demand from civil society organizations (Interview #1)'.

This example illustrates the nuanced dynamic wherein politicians, despite their inherent opposition to the feminist movement, sought to justify their positions by appealing to the demands articulated by the anti-feminist network. Consequently, the network's influence resulted in the validation of politicians' stances, enabling them to engage in public discourse by invoking the purported civil society demands. Here, the legitimacy provided by the network comprises a flow, and because they can maintain this flow, they are capable of influencing politics, and as a network that can influence politics, they continue to exist. In this sense, the relationship between the anti-feminist social network and the AKP as an exocentric hub is significant.

Hence, it becomes evident that the bottom-up mobilization orchestrated by the anti-feminist social network engendered a transformative impact on the political sphere. This network perceives the act of withdrawing from agreements such as the Istanbul Convention as a tangible accomplishment attributable to their collective endeavours (Interview #1) or 'including a regulation for alimony payment in the President's list of 100-day actions' (Interview #9). This perspective highlights the network's sense of achievement in influencing political outcomes, reflecting their bottom-up approach to shaping public discourse and policy decisions.

In summary, although anti-feminism may have a strong top-down outlook, we observe the presence of an anti-feminist social network. This network, while distancing itself from politics, seeks to actively influence it by mobilizing social reaction. At the same time AKP politicians play a direct or indirect

role in shaping the network dynamics and interrelationships by creating exocentric hubs within this network. This complex interplay between the social network and politics ultimately shapes the character and trajectory of opposition to feminism in Turkey.

Conclusion

Despite the initial appearance of anti-feminism in Turkey as a predominantly top-down phenomenon, our research findings shed light on the presence of an anti-feminist bottom-up mobilization. This mobilization encompasses a wide range of actors, including individuals working at civil society organizations and media outlets, who converge to form an interconnected anti-feminist social network. By leveraging their collective influence, these actors effectively mobilize grassroots support and exert significant political pressure.

Our findings have significant implications for understanding how such social networks can be instrumental in expanding the power of authoritarian regimes. Although they may not be as large and visible as mass social movements, these networks have the capacity to mobilize public with network members in critical positions in civil society and media. In doing so, they defend the regime's policies and attack its critics, thus shifting the focus of public discourse. This creates a buffer against opposition forces and helps reinforce the regime's dominance. Also, in the social network, having content multiplexity and being an open system facilitates their ability to focus on different subjects and to react to government policies as needed.

Equally important, our research shows that these networks can also serve to legitimize government policies. The networks help frame the policy issues in a culturally acceptable way and mobilizing a supportive base for government initiatives. This is particularly crucial for authoritarian populist regimes, as the validation of their policies by these networks enhances their power and authority over the society. As a result, these networks not only reflect societal attitudes but also actively contribute to shaping legislative and policy landscapes.

The findings of this research also yield significant contributions in relation to the social network analysis. The application of social network analysis brings essential insights into the complex social relationships. However, our research also revealed that to comprehensively grasp the social dynamics, systems, attitudes, and the consequential impacts of these relationships, it is essential to extend the analysis beyond intra-network relationships. This study showcased the influential role played by exocentric hubs in exerting a profound influence while being detached from the network itself.

The implications of this are far-reaching. Firstly, it underscores the need for a more holistic approach when conducting social network analysis, one that recognizes the significance of actors external to the

social network and incorporates their influence. By expanding the lens of analysis, researchers will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the forces that shape social networks and their impacts on individuals and societies. As our research demonstrated, these external entities have the capability to shape the relations between actors within a network, by creating hierarchies among actors, serving as gatekeepers of the network or the opportunities, thereby exerting shaping the network's internal dynamics. Analysing these external influences allows for a more accurate understanding of more broadly the social system and behaviours.

The second significant implication of this research is the interplay between the anti-feminist social network and political actors. As our research showed, on one hand, social networks generate social reactions, thereby exerting political pressure and legitimizing the decisions of political actors, as seen in the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. On the other hand, political actors can influence who holds hierarchical positions within networks, acting as gatekeepers. This underscores the interconnectedness of political and social forces, challenging the analytical assumption of their separation. Consequently, it highlights how political actors can exploit social networks to advance their agendas, potentially leading to a more controlled form of social mobilization, where political interests shape the network's objectives and actions. Moreover, this dynamic illustrates the significance of understanding broader socio-political dynamics, where political actors leverage social issues to influence public opinion. Understanding this interplay between political and social actors underscores the importance of how social movements and political strategies shape policies and discourse.

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Ethical standards

The research was conducted in accordance with the protocols approved by the [author's university] Ethics Committee.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of interviews

Organizations or Positions	Interview Date
Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH)	April 18, 2022
Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD)	July 22, 2022
Free Thought and Education Rights Association	July 26, 2022
Women and Democracy Association	August 11, 2022
Municipality (Istanbul), Research Development Department	August 19, 2022
Columnist	November 17, 2022
National Social Media Association	November 29, 2022
TV Producer and Columnist	December 8, 2022
Divorced People and Family Platform	December 15, 2022
Columnist and Writer	December 21, 2022
