

Conflict and polarisation on social media caused by the Russia-Ukraine War: The case of *Ekşi Sözlük*

Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nın sosyal medyada yol açtığı çatışma ve kutuplaşma: Ekşi Sözlük örneği

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Abstract

There has been an increase in ideological and political polarisation in Türkiye. Society is divided into dichotomies such as modern-traditional, religious-secular, right-left, Turkish-Kurdish, and Sunni-Alawi; the distinction is not limited to these. The polarisation in Türkiye is similarly increasing on *Ekşi Sözlük*¹, one of the largest internet communities according to visit and interaction rates in Türkiye. This study aims to reveal the reasons and forms of polarisation caused by the Russia-Ukraine War among *Ekşi Sözlük* writers who were not party to the war, and it is significant in revealing the severity of polarisation in Türkiye. For this purpose, 8.144 entries on the thread were analysed using qualitative content analysis under nine headings. It was found that the parties were shaped on the axis of Russia and Ukraine/ the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/the United States of America (USA) dualism. The majority of these entries increase polarisation by affirming the actions of the side they consider close to themselves. The conflict between the defenders of the two sides ranges from insulting opposing views to insulting other authors. The proportion of polarising entries in the headline was close to that found in other similar studies on polarisation in recent years.

Keywords: Conflict, polarisation, qualitative content analysis, *Ekşi Sözlük*, Russia-Ukraine War

Öz

Türkiye'de son yıllarda ideolojik ve siyasal anlamda kutuplaşmanın arttığı görülmektedir. Toplum modern-geleneksel, dindar-laik, sağ-sol, Türk-Kürt, Sünni-Alevi gibi konularda bölünmektedir. Türkiye'de artan kutuplaşma, ziyaret edilme ve etkileşim alma oranlarında Türkiye'nin en büyük internet topluluklarından biri olan *Ekşi Sözlük*'te de benzer şekilde artmaktadır. Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgali, diğer birçok toplumsal olgu gibi *Ekşi Sözlük*'te de yer bulmuş ve kutuplaşmanın örneklerinden biri haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nın savaşın tarafı olmayan *Ekşi Sözlük* yazarları arasında yol açtığı

kutuplaşmanın nedenlerini ve biçimlerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, Türkiye'deki kutuplaşmanın şiddetini ortaya çıkarması bakımından önem taşımaktadır. Bu amaçla öncelikle başlıkta yer alan 8.144 girdi tespit edilmiştir. Daha sonra girdiler nitel içerik analizi kullanılarak araştırılmış ve yazarların hangi bağlamlarda ikiye bölündüğü ortaya konmuştur. Bulgulara göre, başlıktaki taraflar Rusya ve Ukrayna/NATO/Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ikiliği ekseninde şekillenmektedir. *Ekşi Sözlük* kullanıcıları tarafından yazılan metinlerin bir

kısmı Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı hakkında olabildiğince tarafsız bilgi vermeyi amaçlarken, çoğunluğu kendilerine yakın gördükleri tarafın eylemlerini olumlamaya çalışmaktadır. İki tarafın savunucuları arasındaki çatışmanın, karşıt görüşlere hakaretten diğer yazarları aşağılamaya kadar uzandığı ve başlıktaki kutuplaştırıcı girdiler oranının, son yıllarda kutuplaşma üzerine yapılan diğer benzer çalışmalardakine yakın oranlara sahip olduğu saptanmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çatışma, kutuplaşma, nitel içerik analizi, *Ekşi Sözlük*, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine tension, which rose after Russia invaded Crimea in 2014 (Mankoff, 2014), turned into a war when Russia launched an operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2023 (Kirby, 2022). The invasion launched by the Russian government negatively affected Russia, Ukraine and all countries, especially in Europe. Unlike in previous wars where the conventional media was at the forefront, it was a secondary news source this time. During the war between Russia and Ukraine, new communication methods have manifested themselves, and new communication technologies and applications frequently used in daily life have become the primary news sources in this war (Hanley et al., 2023a, 2023b). Soldiers and civilians engaged in the combats shared the videos and photos they took with their mobile phones or action cameras through live broadcasts on YouTube and Twitch, through applications such as *Twitter (now X)*, *TikTok*, *Facebook*, *Instagram* or through *Telegram* groups. Thus, similar to the Gulf War of 1990 being "the first real-time television war," (Gerbner, 1992, p. 260) the invasion of Russia took the form of the first real-time social media war.

In addition to these sources, participatory websites such as *Ekşi Sözlük* are also used to gather information. In such sites, readers can also become content producers. One of the main problems encountered by participants in the production of content is that the published texts are exempt from editorial processes, thus making it possible to distort the truth. The inhabitants of Türkiye, who have pursued a policy of neutrality as much as possible since the beginning of the war, have become a part of the conflict and polarisation. These polarisations are shaped around opposition to NATO (imperialism/fascism) and opposition to Russia (dictatorship/fascism). Some of these texts written by *Ekşi Sözlük* users aim to provide as neutral information as possible about the Russia-

Ukraine War. Still, for different reasons, most try to affirm the actions of the side they feel close to. Sometimes, this affirmation is based on factual data, focusing only on the positive actions of one side. Still, it is often propagandistic, focusing only on the war crimes of the other side. The conflict between the two sides' supporters ranges from denigrating opposing views to insulting other authors.

This study used qualitative content analysis to reveal how the content produced on the website *Ekşi Sözlük* serves conflict and polarisation among users. For this purpose, 8.144 entries published in the first six months between February 24, 2022, and August 23, 2022, under the heading 'Russia-Ukraine War' on the site, were analysed.

The concept of conflict and its outcomes

Being a social being by nature (Aristoteles, 2001) and predisposed to live with other people (Aristoteles, 1997), humankind maintains its existence by communicating and interacting with those outside of it. Conflict arises when two or more social organisms, such as individuals, groups, organisations, communities or nations, are unable to achieve their goals due to co-existence (Rahim, 2023). However, income inequality has traditionally been seen as the leading potential cause of conflict (Dalton, 2006; Esteban & Mayoral, 2011); any conflict based on personal interests, ambitions, aspirations or identities is intrinsically linked to the will to power (Nemlioğlu, 2021). Conflict, which continues to exist between nations or various cultural groups, in bilateral relations and between individuals, even within oneself (Wynn et al., 2010), is based on a series of actions and reactions to these actions, strategic actions and counter-strategies developed, communication strategies, reception and ways in which messages are received (Putnam & Fogler, 1988). Although conflict can occur in any situation and any environment, it brings constructive and destructive consequences for individuals, groups or societies. Despite its positive aspects, conflicts based on interests, values and beliefs can lead to arguments and separation (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). Conflicts between opposing groups for ideological, economic or religious reasons are among the most significant obstacles to social and political progress (Esteban & Schneider, 2008).

An overview of polarisation in Türkiye

Polarisation, which refers to the concentration of individuals in a community in two opposing groups regarding thoughts, opinions, and social and political positions and

attitudes (Türk Dil Kurumu), occurs due to the disappearance of social consensus and the abandonment of negotiation. As a result, individuals move towards ideological edges and concentrate on extreme views, compromises are eliminated, and a segregated society is shaped (Epstein & Graham, 2007). In a polarised society, differences are aligned in one dimension, and the similarity of differences is consolidated. This leads to a process in which people construct society and politics through “us” and “them” (Göksun, 2022; McCoy et al., 2018). In other words, polarisation can be defined as dividing society into ‘us’ and ‘others’. In polarisation, there is a process in which social boundaries are created or crystallised, and in this process, the common ground between the two camps disappears (Bilgiç et al., 2014; LeBas, 2018).

In cases where extreme polarisation spreads throughout society, the negotiation environment regresses, and central tendencies lose their importance and influence (Epstein & Graham, 2007). This leads to the defunctionalisation of social and political life and prevents social reconciliation. It also prevents the permeability that will ensure reconciliation by creating sharp borders. In a polarised environment, people become partisan to prejudices and ignore ideas that they would generally consider to have strong foundations (Epstein & Graham, 2007), tolerance gradually disappears, and parties become hostile towards each other. In cases where prejudices influence decisions, it becomes increasingly difficult to claim impartiality, and these individuals are even subjected to pressure that pushes them towards the poles. Forcing individuals to extremes also reduces the importance of alternative identities (Donsbach & Mothes, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012; LeBas, 2018).

In modern societies, regardless of the level of development, polarisation is widely encountered. In addition to material issues, non-material issues such as environmental problems, gender equality and lifestyle choices also lead to new conflicts (Inglehart, 1990). The polarising discourses and populist policies of governments lead to an atmosphere in which societies are increasingly divided on every issue.

Rather than using constructive language, governments in many countries have a discourse that criticises, marginalises and thus polarises (BilgiMag, 2022; Iwaniuk et al., 2018). In Hungary (Vegetti, 2019) and many European countries (Pausch, 2021), factors such as divisive policies, social and sociocultural conflicts, and migration movements have led to large masses of people who lack tolerance for any issue, cannot tolerate the other side, and are always looking for an opportunity to clash with the other side.

66% of Europeans think that their countries are much more polarised, and 47% think that society is much more intolerant than it was ten years ago (Perasso, 2018). In research conducted by McCoy and others (2022), a rapid increase in polarisation was observed in almost all European countries, especially after 2000. Similarly, people in the USA are also polarised (Bail et al., 2018; Levendusky & Stecula, 2021; Whitaker, 2022). Polarisation is not limited to European states and the USA. In countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Africa, and Kenya (Bértoa & Rama, 2021; Boxell et al., 2021; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Dalton, 2006, 2008; Fischer & Hawkins, 2023; Rao, 2023), polarisation is causing disagreements and separation in society and among people.

The global wave of polarisation also has reflections in Türkiye. The roots of polarisation in Türkiye go back to the Ottoman Empire (Ertugay, 2022). The bourgeoisie-proletariat or right-left polarisation that emerged after the French Revolution did not find its counterpart in the classless Ottoman society; instead, a separation was made through the centre-periphery dichotomy (Gülener, 2007; Kasalak & Uçar, 2014). After the Tanzimat and Constitutional Edicts, this polarisation metamorphosed into an elite-public dichotomy and continued to exist within a binary framework after the proclamation of the Republic (Ertugay, 2022). After 1950, the liberal economy and the statist economy led to a divide in society. Although Şerif Mardin's centre-periphery dichotomy theory (Mardin, 1973; Shils, 1961) is valid in Türkiye, over time, the centre-periphery distinction has been replaced by a cultural struggle (Aydın Düzgüt, 2023), leading to the emergence of a polarisation based on the secular-conservative/religious distinction.

Erdoğan and Semerci (2022) state that different polarisations were frequently encountered in Türkiye in the past, and many of these polarisations continue to exist today, affecting contemporary politics and social relations. According to them, axes of polarisation, such as right-left, centre-periphery, secular-religious, Turkish-Kurdish, etc., have shaped political and social life in Türkiye in different periods. A survey shows that around 65% of the public in Türkiye say that the country is polarised, with around 50% saying that this has increased compared to 10 years ago (Ipsos, 2018). According to several polarisation measures, Türkiye is now considered one of the most polarised countries in the world (Aydın Düzgüt, 2023). Another study shows that 83% do not want their daughters to marry someone who votes for a party they disagree with; 78% reject the idea of doing business with someone who votes for the opposing party; and 74% do not like the idea of their children playing with the children of someone who votes

for the opposing party (Erdoğan, 2016). Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Türkiye has become polarised in ideological, political and social terms. Türkiye is becoming segregated on cultural, class, profession, education, and geography (Kentel, 2022; Somer, 2019). Traumas from the past and social injustices cause the congregation of different cultural groups and profound differentiation and polarisation in politics (Özçolak, 2022). This situation makes individuals feel obliged to choose a side to belong to in a polarised social atmosphere.

Polarisation on social media

Polarisation is not a problem specific to the present or unique to Türkiye. The improvement of communication technologies and social media and the increase in interaction between individuals have accelerated polarisation and made it more visible (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2022). In Türkiye, polarisation has sharpened through both traditional and new media and that political loyalties and the view of the other have sharpened with the effect of this environment regarding political views (Akyüz, 2017). The effect of media on polarisation did not start with the internet and social media sites/applications. Settle (2018) rejects the idea that divergence and polarisation in societies are current and states that eighteenth and nineteenth-century American newspapers were extremely partisan and sarcastic. There have been debates on the polarising effect of the media in the times of television and even radio (Whitaker, 2022). There are two approaches to the polarising effect of media outlets: the view that people prefer sources close to their own opinions when consuming any media product; and that contrasting broadcasts increase the likelihood of being exposed to different views (Levy, 2021; Prior, 2013). While fulfilling their functions, media networks go beyond these functions and reflect their broadcasts by taking sides according to their ideologies or the views they are close to because the media is a propaganda tool, and the broadcasts are shaped in a polarising direction in line with the interests of power centres (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). In the broadcasts, people or organisations with rival views are presented in a partisan discourse by attributing negative adjectives to them. This paves the way for polarisation by causing the sides to tighten among the viewers.

Social media, which emerged as a way to interact with friends and family members, has evolved into various forms, such as blogs, social networks, photo and video sharing sites, instant messaging applications, podcasts, and even games and virtual worlds. Social media encourages activism and political participation in settled democracies

and facilitates protest and resistance in autocratic countries (Allcott et al., 2020). During the USA invasion of Iraq in 2003, war blogs attracted enough readers to rival mainstream political journals (Reynolds, 2004) and became the primary communication medium for organising social movements during the Arab Spring (Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) and Gezi Park protests (Bayhan, 2014; Kurt, 2015; Tufan Yeniçıktı, 2014).

The Internet and social media now have readership/listening/viewing rates on par with traditional media and sometimes even higher. As the importance of social media in society and the frequency of its use in communication increases, many people use it as the primary channel for news consumption (Coscia & Rossi, 2022). This suggests that developments such as the emergence of internet broadcasting as an alternative to mainstream media and the widespread use of social media have an impact on polarisation (Barrett et al., 2021; Erdoğan & Uyan Semerci, 2018; Lelkes et al., 2017). In a study on the relationship between *Facebook* and polarisation (Allcott et al., 2020), it was found that participants who did not use *Facebook* for four weeks were less marginalised, less segregated and had less polarised views. Divisive content spreads widely and quickly on social media networks (Yu et al., 2021). Since polemics fuel such posts and are mostly sensationalised, they receive much interaction and spread rapidly. Social and political polarisation is also reflected on social networks.

In research on Kurds and Syrian refugees, it has been found that discriminatory attitudes and polarisation towards Syrian refugees increased (KONDA, 2016); as a result, polarisation towards Kurds eased, and the main polarising axis has shifted towards Syrians (Çakın, 2020). A study on the gypsy population in Türkiye based on the entries on *Ekşi Sözlük* revealed that the polarisation caused by prejudices and hate language brought about the exclusion of gypsies from social and business life (Alp, 2016). In research conducted on the entries about the Chinese on *Ekşi Sözlük*, it was observed that hate speech was used, negative stereotypes and prejudices were in circulation, and a rhetoric of persuasion fed by conspiracy theories and nationalist/religious references was used by examining which themes were used and how the Chinese were discriminated and defined (Tunçer, 2020). In a study on the discrimination of Armenians on *Ekşi Sözlük* (Akkılıç, 2018), it was found that the entries had polarising content in the contexts of demonisation, lynching, hate speech, oppression/victimisation, Armenian betrayal and conspiracy theories. In another study (Yalçın, 2015), in which symbolic violence on social media was examined, entries had polarising content in which the information given was belittled, opposing views were found, and the person mentioned

was belittled. In Şirvanlı's (2021) study on the political polarisation in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) news, it was revealed that while the pro-government supporters characterised citizens as irresponsible, the opposition groups thought that the state did not take enough responsibility and showed weakness in governance.

In addition to polarisation, many studies in Türkiye have analysed the Russian-Ukrainian War. Some of these studies have analysed the war through international relations (Öztürk, 2023) or hegemony and technology companies (Öztemel, 2022). As well as studies that examine the propaganda activities in the process within the scope of the official news agencies of the two countries (Köksoy & Kavoğlu, 2023) or the X accounts of the Turkish embassies (Durmuş, 2023), some studies investigate the ideology of the language used in internet journalism (Kılıçaslan, 2022) or disinformation and fake news (Babacan & Tam, 2022; Akyüz & Özkan, 2022; Sığırıcı, 2023). Among the studies evaluating the war in terms of user comments on social media, Çiçekdağı's (2022) study examines the reflections of the war on tourism in Türkiye through X comments, while Tam and Kurtuluş's (2022) study focuses on audience reactions to YouTube videos. Studies on the Russian-Ukrainian War mainly focus on professional media content, and very little attention is paid to users' comments. Therefore, this study is significant as it is the first to focus on *Ekşi Sözlük* about the war.

Aim and methodology

This study analyses the increasing polarisation between supporters of Russia and Ukraine in Türkiye due to Russia's simultaneous military operation in many regions of Ukraine. The conflict and polarisation that emerged from taking sides even though one was not involved in the war were analysed. In this aspect, among the participatory dictionaries as a social media platform, *Ekşi Sözlük*, which receives the most interaction in Türkiye (Similarweb.com, 2023a), was analysed in the context of the content produced. The title 'Russia-Ukraine War' was selected among the titles opened on *Ekşi Sözlük* regarding the Russia-Ukraine War, and the entries written under this title were analysed through qualitative content analysis.

Aim

Mass communication has changed with the rapid development of Internet technology in the late 20th century. The uni-directionality of traditional mass media has been transformed from being one-sided as a result of Web 2.0 to a dimension where recipients

can also intervene in the content. Thus, ordinary people have become content producers rather than passive recipients in the communication process. This situation has paved the way for all segments of society to communicate their ideas about every event in daily life to others via the Internet. Unlike traditional communication tools, the structural characteristics of social media tools and unlike traditional communication tools, they are open to interaction, enabling social media to be easily directed, provoked and diverted (Menteşe & İli, 2016).

In *Ekşi Sözlük*, one of the most visited internet communities after *Youtube*, *X*, *Instagram* and *Facebook* in Türkiye (Similarweb.com, 2023b), examples of increasing polarisation can be observed under every heading. One of these is the 'Russia-Ukraine War'. The title 'Russia-Ukraine War' contains polarising discourses in the context of different dichotomies such as Russia-Ukraine, Russia-NATO, Russia-USA or democracy-tyranny. Based on all these, this study aims to reveal how Russia's invasion of Ukraine for various reasons leads to polarisation among people who are not party to the incident. Answers to the study questions determined in line with this purpose were sought:

RQ1. What is the rate of polarising and non-polarising discourse in the entries under the title Russia-Ukraine War on *Ekşi Sözlük*?

RQ2. Under which headings are non-polarising entries categorised?

RQ3. How is the discourse in polarising entries classified?

RQ4. How do the people using polarising discourse in the title classify each other?

RQ5. In which direction is the polarisation caused by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine moving in the context of dynamics within Türkiye?

Methodology

In the direction of these questions, the entries in the sample were analysed by the content analysis method. Developed initially to analyse texts such as magazine articles, newspapers, books, responses to questionnaires and transcribed interviews, content analysis is a research method with a long history of use in journalism and mass communication and systematically and objectively examines the characteristics of messages (Spurgin & Wildemuth, 2017). This method of analysis is based on the assumption that texts are a rich source of data with great potential for revealing valuable

information about specific phenomena (Kondracki et al., 2002) and seeks to uncover truths that may be hidden in data by describing the data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). It considers the participant and context when classifying the text into relevant category groups to identify surface and implied similarities and differences, patterns and relationships (Graneheim et al., 2017). In content analysis, which is based on two fundamental distinctions, quantitative and qualitative, the quantitative method aims to produce a numerical value to indicate prevalence or to use in statistical analyses; and the qualitative method aims to identify a structure or concept within the text using specific words or phrases for substantiation or to provide a more organised structure to the text described (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be explicit or hidden in a given text, enabling researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific way (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). It focuses on the meaning in the content of the text and aims to explore the relationships between concepts. In revealing the meaning, it uses patterns, codes and themes and describes the social reality created by themes/categories. Therefore, in this study, which examines the polarisation caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 on *Ekşi Sözlük*, qualitative content analysis is used to identify concepts and relationships that can explain the data collected.

Sampling

Although there are many titles about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on *Ekşi Sözlük*, the reason for selecting the title 'Russia-Ukraine War' is that it is the most preferred title by *Ekşi Sözlük* members. The title was opened on March 1, 2014; as of August 24, 2023, it had 19.849 entries on 1.984 pages. Therefore, topics such as 'Russia's Invasion of Ukraine' (8 entries) or 'The Start of the Russia-Ukraine War on February 24, 2022' (2.253 entries) were excluded because they had fewer entries than the 'Russia-Ukraine War' topic.

The universe of the study consists of 19.849 entries written in 18 months. The study sample includes 8.162 entries written between February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a military operation against Ukraine, and August 23, 2022, when the war reached its sixth month. The problem is that the entries under the title can be deleted or removed for various reasons. To avoid this problem, all of the title pages were saved individually as a Portable Document Format (PDF) file using the Opera internet browser, thus

preventing the possibility of being unable to access the deleted entries. In addition, since a court order blocked the domain name eksisozluk.com at the time of the process and other domain names had not yet been put into service, the site was accessed using Opera's built-in Virtual Private Network (VPN) service.

Data collection tool and operation

To conduct qualitative content analysis, firstly, the researcher analysed the first five hundred entries to determine the categories, and then a coding guideline was prepared. At the stage of analysing the entries in the sample, coders were determined. Two coders analysed 8.162 entries in the sample according to the coding scheme. The data obtained by coders were compared, and the conflicting items were analysed again by the researcher. At the end of this review, the researcher's interpretation was finalised. Accordingly, 18 records whose placement in the study was disputed were excluded from the study sample. The remaining 8.144 entries were analysed in the findings.

Findings

In this study, which examines the polarisation in social media with the title of Russia-Ukraine War on *Ekşi Sözlük*, the entries in the sample were first categorised according to whether they contain polarising or non-polarising language. Accordingly, no polarising content was found in 2.809 of the 8.144 entries (34.49%) in the sample. However, the remaining 5.335 entries (65.51%) were found to be polarising, and such content was categorised under nine different headings: the entries that are one-sided, the entries containing democracy vs. totalitarianism/neo-Nazism, the entries accusing parties of propaganda, the entries imposing their ideas while criticizing polarisation, the entries referring to other entries, the entries marginalising/insulting authors with opposing views, the entries accusing opponents of ignorance, sexist or racist entries about refugees, and the entries interpreting the war through the domestic politics of Türkiye.

Entries without polarising content

When the sample was analysed, it was found that the rate of entries that did not contain polarising content was 34.49%. It is possible to mention three types of content in these entries: providing neutral information about the war (n=2.241, 79.78%), such as "Mobile networks completely collapsed in Donetsk region," criticising *Ekşi Sözlük* for polarisation

(n=439, 15.63%) entries like “From the comments, I see that the situation divided into camps continues here. Everyone is a supporter of this or that,” and advocating Türkiye’s neutrality (n=129, 4.59%) such as “We must not fall into the trap and remain neutral. For us, joining the war would have disastrous consequences.”

Entries providing neutral information about the war

The first category of non-polarising entries was categorised as those providing as neutral information as possible on the Russia-Ukraine War. The ratio of the entries providing neutral information to the total was 27.52%, and to the non-polarising entries was 79.78%. In such entries, the authors only provide information about the war’s course and avoid making personal comments as much as possible. By linking to the news source, they sometimes report the information obtained from this source from an equal distance to both sides. Although they make predictions for the future, these predictions do not favour either Russia or Ukraine but are merely assessments of the situation.

Some entries discuss the war’s evil and negative consequences, criticising both sides’ leaders, policies and rhetoric and mentioning its effects on the global economy and the armament of countries. Some entries express hopeful expectations for the future and offer good wishes to the people affected by the war, regardless of side.

Entries criticising *Ekşi Sözlük* for polarisation

The second group of entries that do not contain polarising content is against polarisation and consists of those who write that the writers on *Ekşi Sözlük* have posted entries that marginalise each other and increase the conflict environment on the website. These entries constitute 15.63% of the non-polarising entries. Many authors complain about the positioning of website users against each other in an environment where Türkiye is not openly taking sides, pursuing a balanced policy, and expressing discomfort with this situation.

Entries advocating Türkiye’s neutrality

The last group of non-polarising entries, with a rate of 4.59%, consists of the entries written by writers who advocate that Türkiye should remain neutral. Although defending Türkiye’s neutrality means taking sides in a sense, the fact that the entries under this

heading do not contain opinions advocating that Türkiye should go to war with Russia or Ukraine or that Türkiye should apply the sanctions imposed by other countries makes it possible to evaluate the entries in this group under the non-polarising heading.

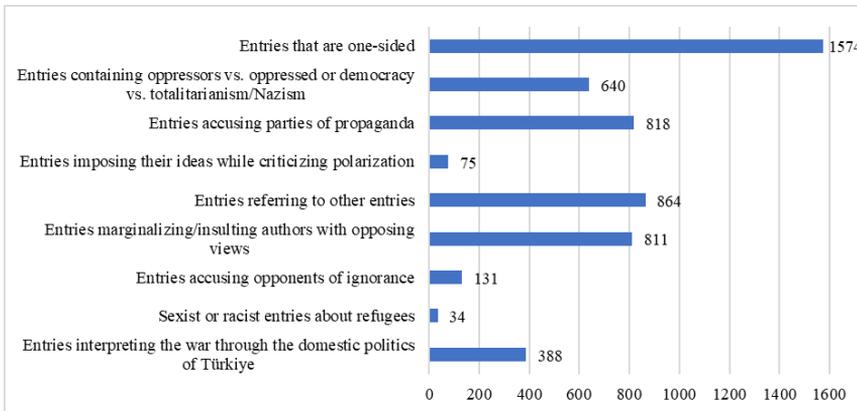
Some entries emphasise the importance of neutrality and mention the importance of Türkiye turning this situation into an opportunity due to the sanctions imposed by other countries. However, some entries suggest that Ukraine is trying to draw Türkiye into the war with the pretext of Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV) produced by Turkish companies, but this situation should not fool Türkiye.

As a result, in general, non-polarising entries are very few. This situation reveals that users are divided in two on the Russia-Ukraine War, as in almost everything else on *Eksi Sözlük*.

Entries containing polarising content

When the sample was analysed, 5.335 entries containing polarising content were found, 65.51% of the total entries. These entries were grouped under nine different headings according to their discourse.

Table 1: Entries with polarising content



Entries that are one-sided

When the entries are analysed, it is seen that some of them provide information about the war but take sides. The analysis calculated the number of entries with a one-sided

approach as 1.574, with the highest percentage (29.5) among polarising entries. Although these entries, in which the authors defend their opinions, are one-sided, they do not attack opposing views and evaluate the situation from only one perspective. Although the individual comments of the authors do not attack or provoke other views, their one-sidedness gives other authors the right to have their say, which in turn leads to conflict between authors.

One-sided comments were found to take two different forms. First, some entries justify one side and defend the side they support. Countries on the other side or their supporters are not included in the comments but are left out as much as possible, and the focus is on the side that is considered to be correct. The fact that the written texts generally do not contain criticism does not mean any discourse in the background. For this reason, such entries are included in the polarising category since the texts only mention one side, but the discourse blames the other side. One-sided entries differ according to the country they support. Some support Ukraine, while others side with Russia.

Some entries supporting Ukraine do not mention Russia, but the reader knows Russia is the enemy. In some entries, the sanctity of the defence of the motherland is mentioned. It is stated that Ukraine's struggle is legitimate as it fights with all its might against a stronger enemy. In many of these entries, the authors address Ukraine with phrases such as "May God help them," "Resist Ukraine!", "Slava Ukraini! Heroyam Slava!" and similar expressions of good wishes.

The entries supporting Russia generally state that Russia is standing up for what is right. There are also entries expressing support for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation or communist parties in different countries.

In addition to the entries that justify Ukraine and Russia, some justify NATO in the conflict that led to the war. These authors state that NATO does not force anyone to join the organisation, that states themselves decide whether or not to join the alliance, and that NATO is exonerated of any blame in the Russia-Ukraine War.

Some entries consist of criticism of the other side, with a one-sided approach to the incident. These criticisms against Russia and Ukraine are sometimes explicit and sometimes made through irony. Sometimes, the authors make accusatory statements

against the Polish government through Zelensky; sometimes, they criticise ironically based on entries such as “Putin thought of this.”

In addition to criticising Russia and Ukraine, which are the direct parties of the war, there are also questioning comments against Ukraine’s supporters, such as NATO, the European Union (EU) and the USA, claiming that they caused the war to break out. At the same time, there are entries stating that Western countries do not intervene in wars in other parts of the world just because they are far away from them. In contrast, they intervene in the war with Ukraine because they are border neighbours and see a threatening situation. According to these writers, Europe, the EU, and the USA are being hypocritical on this issue. Their concern is not human rights or democracy but their interests.

Another criticism is directed at Ramzan Kadyrov, the Islamist leader of Chechnya, fighting on Russia’s side. Among the one-sided comments are those that mock Kadyrov for being dependent on Russia and that Moscow finances the militias that keep him in charge of Chechnya.

Entries containing oppressors vs. oppressed or democracy vs. totalitarianism/ neo-Nazism

Another grouping of polarising contents consists of entries in which the authors accuse the side they support of defending democracy and the other side of succumbing to forms of governance that are not welcome in modern Western democracies, such as totalitarianism or neo-Nazism. The 640 entries in this group account for 12% of all polarising entries.

The accusations against the other side are mostly incriminating towards Ukraine and Russia. Most of the entries directed against Russia state that Putin is a dictator and that Russia is unjustly occupying a sovereign state. Russia’s claims that its genocide of its compatriots or that Ukraine is in the hands of the neo-Nazis are untrue and that these are Russian public relations operations. Some entries draw attention to the similarities between Russia and Nazi Germany, revealing the fascist attitude of Russia. Some entries argue that Putin is a dictator, does not care about his people, and that the people, who are already in a dire economic situation, will suffer even more in the long run due to the sanctions imposed. In addition, they argue that NATO is perhaps

the only obstacle to Russia's expansionist policies and that NATO protected Türkiye from becoming a part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the past, suggesting that Russia continues to pursue the same imperialist policies.

In addition to Russia and Ukraine, critical entries about other European countries, mainly NATO, also occupy an essential place in this group. It draws attention to the fact that the sanctions against Russia initiated by almost all NATO and European countries after the invasion deviated from their purpose and turned into a witch hunt against ordinary, innocent and even Putin-opposing Russian citizens, which resulted in the maltreatment of the Russian people.

Entries accusing parties of propaganda

The third group of polarising entries includes criticism of propagandist discourse. According to the authors, Ukraine, Russia, the USA and the EU are engaged in disinformation-based propaganda about the war. While it is customary for the parties to engage in propaganda during a war, they criticise the practices of their adversaries. In particular, the accuracy of government data on the number of soldiers killed, civilian casualties, civilians massacred or military targets destroyed is debated. Some authors label the data or news published by the other side as propaganda and try to refute them as if they were Russian or Ukrainian government employees and engage in counter-propaganda. For example, the authors claim that the faulty operations of one side are portrayed as the crime of the other side; they try to label the other side as neo-Nazi sympathisers or fascists; and they even claim that the other side has created scenes where people are lying dead to make the other side look like war criminals. Ukraine's defenders interpret the information provided by Russian news sources as propaganda. However, Russia's defenders claim that Western media agencies are distorting the truth and trying to justify Ukraine.

Entries imposing their ideas while criticising polarisation

Some of the polarising entries in the heading consist of those who express their discomfort with this polarisation and then try to impose their ideas by defending the side they support or criticising the other side. A relatively small number (n=75) of such entries pretend to be neutral and accuse Russia of being an invader, Putin of being a dictator, or portray Ukraine as a country that collaborates with fascists, whose heads

of state are buffoons, a lackey of the USA, and naive enough to trust the West. Such entries consist of "I am against polarisation on *Ekşi Sözlük*, but..." or "I am not for war, but...", which always begin with but and contain the second and main context. Criticism of the USA and NATO is expressed in the form of neutrality and, as before, that NATO is provoking Ukraine and pushing Russia into a corner, forcing it to attack. Under the guise of neutrality, others bring up the issue of Türkiye's troop presence in northern Syria and criticise Türkiye's actions.

Entries referring to other entries

One of the essential elements of polarising content on *Ekşi Sözlük* is the references made by the authors to each other. Sometimes, apart from providing information or conveying their opinions, authors criticise and sometimes support other authors' previous entries. The category ranks second among polarising entries after one-sided comments, with 864 entries containing references. The sine qua non-condition for these entries is that they are written in response to entries written by other authors under the same heading. Some entries criticise authors for taking sides, manipulation or propaganda in general without targeting any specific entry. Some entries, however, are written directly to refute the argument made by a single entry. By embedding all or part of the entry to which they are responding within their text or linking to the entry or screenshot, the authors allow users to see what was written in the previous entry. The referencing entries may contain information about the war, but since they target another author, this content becomes inconsequential and a discourse that directly causes polarisation.

In the referenced entries, the authors always focus on the Russia-Ukraine dichotomy and the USA/EU/NATO. The authors bicker with each other on many issues, such as the relationship between Zelensky's being Jewish and neo-Nazism, whether Ukraine is making a strategic retreat in the territories it has lost or fleeing the field, whether it was the West that caused the war to break out; the validity of Russia's justifications; who is making propaganda and who is trying to convey the truth. Sometimes, these exchanges take place within the bounds of decency. In some instances, however, there are contents containing insults, swearing and marginalisation, in which the writers are almost angry with each other. This situation makes categorisation difficult and ensures that referring to previous entries is at the forefront of the categories of entries that cause polarisation.

Entries marginalizing/insulting authors with opposing views

On *Ekşi Sözlük*, another grouping for entries defined as polarising is those that marginalise authors with opposing views. Again, three classifications stand out in the content included in this group. The first one is those who characterise the supporters of Russia with adjectives such as "Russianist," "Russo worshipper," "Putinist," "Kremlin lackey," "Politburoist," "Russian troll," "Russian dog," "Russian sucker." However, supporters of Ukraine are marginalised with epithets such as "Ukrotroll," "Ukrainian shill," "Azov remnants," and "fake neo-Nazis." In addition to the countries on both sides of the war, those who defend the USA, EU and NATO countries are labelled as "American dog," "American lover," "American lackey," "NATOist," "NATO lover" or "EU sympathiser." An analysis of polarising entries on *Ekşi Sözlük* reveals more anti-Russian entries than anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western entries combined. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the marginalising epithets applied to pro-Russians are much more diverse.

In addition, when the entries in the sample were analysed, many entries containing insults and swearing were found against the parties to the war and the writers on *Ekşi Sözlük*. Swearing, which people often use as an emotional response, offers relief in situations such as disappointment, surprise or anger. Therefore, the authors on *Ekşi Sözlük* swear more than the reactions they use for humiliation and marginalisation towards the war in which they do not have the opportunity to intervene. Swearing at opponents also tightens ranks and creates unity among like-minded people.

Entries accusing opponents of ignorance

Another polarising element among the analysed entries is those who accuse the supporters of the opposing front of ignorance, regardless of the side. Russia's supporters criticise Ukraine's supporters for believing that Ukraine will defeat Russia. In their view, Russia is the other superpower in the bipolar world, the leading actor in the bipolar world, and the one that has stopped American and NATO expansionism. Therefore, Ukraine, as a relatively new state, has no chance against Russia. Volodymyr Zelensky was elected to the presidency in 2014 due to the Revolution of Dignity, supported by the USA, and is seen as a lackey of the USA. He is, therefore, only a pawn in the Western game against Russia, and NATO will stop supporting Ukraine once they are done with him. The followings are examples of such entries:

“War is bad. I am neither a supporter of Russia nor a fan of Putin, but Russia is right in its cause. Let me explain this with an example. If I explain it to that ignorant person, maybe your brain cells will start working. (...);”

“It showed ignoramuses who think that Ukraine will defeat Russia. Some seriously believe this. (...)”

“another said under my nickname that Russia and Ukraine are enemies, not brothers, and accused me of ignorance. Governments can be enemies, but peoples are not enemies;”

For the anti-Russians, Russia is a corrupt dictatorship that has benefited from the might of the USSR. It is a paper tiger, and its technologies, which the world has feared for years, are an illusion. For these reasons, it is ignorant to think Russia can invade Ukraine with Western backing. It will be weakened by the economic sanctions imposed and forced to withdraw from all the territories it occupies in due course. Russian technology cannot compete with the West, so Russia is doomed to lose this war. It is also a sign of ignorance to believe in the trump card of nuclear weapons, which Russian officials sometimes invoke because Russia can't intervene in a neighbouring country with nuclear weapons. That the neo-Nazis ruled Ukraine is another fabrication that should not be believed. These types of entries appear with examples such as “A war started by a mad dictator in which no one will intervene. It's a pity;” “Putin is a dictator. Like his predecessors. If Europe, the USA, and the NATO are not stupid, they should build material and moral barriers against Russia in this war that has started for no reason. Otherwise, Russia will not stop and will haunt the Caucasus;” “I am very sad that Ukraine is left alone. It hurts me that Putin, a Hitler-like dictator, can attack an innocent country and win a war.”

Sexist or racist entries about refugees

After the turmoil in the Middle East, especially after the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye has been receiving many refugees from the Middle East. According to official figures, more than five million refugees live in Türkiye as a result of this wave of migration (Gözcü, 2023). The problems brought by the growing number of refugees led to increased concerns about refugees, and even fear turned into hatred (Kıraç, 2023). The Russia-Ukraine War has started a new wave of migration. Those who had fled the war in Ukraine

or were anti-war in Russia and wanted to escape oppression started settling in Türkiye. Some writers on *Ekşi Sözlük* brought this situation to the agenda.

Some authors state that refugees from Ukraine and Russia should be preferred to Middle Eastern refugees because these writers see Slavic women as sexual objects. This discourse, based on the beauty/ugliness distinction and containing hate speech, is discriminatory hate speech based on geography, focusing on Slavic immigrants from Europe. In contrast, others come from the Middle East. This is followed by the distinction that Middle Eastern refugees are illiterate while European refugees are educated. Some authors react to this discourse and link it to fascism. Furthermore, Middle Easterners are denigrated by saying that 'dark-skinned' people from the Middle East who defected to Ukraine were the first to flee after the Russian aggression.

Some writers, however, question the morality of Ukrainian migrants by claiming that they vacation in other European countries on refugee benefits based on unsubstantiated news reports. Other writers have posted hate speech entries claiming that Ukrainian women stayed in their country and joined the army instead of fleeing the war and that they are braver than Middle Eastern men.

Entries interpreting the war through the domestic politics of Türkiye

The number of entries interpreting the 'Russia-Ukraine War' in terms of the actors of domestic politics in Türkiye is as low as 3.3%. Nevertheless, in terms of showing social dynamics, the polarisation caused by domestic politics is reflected in the entries under the 'Russia-Ukraine War' heading. There are many authors with different views and emotional approaches to the issue, such as those who declare American supporters as Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) members just because Fethullah Gülen resides in the USA, those who blaspheme those who support Russia despite the death of 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib as a result of a Russian airstrike; and those who criticise the hostility towards the West and admiration for Russia in the Turkish public opinion.

More rational or pragmatist authors, however, argue that Russia has been one of the biggest enemies of the Turkish states for centuries. Some authors argue that Stalin demanded territory from Türkiye after World War II and that Türkiye would have been a former Eastern bloc country had it not become closer to the West. Türkiye is a member of NATO, an organisation established against the threat of the USSR. Therefore, according

to these authors, the anti-NATO sentiment in Türkiye stems from the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government's inept behaviour under the guise of foreign powers and its attempts to cosy up to Russia. For this reason, anti-NATO sentiment is primarily promoted by JDP trolls. Some writers argue that Russia's victory in Ukraine would put Türkiye in a dangerous situation because Russia and Türkiye's interests clash in the Black Sea, Armenia, Syria, and Libya, making Türkiye the next target.

Another reason for the polarisation of the headline towards domestic actors is Ukraine's use of military technology produced in Türkiye. The use of UCAV produced by Baykar, a company owned by the family of President Erdoğan's son-in-law, by Ukraine against Russia has led JDP supporters to praise these weapons and overestimate their effectiveness, while the opposition has denigrated them. Therefore, the JDP supporters/opponents divide, and polarisation is reflected under this heading.

Discussion and conclusion

In this research, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been followed through *Ekşi Sözlük* rather than traditional mass media such as television or newspapers, due to evolving technology and social habits that have transformed in parallel with technology. The world could follow the course of the war first-hand by following visual broadcasts from the battlefield and literary texts. In this context, the war, which is not sufficiently covered in the traditional media in Türkiye, is followed through social media. On this *Ekşi Sözlük*, where all users may produce content, thousands write under the heading 'Russia-Ukraine War'. In this medium where ideas and opinions can be discussed most democratically, people, unfortunately, feel obliged to choose between the sides of the war and support one side or the other as if they were rooting for a team. This contribution, in turn, shapes what is written, leading to a conflict between the authors about a war they are not involved in and polarising attitudes towards each other. From this point of view, this study aims to reveal how Russia's invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine leads to polarisation among people not involved in the incident for various reasons. The entries on *Ekşi Sözlük* under the title 'Russia-Ukraine War' were analysed, and the elements of polarising content were revealed.

Conflict, which arises as a result of the inability to satisfy the needs of individuals (Yelkikalan, 2006), can be based on various reasons such as personal interests, ambitions, desires or identities (Nemlioğlu, 2021; Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). In sociological terms, conflict is the struggle of individuals or groups over the overlap and divergence

of their economic and political goals, value judgments and norms (Şahin, 2013), and situations in which they disagree, whether or not they act on different, incompatible needs, interests, opinions, values or goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Tillett & French, 2006). As a result of conflict, the differentiation of the existing common culture based on two opposed interpretations leads to polarisation (Bauman, 2012). As a result of polarisation, social consensus disappears, and negotiation is abandoned. As individuals move towards the ideological extremes and concentrate on these extreme views, compromise disappears, mental separation deepens, and a segregated society emerges (Epstein & Graham, 2007). During polarisation, the differences in a society settle on a single level, leading to a process in which people construct society and politics through understandings of us and them (Göksun, 2022; McCoy et al., 2018). In other words, polarisation can be defined as dividing society into us and them.

According to the findings obtained via qualitative content analysis of 8.144 entries published in the first six months following the start of the war, 2.809 entries do not contain polarising discourse, and 5.335 entries contain polarising elements in different contexts. Non-polarizing entries are grouped under three headings: those that provide neutral information about the war, those that criticise the website for polarisation and those that defend Türkiye's neutrality. Those with polarising language were analysed under nine categories. The ratio of entries that do not contain polarising language to all entries is 34.49%, which shows that the authors use a polarising discourse in almost two out of every three entries. These data are consistent with other studies conducted in Türkiye. For example, according to Ipsos (2018), the polarisation rate in Türkiye is approximately 65%. Therefore, it would not be erroneous to say that the ideological and political polarisation in Türkiye is also reflected on *Ekşi Sözlük* writers.

In this respect, the results align with the previous studies (Akkılıç, 2018; Şirvanlı, 2021; Yalçın, 2015) on polarisation in the other studies in the literature. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, the categorisation of polarising entries was more comprehensive than other studies, as there were more than nineteen thousand entries under the heading, and more than eight thousand were analysed.

When the findings and the dynamics of the polarisation of the parties in the 'Russia-Ukraine War' heading on *Ekşi Sözlük* are evaluated in the axis of the research questions, it is observed that the parties are polarised primarily on the dichotomy of Russia and Ukraine. The authors supporting Russia argue that Ukraine oppresses the Russian

minority in the east of the country and that Ukraine is rapprochement with the Western bloc despite Russia's protests. However, writers supporting Ukraine argue that the alleged events in eastern Ukraine are just Russian propaganda and that Ukraine, as a sovereign state, has the right to join any organisation it wants. In some entries, both sides accuse each other of fascism. Based on the argument that Ukraine is a pawn, another polarisation is constructed on the NATO/EU/USA-Russia, specifically the USA-Russia conflict. According to the Russian proponents, the USA, to provoke Russia, instigated the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, which brought Westernist governments to power. The opposing view is that Putin is a dictator and that his actions and arguments for war are the same as those used by the neo-Nazis to invade Poland. Each side blames the other for its expansionist policies.

These antagonisms are the main conflicts that create the polarisation in the title, but other polarisations arise from the criticism of the authors against each other. First, the fact that the entries have a one-sided point of view leads to the need to respond to the other side by putting them under suspicion. Entries referring to other entries often criticise and sometimes support the previous entries of other authors. Some of these entries raise objections on a general issue, others on a specific entry. In the polarisation shaped by the propaganda of the warring countries and war-related state organisations, as well as the authors on *Ekşi Sözlük*, each side accuses the other of twisting the facts and disinformation.

In their entries, a group of writers marginalise or insult writers with opposing views. As a result of this action, which is carried out by insulting and swearing, the possibility of reconciliation between the parties is wholly eliminated, and an extreme polarisation emerges because the other side tightens its ranks in the face of these attacks. The group integrates by ignoring the differences within it. Accusing the opposing side of ignorance causes a similar reaction and increases polarisation. When the entries are analysed in the context of oppressors vs oppressed or democracy vs totalitarianism/ neo-Nazism, it can be seen that the authors accuse their side of being a defender of democracy and the other side of succumbing to totalitarianism or neo-Nazism, forms of government that are not welcome in modern Western democracies. In this polarisation that developed based on Russia, Ukraine and Western countries, perhaps the only point the majority can agree on is that Western countries overreacted to the Russian people after the war and did injustice to them. Although some entries seem to criticise the polarisation in *Ekşi Sözlük*, they have subtexts reflecting the author's opinions. Some authors declared

refugees from Ukraine and Russia as sexual objects, whereas others committed hate crimes against Middle Eastern refugees. As a result, although some authors entered entries supporting these views, these views were generally opposed, and polarisation was relatively less polarised.

The general opinion in the entries interpreting the war through the domestic politics of Türkiye is that one of the USA or Russia is Türkiye's enemy. In this sense, Ukraine remained in the background despite being a party to the war. Considering the internal dynamics, it was observed that those who supported Russia were mainly composed of individuals with political views close to the JDP, the ruling party in Türkiye. This may be related to the JDP government's recent efforts to rapprochement with Russia and the East instead of the West. The supporters of Ukraine and the West, on the contrary, are those who are politically objectors of the Turkish government. Regarding Turkish arms production, the polarisation goes in a different direction. People loyal to the JDP have praised the UCAVs produced by Baykar, a company owned by the family of President Erdoğan's son-in-law, and have endorsed Ukrainian initiatives in this direction; however, there has been much criticism of the weapons from the objectors.

As a result, the study reveals that the polarisation in Türkiye is also reflected on *Ekşi Sözlük* and that people can be polarised even on a subject that does not directly concern them. Polarisation is not the same as disagreement on solving problems, which is healthy and natural in a democracy. Polarisation is more than having a different opinion than others on specific issues. In extreme polarisation, people feel isolated and suspicious of the 'other' camp. At the same time, they feel loyal to and trust their camp without examining their prejudices or the factual basis of their knowledge. Polarisation is likely to be persistent and harmful. Therefore, this study reveals the unhealthy situation in Turkish society, as many previous studies have already demonstrated (Aydın Düzgüt, 2023; Erdoğan, 2016; Erdoğan and Semerci, 2022; Ipsos, 2018; Kentel, 2022; Özçolak, 2022; Somer, 2019).

The research analysed the entries entered under the title 'Russia-Ukraine War' on *Ekşi Sözlük*. Therefore, some inferences and conclusions have been reached only through the data obtained from the website. The main problem with such an approach is that the authors, who are called trolls and aim to interact and make a name for themselves, cannot be identified. It is undeniable that there are trolls on *Ekşi Sözlük*, both on the Russian and Ukrainian sides, who try to sow seeds or manipulate and provoke other

people to upset them or start a quarrel. Trolls who deliberately write inflammatory, digressive or irrelevant entries to provoke others into emotional responses or to distract from the topic of a thread write many posts under this heading, provoke and polarise people, and then delete their entries and disappear. Since troll entries have very sharp discourses, they encourage the opposing writers to sharpen their language. This may cause polarisation to appear more widespread than it is.

In addition, although the entries contain information about the motivations of the authors, reaching these authors in future studies will provide more accurate information about their motivations. Since the study was conducted on a website for Turkish-speaking people, it was only possible to analyse the views of a specific community on the war. A study on worldwide sites such as *X*, *Quora* or *Reddit* would enable more universal results. A comparative analysis of a site from Türkiye and a site with users worldwide would enable comparisons between Türkiye's views and those worldwide.

Endnotes

- 1 *Ekşi Sözlük* is an interactive, participatory website containing authors' definitions and comments, information about words, terms, concepts, events and people, experiences, observations, anecdotes, surveys, links, and resources

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