



“İttapars”, Trolls, and Kanzis: Ethical and Political Tensions in Turkey Through the Marginalization of Stray Dogs and the Manifestation of Social Polarization

“İttaparlar”, Troller ve Kanziler: Sokak Köpeklerinin Ötekileştirilmesi ve Toplumsal Kutuplaşmanın Tezahürüyle Türkiye’de Etik ve Politik Gerilimler

ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2024, the issue of forcibly removing stray dogs from the streets in Turkey sparked widespread public debate and intensified political polarization. This article will examine the response to the decision to collect stray dogs and place them in shelters among different political factions of society and the social anger it has generated. This social anger has turned into a political debate between those who support the decision to collect stray dogs and those who believe this decision is wrong, with the suffering of stray dogs and wild animals being overlooked. The article addresses the decision to round up stray dogs as a situation that has brought to light social anger stemming from polarization within society, and has even led to the emergence of new practices of stigmatization within the social sphere. The article will examine these stigmatization practices and explore the symptoms of social anger through examples from local and foreign media. The debate surrounding stray dogs reflects deeper political, social, and ethical tensions in Turkey and reveals how animal liberation issues intersect with broader political and social dynamics.

Keywords: STRAY Dogs, Polarization, Ethics, Türkiye, Social and Political Philosophy.

ÖZET

2024 yılının yaz aylarında, Türkiye’de sokak köpeklerinin zorla sokaklardan toplanması konusu geniş çaplı bir kamuoyu tartışması başlatmış ve siyasi kutuplaşmayı yoğunlaştırmıştır. Bu makale, sokak köpeklerini toplayıp barınaklara yerleştirme kararına toplumun farklı siyasi kesimlerinin verdikleri farklı tepkileri ve bunun yarattığı sosyal öfkeyi inceleyecektir. Kararın ardından ideolojik olarak karşıt fikirli kişilerde oluşan toplumsal öfke, sokak köpeklerini toplama kararını destekleyenler ile bu kararın yanlış olduğunu düşünenler arasında, sokak köpeklerinin sahip olduğu etik konum göz ardı edilmek suretiyle ortaya çıkmış salt bir sosyal öfke örneği olarak ele alınabilir. Makale, sokak köpeklerini toplama kararını, toplumdaki kutuplaşmadan kaynaklanan öfkeyi gün yüzüne çıkaran ve hatta sosyal alanda yeni damgalama pratiklerinin ortaya çıkmasına neden olan bir durum olarak ele almaktadır. Makale, bu damgalama pratiklerini inceleyerek ve Türkiye’deki sokak köpekleri meselesi hakkında yerli ve yabancı medyadan örnekler aracılığıyla açığa çıkan toplumsal öfkenin semptomlarını analiz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sokak Köpekleri, Kutuplaşma, Etik, Türkiye, Toplum ve Siyaset Felsefesi.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of stray dog roundups in Türkiye has sparked intense outrage, captured public attention, and profoundly impacted Turkish society. While some segments of the population view stray dogs as dangerous animals that must be removed from public spaces, others defend them as innocent nonhuman animals deserving of protection. Such distinct opinions have led to significant polarization of public opinion on social media platforms and fueled social anger.

Shared anger can be understood as a hostility, or even a desire for retaliation among groups of people against a specific individual, community, or situation. It typically develops when one group perceives itself as threatened or wronged by another (Gaffney et. al., 2018, p. 12). The debate emerged after the decision to round up stray dogs in Türkiye can be interpreted as a manifestation of the anger felt by citizens of differing ideological allegiances and divided into social camps, for various and fundamental reasons. Following a tragic incident in Antalya, where a child was hit by a truck while fleeing stray dogs, fear and anger spread among certain segments of society, reinforcing existing negative attitudes towards stray animals (Daily Sabah, 2022). On the other hand, animal rights activists oppose the rounding up and euthanizing of stray dogs in shelters, calling this practice cruel and spreading their views to a wide audience through social media. My claim is that the reasons for rounding up stray dogs and the ethical nature of the case are not very important to society. Instead, the majority of those who express their opinions on this issue in the public sphere are affected by the

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wave of share danger directed at opposing ideologies. Alongside these events, we are witnessing a period where discussions of animal rights and animal ethics have entered the public agenda in Turkey for the first time in over a decade. Previously, the issues that attracted public attention and concern mainly were particular animal suffering caused by humans (Middle East Monitor, 2022). As a result of public debates initiated on social media platforms, notably X and Ekşi Sözlük (Turkey's most popular online forum), stray dogs have become a seriously problematized issue within society. Local municipalities and the highest authorities representing the right-wing government in Turkey have become involved in these discussions. Shortly afterward, the Parliament decided to round up stray dogs and send them to shelters.

STRAY DOGS, URBAN WILDLIFE AND REGIONAL TENDENCIES OF SOCIETY

According to decision above, as of July 2024, dogs in shelters can only be released if adopted by people. Additionally, a decision also was made to euthanize dogs that are officially confirmed to have harmed humans. Initially, the draft law included a decision to euthanize all stray dogs. However, after backlash and several polls indicating that the majority of the public opposed euthanizing dogs without reason, this practice was removed from the law. The existing law allowing for the euthanization of dogs proven to be dangerous and harmful to humans was left unchanged. This decision grants the authority to round up stray dogs and manage shelters for local municipalities and mayors (Craig, 2024).

Some dissident municipalities have even declared that they will not comply with the decision or bypass the law by employing stray animals as "guard dogs". Therefore, debates about the laws passed by Parliament are still ongoing. Turkey's main opposition party has also appealed to the Constitutional Court for the law's annulment (Toksabay, 2024). Some proponents of the law argue that it values and prioritizes the lives of stray dogs. According to this view, stray dogs are also at risk on the city streets, so the law is a measure to ensure their welfare. However, the motivations cited in these arguments need to be more convincing to the majority of the public because the law is also a topic of debate that has further polarized political factions.

The general belief among opposition citizens is that the primary goal of the government in enacting this law is not to prevent stray dog attacks, which are claimed to be dangerous to humans. Instead, they believe the government aims to consolidate its political base and distract from the long-standing economic and political tensions. Therefore, the opposition finds it suspicious that the Turkish government "suddenly" decided to address the issue of stray animals and develop a solution. According to the dissident party's supporters, another underlying motivation for the government's desire to pass this law is that most of Turkey's major cities are governed by opposition party mayors. The new law also includes a large-scale financial penalty for municipalities not complying with the parliamentary decision to round up stray dogs. As such, the opposition also criticizes this decision as an attempt by the ruling party to undermine the success of opposition municipalities in this year's local elections (Buyuk, 2024). Before delving into Turkey's climate and its impact on decisions about stray dogs, it is crucial to consider how urban stray animals are viewed as wild animals.

If we choose to take an interventionist approach in order to lessen the suffering of wild animals, then the same reasoning can also be applied to stray animals living in cities. Trying to survive under such conditions, they endure continuous hardship similar to that found in wild nature. These animals live in an area where the concept of wildlife is redefined as urban wildlife, and the difficulties and problems of living in the city are fundamentally reflected in the lives of these animals (Font, 1987, p. 319). From this perspective, acting to reduce the suffering of both wild and stray animals appears not only reasonable but also a moral responsibility (Moen, 2016, p. 91). This perspective also supports intervention in the lives of stray animals in cities, as they endure similar suffering as animals in natural habitats. The city can be fundamentally viewed as a *topos* coded as a human living space since Aristotle (Kılıç, 2012, p. 367). However, over the years, particularly in some countries, streets have become places where animal populations have increased due to the breeding of animals and the number of abandoned pets. Consequently, most of the dangers considered for wild animals are equally applicable to animals living on the streets.

In Turkey, discussions about stray animals are also influenced by regional variations. The larger populations of stray animals in rural areas can be linked to the expansiveness of these regions and the scattered nature of settlements. Animal population management in rural areas is more complex than in urban areas (Bakırcı, 2024). Within urban areas, when stray dogs are encountered more frequently and dangerously, it can create a situation where harsh animal control may be justified on public safety grounds.

Additionally, some people live in coastal urban areas, where encounters with dangerous stray animals are less common. These areas are generally areas where it is relatively easier to feed stray animals, and over time, the stray dogs here have become more docile and open to human intervention. There are also certain social and

economic reasons why people living in these regions should be relatively more sensitive to animal rights (TurkuazLab, 2020).

STRAY DOGS CASE UNDER THE POLARIZATION: DOG WORSHIPPERS VS. INTERNET TROLLS

After discussing the sociological and economic determinants of attitudes toward stray dogs, I will briefly explain how the issue of stray dogs has become a matter that fuels tensions between political identities. After a user on X claimed that having a romantic sentimentality toward stray dogs is entirely a class-based tendency, users began criticizing each other from the perspective of their respective political identities (Tamga Türk, 2024). According to this view, there are fundamentally two distinct groups with different reflexes regarding the issue of stray dogs:

The first group typically resides in rural and suburban areas, predominantly stigmatized as right-wing and conservative, economically disadvantaged, and often harbors deep rage against leftists and secular segments of society. This group accuses the second group, primarily of people living in coastal regions who are relatively more educated, well-off and they possibly support left-wing public policies (Yağcı, 2022, p. 43).

The second group generally lives in coastal urban areas and predominantly supports the left-wing parties. This group needs more knowledge about the stray dog population in rural areas. This group is characterized as more educated and secular. A typical social analysis in everyday language portrays the "Left-wing auntie from Kadıköy feeding stray cats". Generally, the neighborhoods where stray animals are consistently fed and cared for are those with a strong dissident party's support base (Mumyalmaz, 2024, p. 121). According to social intuitions, those people have more empathy toward stray dogs because these people do not see as many stray dogs as those in rural areas and are unaware of how the dog population negatively impacts those in rural regions. As a result, the residents typically know the stray animals in these areas, and their numbers are lower compared to rural regions.

Both social groups may draw on social anger towards each other. Each group's identity is rooted in anger directed towards the other to maintain a shared privilege they are unwilling to give up. As the conservative group essentially holds political power in Turkey, they typically have more influence in seeing their demands met at the national level.

Especially after images of the child who was hit by a truck while fleeing from stray dogs spread on social platform X, and the child's mother made statements to the media commenting on the stray dog issue, it became a long-standing occurrence for the two politically opposed factions to confront each other and engage in attacks on social media platforms. The public discussions formed an opinion, and with political support, the mentioned law passed in Parliament. According to Holmes, such factions hold social anger toward each other, which influences political decisions rather than rational deductions and political relations (Holmes, 2004, p. 123).

Both groups mentioned above tend to project their social anger onto opposing groups and form alliances with individuals who share similar ideological commitments. In this context, social anger toward opposing ideas overlaps with a wave of reactive anger against a perceived moral wrong. However, social polarization is a form of anger shared by a group, and social anger is a reaction that only occurs when a social group feels threatened. Members of a particular social group may develop anger toward other social groups for specific reasons, which can create a sense of unity among members of that social group (Emerick and Yap, 2023, p. 354). Based on this sense of unity, the relatively conservative group supporting the stray animal roundup law refers to the group advocating for birth control and the sterilization and return of stray animals to the streets as "İttapar" (Dog Worshipers)², in line with their identity reflexes.

In contrast, the group opposing the law uses the term trolls to imply that the conservative segment consists entirely of right-wing supporter internet users. This term was coined by opponents to describe the dominant group that holds right-wing ideology and has a strong presence in internet forums. (Saka, 2018, p. 165). Between these two opposing factions, an intermediate group defends the government's policies by saying things like, "There are no stray animals in Europe or America!" or "Stray animals are not scientifically sound," while posing as opposition. This intermediate form is referred to as "Kanzi" (alt-right of Turkey or nationalist state supporters posing as dissidents) by online forums. Therefore, it can be seen that users referred to as Kanzi

² The word "İttapar" literally means a person who worships dogs. The word "it" is synonymous with "dog" and comes from the Azerbaijani language. However, in Turkey, "it" is a more pejorative and bad insult than "dog". It is a word used to call people useless, unnecessary, anti-social, and dangerous. See: <https://eksisozluk.com/ittapar--6601794>.

are portrayed as individuals who distort liberal ideas and arguments in favor of right-wing and authoritarian approaches.³

The division that began in Türkiye after the Gezi protests and is commonly referred to as the "50 percent" divide has become a social reality, both numerically and in many familiar terms, and is now widely accepted by the public (Kaya and Whiting, 2018, p. 92). Attitudes toward stray dogs, particularly on social media, are fundamentally influenced by the social reflexes of anger these two groups harbor toward each other. Therefore, the groups that discuss the issue of rounding up stray dogs on social media, centered on social platform X and expressing anger toward each other and the ideological commitment they represent, have three distinct political identities and tendencies: İttapars (Dog Worshipers), Internet Trolls, and Kanzis. Each of these groups has an object of anger determined by their social identity, and directs their anger toward this group in different ways.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the political climate created by social anger and social stigma does not allow for an approach that values the individual lives of stray dogs and does not allow individuals to create a comprehensive discussion on this issue from the perspective of animal ethics. When we proceed from an interventionist perspective on the suffering of wild animals, some argue that this approach is undertaken in the name of animal welfare or liberation. From a particular perspective, the decision of roundup can also be seen as an intervention against urban wildlife (Hadidian, 2015, p. 1092). However, the problem here is that it needs to ignore the possibilities of creating an appropriate birth control policy for stray dogs or building shelters that would benefit the animals, paving the way for the inhumane collection of dogs. Moreover, especially in rural areas of Turkey, it has also created a perception of political assurance and legitimacy that justifies individuals causing harm to dogs.

For some groups, stray dogs symbolize disorder, insecurity, and even state neglect, while for others, they represent resilience and interspecies coexistence, serving as vivid reminders of shared public spaces. Therefore, the tendencies of users discussing the decision to round up dogs on online forums may reflect a wave of social anger without considering any ethical justification for the case. This can also be analyzed as a symptomatic manifestation of the anger arising from this polarization among individuals. These approaches, rooted in ideological commitments, have found an opportunity to expose ideological representations in the public sphere through the issue of stray dogs. Consequently, a careful reassessment of existing policies can help protect both animals and the fragile social harmony this debate has exposed.

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³ These nicknames are also taken from eksisözlük (Eng. sourtimes). See: <https://eksisozluk.com/kanzi--2393230?p=14>

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