

The *Rezalet* (“Scandalous”) Project: The Politics of Everyday Online Complaints in Authoritarian Turkey

Abstract

My project analyzes the little/everyday complaints in one of the most popular online contributory platforms in Turkey, the “eksisozluk.com”. This social media site in Turkey - eksisozluk.com, is an interactive web platform with more than 400.000 registered users- and has recently become an outlet where ordinary people voice their complaints. Not a day passes when one or more of the users do not initiate a “complaint entry,” with the word *rezalet* (scandal) in the title of the entry and the date of the complained incident. Other users then chime in and discuss the initial complaint entry thoroughly. While the bulk of complaints is about unsatisfactory products or services, the palette of grievances is wider, including medical malpractice claims or dissatisfaction with governmental services. The number of such entries and the volume of discussion around them have skyrocketed since 2013, when Istanbul was rocked by massive street protests and their brutal repression by the police. These entries have since become so standardized that a new genre of internet activism, what I call the *rezalet* (scandal) titles/entries, is now visible. What does this increase in the number of complaints and the popularization of a new genre reveal? What is the politics behind the rise of the *rezalet* genre? Based on qualitative and discourse analyses of these entries, I show that their intensification follows the increasing frustration with the authoritarian practices of the regime. Similarly, the formation of the complaint/ scandal genre renders public (scandal) what is otherwise private (personal complaint). In doing so, this very genre constitutes and crystallizes a non-traditional and creative form of mobilization against the increasingly authoritarian regime. A deep reading of these entries shows that “merit-ocracy” (*liyakat* in Turkish) and “contract” are two themes informing most -if not all- of these entries, suggesting common lines of frustration and opposition to the current (and still, after the 2023 elections) ruling coalition.

Such combination of political frustration and (mostly) consumerism-based activism shows the potentials and limits of mainstream/middle class opposition to an autocratic regime. While more progressive and active pockets of activism exist, one of the building blocs of opposition to authoritarianism in Turkey has (at least until the last elections) been a middle class / consumer driven mass. Can such “clicktivism” be successful or how far can it go? In what ways can peer to peer politics replace, in other words, hand to hand politics? Does the *rezalet* genre work to take the steam off and serve the continuation of an authoritarian regime? Or does/can it lead to real and progressive outcomes? These are some of the essential questions that constitute the arch of the project.

Bio

Z. Umut Türem obtained his PhD in “Law and Society” at the New York University. He was first an assistant and later an associate professor at the Bogazici University’s Ataturk Institute for Modern Turkish History (from 2012 to 2023). He resigned from his post due to political pressure from the “kayyum” (trustee) rector appointed by the autocratic leader of the country. Türem is currently affiliated with the Education Department of the University of

Vienna, working on a project on Turkish bureaucrats trained in universities abroad. He is hosted as well by the Near Eastern Studies Department, working on the “Rezalet Project” that he will be presenting in this series of seminars.