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Political public relations and crisis communication of the government: The case study of the earthquake of 6 February 2023 in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

On February 6, 2023, a massive 7.8 earthquake struck southeast Türkiye and caused killing thousands of people and leaving devastation across a wide swath of the country. In this context, this paper examines the government communications and crisis communication in the context of the disaster responses of the emergency management agencies during the earthquake of February 2023 in Türkiye in terms of image repair strategy and aims to reveal how the government responds to the opposing political circles' claims. It was concluded that the ruling party used communication channels intensively to refute the opposition's arguments and presented its own efforts and actions through visual and numerical proof and the main character of the government's crisis communication was based on highlighting what they made well.

I. Introduction

The earthquakes that struck ten southern Turkish provinces on February 6, 2023, marked the country's worst humanitarian disaster in modern history. One-sixth of Türkiye's population —more than 13 million people— was affected by earthquakes (Cagaptay, 2023). The two significant earthquakes that hit Türkiye on February 6, 2023, have left the country in a terrible state in terms of physical and psychological damage and caused nearly 50.000 deaths. The political opponents have assessed the rescue operation after Türkiye's earthquake as a failure and accused the Turkish government of a lack of preparation and coordination.

In the critical initial hours and days after the earthquake, the Erdoğan government was criticized for being slow, in particular, to mobilize the military. It was thought that the military could help not only the direct rescue but also build or repair critical infrastructure necessary for the rescue efforts, things as field hospitals and damaged airstrips. In addition, the civilian office responsible for emergency relief, the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) was the other agency discussed due to being poorly managed and uncoordinated. The government also faced reactions to its lack of tolerance for criticism. The government-friendly Turkish media attempted to show by using the argument "the disaster of the century," that the magnitude of the earthquake was so great that no steps could have been taken to prevent mass destruction. State media and pro-government media had a clear narrative: "the devastation was an act of God, not a result of mismanagement, the state is doing everything that can be done, and anyone who says otherwise is a liar or a traitor" (Eissenstat, 2023).

The opposition criticized the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government for having been ineffective in responding to the disaster. It was discussed that the response could have been more effective. Discussions focused on two major areas. The first relates to the lack of enforcement. In other words, the lack of resilience, so tragically demonstrated, is essentially the consequence of ineffective enforcement. The second issue has to do with top-level governance. The constitutional change of 2017 has introduced a presidential system with few checks and balances and a hyper concentration of power at the top. The system was introduced as an institutional design allowing for faster decision-making. Be that as it may, the cost of weakening checks and balances, for instance by disempowering the legislative to the advantage of the executive, has nurtured a climate of non-accountability (Ülgen, 2023). Türkiye's executive presidential system has created a form of governance

in which institutions are politicized, and almost every decision comes from the top—meaning the presidency. Leadership roles have been distributed to like-minded AK Party confidants, debilitating institutions' ability to produce apolitical, truly professional policy suggestions. More importantly, ministries and government agencies are unwilling and unable to act without a green light from above (Coşkun, 2023).

The earthquakes have also affected the economic situation and required a million citizens need to be supported financially and their accommodation, heating, and food expenses which cover for six months or more. The government held the fundraising campaign on Feb. 15 to aid recovery and support programs. It was a 7-hour-long jointly broadcast TV program titled "Türkiye, One Heart" that took in donations of TL 115.1 billion ($6.1 billion) from civil society and business associations. It has been declared that these funds will be allocated to the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), the largest humanitarian organization and counterparty of the Red Cross, and the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ). In this context, the Turkish government has built its political strategy on the basis of threefold: emphasizing the unprecedented magnitude of the quake (which they have dubbed the "disaster of the century"), claiming that their initial response was better than that following the 1999 İzmit earthquake, and highlighting the government's financial and technical capabilities to rebuild the damaged areas (Kubilay, 2023). Both this narrative and this situation which was defined by the insufficiency of the government mark a crisis due to the critics of the public, so it deserves to be analyzed in terms of political public relations and crisis communication literature.

Crisis can be self-inflicted through poor management practices and actions, or be a result of external factors such as a terror attack or natural disaster. Crisis communication can address both the performance of the crisis response and the nature of the crisis itself (Coombs, 2020). Coombs (2020) has argued the crisis communication methods of public relations are highly relevant to the political field and compared corporate and political crisis communication with each other in terms of five important similarities: (1) the shared rhetorical roots, (2) the emphasis on framing, (3) the use of auto-communication, (4) interest in negative affect, (5) a need to cope with scandals. Accordingly, symbolic-focused crises involve damage to the reputation of a corporation, individual, or political institution and frequently a conflict over how the situation is being defined. Benoit (2015) points out that crisis communication includes image repair discourse, and the theory of image repair discourse also focuses exclusively on messages designed to improve images tarnished by criticism and suspicion. Accordingly, image repair discourse is a persuasive message or group of messages that respond(s) to attacks or suspicions that promote a negative attitude about the source of image repair.

Moreover, in the digital age, the crisis communication notion focuses on social media and the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model. For over a decade, social media and crisis communication has become not only an emerging research agenda in communication science but also one of the predominant public relations research areas. Jin and Austin (2022), in their book Social Media and Crisis Communication, have dealt with updated theories that describe, explain, and predict current and emerging crisis phenomena, and provided evidence-based insights for effective and ethical crisis communication practice. They have also examined specific crisis arenas (i.e., health, corporate, nonprofit, sport, politics, and disaster) in further depth and investigated the role of emerging social media platforms and newer technology in crisis communication management.

In order to contribute to global discussions in the crisis communication literature, this paper has examined government communications and crisis communication in the context of the disaster responses of the ruling party (AK Party) and the emergency management agencies during the earthquake of February 2023 in Türkiye. For this purpose, it has been selected two organizations for this case study: 1) The Disaster, and Emergency Management Presidency which is a governmental disaster management agency under the Turkish Ministry of Interior, and 2) The Ministry of Interior which is one of the main actors in taking necessary measures for effective emergency management. In addition to these public organizations, the tweets of the ruling party and the main opposition party have been analyzed to map the strategy of crisis communication in the context of the earthquake. By using Benoit's (2015) image repair categories, this paper has focused on press releases to identify crisis communication discourses of the government emergency management agencies. It has aimed to reveal whether the government adopts defensive utterances and persuasive attempts to reshape the public's attitudes and how it responds to the critical arguments of opposing political and social groups.

2. Literature Review

There is an interaction among the fields of politics, public relations (PR), and the media. Understanding the relationship among politics, PR and the media involves thinking holistically as they cannot be divorced from the society and culture in which they operate. Indeed, the concept of political PR itself involves many different elements, some of which may be disputed and offers the possibility to mislead and manipulate others in the quest for power. Without discussing civil society, no conversation about public relations, politics, or the media would be complete, and it has a connection to the public sphere and the idea of political communications. Organizations in the public sector have a moral and legal duty to disclose their activities to the public. They need to be accountable, but should not be "partisan". Government communication falls into two broad categories. First, public information campaigns are typified by one-way communication, conveying specific information to groups about a particular subject. The second category reflects public communication campaigns with greater interaction, often involving persuasion to bring about some form of behavior change. Themes underpinning political PR consist of three constituents of strategy, implementation, and behaviors. Framing, persuasion, agenda setting and issues management are placed under the strategy. In terms of implementation, political PR is tied to the concept of the PR state and how media channels, digital tools and the role of celebrities is impacting how citizens, consumers and voters receive and process information. Therefore, political PR covers a diverse and broad field and can engender optimism for its support for

democracy or cynicism by distorting debate and favoring the elite (Roberts-Bowman and Walker, 2021). Strömbäck and Kiousis (2020) have evaluated political public relations as an intertwining notion with political communication and tried to bridge the gap between theory and research in public relations, political communication, political science, and other relevant fields and defined the field of political public relations. When the term political public relations is used in political communication research, it is primarily used to refer to purposeful activities by political actors to influence the media, their agendas, and how they frame events, issues, and processes. Political public relations is much broader than the strategies and tactics for influencing the media. Similarly, public relations strategies and tactics are relevant in many other areas of political communication activities aside from those related to news management and media relations.

Government communication is related to the concepts such as political public relations, government public relations and government political marketing. José Canel and Sanders (2013) suggest that political communication viewpoint offers theoretical stances for the study of government communication, ranging from propaganda studies, voting studies, mass media effects, and the interaction of influence between the press, government, and public opinion. The range of government communication covers tasks like reputation and issues management in addition to media relations. When considering key dimensions of crisis communication, we can utilize Coombs's (2020) concepts of rhetoric and framing. Political crisis communication is rooted in rhetoric and the use of frames. As Coombs (2020) noted, political crisis communication includes a crisis framework intended to define problems and indicate how best to solve them. Framing has become a central feature of communication about political crises in general. Crisis frames are identified in three ways: (1) denial, claiming that the crisis does not exist; (2) threat, the crisis exists and is a threat; (3) opportunity, the crisis exists and is an opportunity for change. The three frames have different effects on the political stance and policy stance. There are two ways to frame causality for a crisis: endogenize, which places the responsibility on certain politicians or policies, or exogenize, which says that factors outside of human or natural control were to blame for the uncontrollable catastrophe. In reality, several competing frames are natural because politics is characterized by a variety of interests. Crisis framing includes two political spheres, as policy game and political game. While the policy game means a struggle between those wanting policy change and those wanting the status quo, the political game is the struggle between government officials and their opposition.

Johnston et al. (2020) have examined government communication relating to emergency management preparedness in an Australian context and concluded that the messages suggest a "paradox of the positive" in public communication for preparedness in emergency management communication. In other words, messages have overemphasized the capacity of local agencies to respond to crises and underemphasized citizen-shared responsibility. Johnston et al. (2020)'s study is important in terms of problematizing government preparedness communication. Furthermore, as the use of social media between organizations and stakeholders in crises has significantly increased, there has been a growth in literature to uncover how and why social-mediated communication is applied during crises. When analyzing social media use in crises on a global scale, scholars have noticed that it is significant to consider not only the messages being exchanged, but also the contexts within which information is transmitted online. A variety of contextual factors (e.g., political, social, cultural, and economic) play a crucial role in influencing how organizations, governments, corporations, and stakeholders respond to crisis situations (Cheng et al., 2022). Cheng et al. (2022) argue that the traditional crisis communication theories (Benoit, 2015; Coombs, 2020) and strategies have originated from Western societies and there is a lack of theoretical development and model explorations originating from non-Western contexts in the current social media and crisis communication (SMCC) research. Cheng et al. (2022) also suggest that crisis communication scholars should expand their reach to include theories that are used in non-U.S. studies, and this will help to diversify crisis communication scholarship and encourage the need for theoretical development.

Political public relations draws on a rich interdisciplinary foundation from fields such as public relations, political science, political marketing, and political communication and covers major domains such as news management and agenda building, issues management, event management, crisis communication, assessment in political public relations, and digital communication (Kiousis and Strömbäck, 2014). The state of the art of crisis communication and social media research is elaborated upon, including main approaches to studying social media and crisis communication; key concepts, models, and theories (e.g., the social-mediated crisis communication model); and current research in different practice areas. New research agendas and future directions for crisis communication and social media are suggested, including the integration of different methodologies and research approaches, visual social media and their emotional impact, as well as social media in crisis communication arenas (Jin and Austin, 2020). The mass media have the central role in the very construction of crises in a number of ways. First, the mass media are a key location for the development and circulation of discourses that when transgressed becomes crises. Similarly, mass media help to construct narratives of organizations and then report on breaks (crises) in those narratives. Mass media also draw attention to specific events over others (agenda-setting effect) and then decide what to include or exclude in their stories, which can affect how a crisis is perceived by audiences (framing effect) (Koerber, 2020).

3. Research Design and Findings

This paper is based on the case-study method that seeks an understanding of a social situation or process and enables adequate evaluative description (Richards and Morse, 2013) and it uses Benoit's (2015) typology for the analysis of crisis communication. Benoit (2015) has provided five general approaches to crisis communication strategies for organizations. Benoit's (2015) typology of image repair strategy composes of five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These categories include particular patterns as follows: One strategy for dealing with attacks is simply to deny the undesirable action. Denial may be supplemented with explanations of apparently damaging facts or lack of supporting evidence. In evasion of responsibility, those who are unable

to deny performing the act in question may be able to evade or reduce their apparent responsibility for it. In reducing offensiveness, a person accused of misbehavior may attempt to reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience. This approach to image repair has six variants: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. In corrective action strategy for image repair, the accused vows to fix the problem. This approach can take the form of restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable act and/or a promise to "mend one's ways" and make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act. Mortification is a particularly complex image repair strategy. No universally agreed conception of "apology" stipulates exactly what an apology must include. It can include an explicit acceptance of blame, expression of regret or remorse, or a request for forgiveness. Benoit (2015) points out that image repair research is political because politicians have opponents who often promulgate or repeat attacks, and politicians also daily make decisions that influence the lives of constituents.

By referencing this typology, this paper focuses on the image repair discourse of the emergency management agencies, The Disaster, and Emergency Management Presidency, and the Ministry of Interior of Türkiye on the earthquake of February 2023 in press releases and their tweets. It also analyzes the tweets of the ruling and the main opposition parties to identify the political crisis communication strategy. Thus, it aims to reveal what kind of strategy the government implemented to persuade the public and respond to opposing social groups. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (abbreviated as AFAD) is a governmental disaster management agency operating under the Turkish Ministry of Interior, but it also has been evaluated as unprepared and insufficient. Evaluating crisis communication case studies on regional, national, and international levels is important to compare different contexts.

Table 1. Image Repair Strategies of AFAD in the Press Releases (February-March 2023)

General Strategy	Tactic	Utterances of the Organization/Agency
Denial	Simple denial	*"The news about the decrease in the number of AFAD Search and Rescue Technicians in some written and visual media does not reflect the truth."* *"The allegations in some media outlets that "the families are allowed to be paid for cranes under the control of AFAD" do not reflect the truth."*
Evade responsibility	-	-
Reduce offensiveness		*"...In 2022, the number of our search and rescue personnel was increased to 2,681...."* *"...Within the scope of the State of Emergency Law and the Disaster Law, the land vehicles were commissioned in return for payment by us...."* *"...In the event that even an individual situation that abuses the process in a humane and moral sense is detected despite all necessary precautions that have been taken after the disaster of the century, the necessary legal process will be initiated immediately and followed up. ..."*
Corrective action		*"...From the very first moment of the disaster, our personnel, security units, Civil Administrative Officers, and all relevant public institutions have been on the field and at their duty...."*
Mortification	-	-

The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) is a governmental disaster management agency operating under the Turkish Ministry of Interior. Disaster and Emergency Management Authority defines itself as an institution working to prevent disasters and minimize disaster-related damages, plan and coordinate post-disaster response, and promote cooperation among various government agencies. Firstly, it was examined the press release responding to the allegations regarding the number of AFAD search and rescue technicians and seen that it was denied the allegations and informed the public of the correct number. The second press release is about the allegation that AFAD condoned the crane trade. The main strategy of the text is to defend the agency's operations and refuse the allegations strongly (see Table 1).

The Ministry of Interior has responded to the allegations of child abductions and rejected them totally, and also stated that it would be taken against legal action. It is seen that the Ministry of Interior has tried to highlight the positive actions in compensating for the negative effects of the earthquake and combined the three strategies of denial, reduce offensiveness, and corrective action (see Table 2).

There were a total of 51 tweets from two public organizations' accounts through the "earthquake" keyword. It was seen that tweets verified the image repair strategy of the press releases and attempted to convince the public that the negative effects were minimized, and the government worked. Furthermore, it has also reproduced a belief about preventing the recurrence of the problem. The communicative styles of the agencies have combined denial, reduced offensiveness, and corrective action. In addition, the negative comments and allegations have been disregarded and more focused on conducting actions. In order to evaluate the crisis communication strategy of the government, the critical

thoughts of the main opposition party (CHP- The Republican People's Party) should be considered. The faults and shortages pointed out by CHP during and after the earthquake have provided insight into how the government deals with the rescue and recovery process (see Table 3).

Table 2. Image Repair Strategies of Ministry of Interior in the Press Releases (February-March 2023)

General Strategy	Tactic	Utterances of the Organization/Agency
Denial	Simple denial	*"After the earthquake disaster that took place in Kahramanmaraş on 06.02.2023, it was seen that some social media accounts made unfounded statements that child abductions took place in the earthquake region…."*
Evade responsibility	-	-
Reduce offensiveness	Attack accuser	*"…Action is taken against those who bring up and spread unfounded allegations…."*
Corrective action		*"8 thousand earthquake victims were placed in the largest container city in Malatya. In the city, which was affected by the earthquakes centered in Pazarcık and Elbistan, which is described as the "disaster of the century", the studies started to solve the housing problem of the citizens continue…."* *"… One of the earthquake survivors, Mustafa Eser, said, 'They bring everything and deliver it to us. We have nothing left. The interest of the authorities is very good towards us.' he said…"*
Mortification	-	-

Table 3. The Thematic Analysis of Tweets (February-March 2023)

Keyword: Earthquake	@TC_icisleri (Ministry of the Interior)	@AFADBaskanlik (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency)
Workings on reducing the effects of the earthquake and improving the victims' lives	12	37
The responses to negative comments	1	1

Table 4. The Thematic Analysis of Tweets of the Main Opposition Party (February-March 2023)

Keyword: Earthquake	@herkesicinCHP (The Republican People's Party)	@herkesicinCHP Popular tweets
Negative comments on the government's earthquake management process	14	Our Chairman, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: "I am calling out to the Red Crescent officials... Bring us how many tents you have left in your warehouse that were not sold, we will buy them all, we will send them to the earthquake zone." (Feb 28, 2023). Our Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: "Look at the last 10 months, you'll see earthquake experts talking on all TV channels and begging, 'Take precautions'. What has been done? Plenty of zoning amnesties have been issued. They buried people in their dwellings." (Feb 12, 2023).
Aids, policies and commitments on reducing the effects of the earthquake	11	-

It was collected 25 tweets through the "earthquake" keyword between Feb-March 2023, identified them according to their themes, and found that the main opposition party (CHP) criticized the government for the earthquake-related processes and the improvement actions in 14 tweets. On the other hand, the other 11 tweets were related to their own policies and aid actions for reducing the negative effects of the earthquake. The main opposition party has highlighted not taking action against the earthquake in terms of the resistance from the buildings and condoning the low-quality buildings via zoning amnesty policies (see Table 4).

Table 5. The Thematic Analysis of Tweets of the Ruling Party (February-March 2023)

Keyword: Earthquake	@Akparti (The Justice and Development Party)	@Akparti Popular tweets
Support and aid actions during and after the earthquake	39	Our President @RTErdogan: The number of residences that have reached the construction phase after the completion of ground surveys throughout the earthquake zone has reached 309 thousand. (Feb 27, 2023). Our President @RTErdogan: We are not content with even a single citizen of mine to leave the city they live in because of the earthquake. Whatever we will do, we will do here, what we will achieve, we will achieve here. (March 12, 2023).
Responses to the Opposition's claims and criticisms	2	-

Table 5 shows the government, in particular, President Erdoğan's approach to the criticisms and how they dealt with crisis management on Twitter. Similarly, researching the tweets through the keyword "earthquake", 41 tweets were classified and found 39 were related to the government's actions for reducing the negative effects of the earthquake and reconstructing the buildings in the earthquake-hit zones. There were only two tweets responding to the critical comments. It was concluded that the government's crisis management strategy was based on explaining the action plan and showing its performance via visual and numerical data instead of responding to opposition circles.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the earthquake as the matter at the top of Türkiye's political agenda ahead of the 2023 elections beyond just a natural disaster issue. As McLean and Ewart (2020) argue, disasters are inherently political events, but not all information provided during a disaster is political. For example, emergency management organizations are focused primarily on providing information that is aimed at preventing the loss of lives and, after the initial phase of a disaster, assisting with recovery. The information provided to the news media by those who witness or directly respond to disasters or crises is not driven by political concerns. On the other hand, Benoit (2015: 73) also notes politics is inherently partisan, competitive, and newsworthy. Accordingly, image repair is an important aspect of this context. Kiousis and Strömbäck (2014) point out that political public relations is a central component of political communication and the primary area of political public relations is crisis communication and management. The domain of political public relations involves digital communication for efforts. Digital communication activities have quickly become a central area of focus for public relations professionals because of their conversational and dialogic nature.

Therefore, this paper has evaluated the earthquake both as a natural disaster and a political matter in terms of its impacts. This topic is important to monitor before the elections in May 2023 the political parties' vision for support and recovery efforts and evaluate both the government's crisis management skills and the opposition's potential performance. Since the earthquakes caused enormous damage, the performance and flaws of the government led to public discussions in the public sphere, at the same time fed political polemics. When looking at the press releases and tweets of the relevant public organizations from Benoit's (2015) model, it is seen that they adopted denial, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action as general strategies and strongly underlined their relief workings on reducing the effects of the earthquake. In addition, the tweets of the ruling party (AK Party) are in line with this strategy and bring the earthquake-related actions of the government to the forefront and try to reverse the allegations of the opposition that the government is "responsible for this". To sum up, it can be said that the ruling party uses communication channels intensively to refute the opposition's arguments and presents its own efforts and actions through visual and numerical proof. The main feature of the government's crisis communication can be defined as telling by highlighting what they did well.

The general election of 14 May 2023 and the presidential election of 28 May 2023 (second round) were ended by the victory of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party). In spite of February's deadly earthquake, the incumbent president won support in 9 out of the 11 regions most devastated by the natural disaster. Thus, the results of the elections verified that the public relations strategy of the ruling party in the earthquake zones was successful. Although this analysis covers the strategies and discourses of the government with regard to aiding the victims in the first moments when the effects of the earthquake are felt, it can be argued that the election victory of the government is linked to

promising to rebuild victims' lives and homes. In future studies, discussions can be examined about the political figures on repairing the earthquake's harm during the election campaign and how the public evaluates these efforts.

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