



EUROCIV BRIEF N° 1*

INTRODUCING THE PROJECT: AIMS, METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

“Europeanization of Public Debates and Civil Society in Turkey” (EUROCIV) is a two-year research project which was launched in September 2012. This research, awarded with Marie Curie Career Integration Grant, is supported by the European Commission within the context of the 7th Framework Programme. It is conducted by Dr. Alper Kaliber under the mentorship of Prof. Ayhan Kaya in the European Institute at Istanbul Bilgi University.

AIMS

The central aim of this research is to explore the impact of the institutions (particularly the EU), norms and policies of European integration on the politically mobilized civil society organizations (CSOs) in Turkey. The task will be achieved by introducing a novel conceptual framework to Europeanization approaches. EUROCIV focuses on the CSOs that are actively involved in the debates concerning the rising political Islam and Kurdish identity claims in Turkey. These public debates may well be defined as Turkey’s core regime debates, since they are questioning the fundamental precepts of domestic political order which are secularism, nationalism and the territorial integrity of Turkish state. These two issues have also constituted the major axis of civil society involvement in public debates in the country since the 1980s.

For the purposes of this research project, the phenomenon of civil society has been defined as “the coming together of free individuals of their own volition” (Yerasimos, 2000: 15) in a given society or in a global scale with the purpose of influencing the socio-political, economic and cultural agenda in accordance with the pre-defined collective objectives. The vibrant conceptual-theoretical debates about the meanings of civil society (see Keane, 1998; Van Rooy, 1998; Parekh, 2004) have inspired us to operationalize a broad definition of the term for our research. The nature of the debates on the Kurdish issue and political Islam, where almost all segments of the society have something to say, also necessitated this approach. Thus, we included a wide variety of actors who are intervening in public deliberations ranging from grassroots organizations, associations, trade unions to business oriented NGOs, university based research centres and think-tanks.

The empirical focus of EUROCIV is three-tiered. First, it investigates how and in what ways the EU-required legal and constitutional reforms (EU-ization) on the freedom of association and assembly have changed the political/structural conditions in which politically mobilized CSOs operate in Turkey. Secondly, the research explores how the CSOs react to and make use of the EU/European context (Europeanization) to increase their influence and to promote their political agenda. It assesses how the reforms expanding the sphere of liberties and rights, various EU funds and increasing opportunities of making collaboration with European CSOs are beneficial to the civil society actors in re-organizing and developing their strategies, objectives and frames of actions. Another task of EUROCIV is to map out the variety of discourses concerning the EU and Turkey's integration into Europe disseminated by the politically mobilized civil societal actors in Turkey.

At the theoretical level, on the basis of critical engagement with the concept of Europeanization, the aim is to develop a new analytical framework to comprehend better how European integration affects societies. This project is also an attempt to re-define the scope and boundaries of Europeanization and to re-locate it within a broader sociological terrain. Analytically, it develops a clear distinction between EU-ization as a domestic process of legislative, institutional and policy engineering aiming at alignment with EU's body of law and institutions, and Europeanization as a wider socio-political and normative context. (Kaliber, 2013). Rather than a mere process of adaptation, Europeanization exists as a context where European norms, policies and institutions are (re)-negotiated by different European societies and institutions, and have an impact on them. In the relevant scholarship, change through Europeanization is often taken as read, as a linear, empirically observable and testable process of adaptation to the EU. Yet, we reject any notion of Europeanization as a linear and evolutionary process of adaptation furthering stage-by-stage and experienced by all societies in similar modalities.

The impact of Europeanization in a given society is largely determined by the extent of and the ways in which Europe is used as a political/normative context by domestic actors. Europeanization penetrates into domestic politics, if and when these actors use the European context as a "mobilising political instrument" (Malmborg and Strath, 2002: 4) to promote their political, social agenda. Europeanization exists as a context to the extent that the European norms, values, institutions are incorporated into the public narratives by domestic political-societal actors. For that reason, to get a deeper insight to the impact of Europe in domestic settings, a novel epistemological and methodological approach to Europeanization is needed. This approach considers the fact that Europeanization, rather than being a teleological process of change and development, is a context which is continually renegotiated by the European societies in their domestic and European level debates (Kaliber, 2013).

EUROCIV relies on a multidisciplinary research, combining different perspectives including international relations, European integration studies, political theory, and sociology. The research is based on three fundamental pillars: civil society, Europeanization, and core public debates. In order to achieve its objectives, EUROCIV proceeds through a five-phased methodology. These are 1) critically engaging in the relevant literatures and setting the theoretical/conceptual framework of the research, 2) examining the impact of EU-required reforms on the development of Turkish civil society and specifying the CSOs involved in the secularism/political Islam and Kurdish debates, 3) understanding the perception and construction of the debates by the civil societal actors, 4) mapping out the contemporary appeals to EU/Europe by the CSOs in relation to secularism and the Kurdish issue, 5) linking the discourses of civil societal actors on EU/Europe with their impact on these debates. In each and every stage of the project different methods of research will be employed i.e. critically engaging in the relevant literatures, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with civil society activists and discourse and content analysis.

The scholarly attempts on the impact of Europe in Turkey have overwhelmingly been confined to either institutional/policy realms or policy elites. This research, focusing on the grassroots level, aims to explore if the society itself has been experiencing any substantial change through EU-ization/Europeanization. It reveals the degree of Europeanization of core regime debates and civil society in Turkey as well as the modalities of mobilising Europeanization by the civil society actors of these debates. Moving beyond the elite-oriented analyses dominating this particular field of research, EUROCIV aims at bringing the society back into the analysis.

Civil society and public debates in Turkey

Particularly since 1980 and the ensuing implementation of a highly restrictive constitution, civil society in Turkey became closely associated with the push for democratization and the protection of human rights and, therefore, has often been viewed with suspicion by state institutions (Kaliber and Tocci 2010). With the 1980 military coup, Turkish politics was eclipsed by a security regime (Kaliber, 2005), where almost all grassroots activities were dramatized as challenges to the state. In the years that followed, freedom of expression and assembly, and the rights of associations and foundations were constitutionally restricted, severely limiting the prospects for the emergence and consolidation of a pluralist civil society in the country (Toprak, 1996). Grassroots organizations deemed as seditious (most notably Kurdish and Islamic) and a threat to political order have been “seriously monitored, prosecuted and suppressed” (Kalaycıoğlu, 2002: 261) by the state. Yet, all these repressive measures fuelled, rather than alleviate, the debates about the two major and unresolved issues of Turkish politics, which are secularism/political Islam and the Kurdish question.

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From the 1990s onward, new actors began to emerge with new claims to identity and politics challenging the hegemony of secularist and ethno-nationalist tenets of Turkish modernization (Keyman and Onis, 2007: 270; Cayir, 2000; Pusch, 2000). Yet, the rise of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims through different channels including civil society was deemed as an existential threat by the Westernized political-military elite to the secular and unitary nature of Turkish state

(Kaliber and Tocci, 2010). The revival of civil society in late 1990s coincided with intensifying public debates on these issues which, in turn, constituted the “major axes of domestic opposition” (Bilgin, 2007: 562) in Turkey. Especially after Turkey was granted candidacy status in 1999, EU-ization as a process of legislative and institutional engineering, and Europeanization as a wider socio-political context began to penetrate into Turkish politics and society more deeply than ever before. The legal harmonization packages and constitutional reforms adopted by the Turkish National Assembly to meet the Copenhagen Criteria opened up new spaces for the actors of civil society in Turkey. The 2001 constitutional reforms, subsequent nine ‘harmonization packages’ passed between 2001 and 2004, and constitutional amendments in May 2004 have all favoured civil society and encouraged CSOs to be actively involved in the public debates.

As various scholars suggested, strengthening of Turkey’s integration with Europe has given a significant momentum to the “development of a more pluralist civil society” (Kirişçi, 2007: 17) throughout Turkey (Göksel and Güneş, 2005; Yerasimos, 2000). According to Sofos, the civil society movement in late 1990’s, showing “signs of activation of social spaces” toward democratization of the domestic polity in Turkey, has legitimized its existence through the discourse of Europeanization. Yet, it is not possible to attribute civil society ‘a positivity’ in an *a priori* manner since it involves not only democratic discourses, but also essentialist identity claims, voiced by religious and ethnic fundamentalism. The sphere of civil society in Turkey also includes CSOs arguing for reconstructing the state-society/individual relations in a communitarian basis” (Keyman and Öniş, 2007: 221).

In the post-1999 period, some Islamic, Kurdish and other groups defending political liberalization have increasingly exploited Europe as a normative-political context to emphasize and criticize the authoritarian aspects of the domestic regime in Turkey. Meanwhile, the so-called post-modern *coup* of 28 February 1997 became a real turning point for the Islamists who had traditionally opposed Turkey’s integration into Europe since the 1960s. A substantial part of Islamic political cadres and business elite have reviewed and amended their positions on Turkey’s integration to Europe associated with democratising reforms. In late 1990s, in tandem with other segments of Turkish society, they began to experience extensive socialization into penetrating European norms, values and institutions. Turkey’s integration with Europe had been seen as a window of opportunity to broaden the political, economic and cultural spaces that had shrunk as a result of the 28 February process (Yankaya, 2009: 5). For the bulk of Islamic CSOs, Europe, instead of being the anti-thesis of Islamic values, transformed into a possibility where some ‘authoritarian’ aspects of Turkish politics, i.e. military supremacy over the civilians, can be challenged (Duran, 2004).

For the bulk of Kurdish groups Europe has always been a normative-political context through which they could challenge illiberal tenets of the domestic regime and push for democratization. For the Kurdish CSOs, which are close to Kurdish nationalist movement, the EU/Europe should maintain its involvement in the Kurdish question due to its historical responsibility and democratic norms and principles. However, it should be noted that they are also strongly criticising the EU, which is for them “adopting the same line with the Turkish state” (Kaliber and Tocci, 2010). Some other Kurdish organizations are mentioning the positive role of EU-led reforms to democratize Turkey and open a space for dialogue between Turkish and Kurdish peoples.

The post-1999 era has also been characterized by the exponential rise of ‘uncivil’ and ultra-nationalist civil society defending a very rigid interpretation of Turkish nationalism, authoritarian state ideology and militant secularism. These groups convey a demonized image of EU/Europe and “ridicule the desire to comply with European norms and regulations as a pitiful gesture of alienating intellectuals and self-interested politicians” (Bora and Canefe, 2003: 144). The CSOs, intellectuals, and political parties defending the recognition of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims, multi-culturalism were securitized as collaborators of Europe and a potential threat to sanctified cultural, national essentials of Turkishhood. The increasing involvement of the EU and other European institutions in Turkish politics was instrumentalized by these groups to create a sense of urgency premised on the idea that the EU has been “concocting a grand and elaborate project of splitting up Turkey” (Tocci and Kaliber, 2008: 12). According to them, Europe, in particular the EU vocalize demands on Turkey, i.e. recognition of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims that could jeopardize its territorial integrity and secular nature (Piccoli, 2005).

One might suggest that against this background, Turkey entered the twenty first century with vibrant ideological, political and economic debates flourishing in every segment of the society (Kasaba and Bozdoğan, 2000: 19). The policies of the ruling, Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) have also instigated increasingly tense debates in Turkish domestic politics since 2002. Some actions and discourses of the subsequent AKP governments questioning the secular tradition of Kemalism (the founding ideology of Turkish republic) and certain judicial reforms and constitutional amendments it undertook further aggravated the polarizations in the society between secular modernists and conservatives. In 2009, regarding the Kurdish issue, the AKP announced the ‘Democratic Initiative’ as a response to rising democratic demands of ethnic Kurds in Turkey. However, the fact that it did not result in any concrete steps caused indignation and disillusionment in the Kurdish community and liberal CSOs. Yet, at least it has contributed to opening up the Kurdish issue to vibrant debates with a major civil society involvement.

Early March 2011, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) announced an end to the unilateral ceasefire while a major operation named as ‘Kurdistan Communities Union’ (KCK) has been and activities. The general elections in June 2011 saw a historical performance for Kurdish candidates who won 36 seats in Turkish parliament. However, six of these deputies remain in jail and one among those has been stripped of his deputy status by the constitutional court. This invoked a boycott of Turkish parliament by the rest of the Kurdish deputies. The new AKP government, which secured an overwhelming majority in the parliament, launched major military operations against the PKK insurgents which caused significant military and civil casualties. Meanwhile, KCK operations expanded to include thousands of political activists, party officials, local government leaders and even academics. That the polarization of the Turkish society and the CSOs has become even more dramatic suggests that the critical threshold has been reached as regards the Kurdish question.

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Against this background, this research is timely in the sense that it critically examines how the rise of political Islam and the Kurdish identity claims have been incorporated in the actions of

the politically mobilized civil society in Turkey. EUROCIV also sheds light on the impact of Turkey's accession process to the EU on the societal debates concerning these two core issues which are bound to remain as two critical items on the domestic political agenda. The two axes of Turkish domestic debates appear as a determining factor not only in reshaping Turkish politics and society, but also in the course of Turkey's relations with the EU and Europe in general. Given the upsurge of emphasis on the role of civil society in the deepening of European integration, EUROCIV is likely to encourage the development of new research avenues, both because it introduces a new theoretical approach to Europeanization studies, and because the empirical data it will produce are politically relevant, timely and usable by academics and policy-makers alike.

As it may be expected, Turkish civil society consists of a wide range of groups and organizations coming from diverging political and ideological backgrounds. The CSOs involved in large public debates in Turkey, articulate and disseminate a variety of discourses of Europe and Europeanization. EUROCIV would clearly reveal which perceptions and representations of EU and Europe are prevalent among the politically mobilized CSOs vocal on the debates about Kurdish question and political Islam/secularism. EUROCIV would also provide invaluable insights about the use of the EU reforms and European norms, values and institutions by the CSOs in order to justify and express their political agenda and deliberative positions as well as to delegitimize or to disempower other CSOs with counter arguments.

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