Europeanization of Public Debates and Civil Society in Turkey: The Kurdish Question

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Turkey’s centuries-long and ambivalent integration with Europe delivered a historical breakthrough when its candidacy status was formally recognised in the European Union’s (EU) Helsinki summit of 1999. In the post-1999 era, Turkey experienced two markedly distinctive periods of EU-ization/Europeanization and de-Europeanization. In the first period, (2001-2005) for the vast majority of Turkish society, Europe in general and the EU in particular turned out to be a new political, normative context, where the demands to democratise and liberalise the domestic regime have been articulated and justified. Turkey’s strengthening integration with Europe in this period coincided with fierce ideological, political and economic public debates flourishing in every segment of the society (Kasaba and Bozdoğan, 2000: 19). These public deliberations have continued in the second period (2007-up to now), which are characterized by the retreat of Europeanization or de-Europeanization.

These debates which have been re-shaping both Turkey’s domestic politics and the trajectory of Turkey’s relations with the EU/Europe have mainly revolved around two major issues: the rise of political Islam and Kurdish identity claims. Civil society organizations (CSOs) from all segments of the political spectrum have been heavily involved in these public deliberations dominating Turkish politics and polarising the society. This has represented a recent phenomenon for Turkey, where the development of an autonomous and plural civil society was deemed as a threat to state-centric and elite-directed (Keyder, 1997) modernization. Yet, the intensifying and deepening impact of EU-ization/Europeanization and the subsequent democratization within the last decade widened the political space available for civil society in Turkey. The legal harmonization packages and constitutional reforms passed by Turkish governments to meet the Copenhagen Criteria accelerating in the years between 2001 and 2004 lifted restrictions against freedom of assembly and opened up new spaces for the actors of Turkish civil society. As another manifestation of deepening impact of Europeanization, Europe in general and the EU in particular have become ‘a common reference point increasingly referred to in domestic debates’ (Diez *et al*., 2005: 2) by political and civil society actors. The CSOs, who are actively involved in large public debates, have formulated their political demands and deliberative positions by making reference to specific European norms, policies and institutions. Particularly the debates on the Kurdish question, political Islam/secularism, and major foreign policy issues, i.e. the Cyprus conflict have been informed by distinct perceptions and representations of Europe: Europe either as a source of democratization and improvement of civil and political rights or as a source of insecurity threatening Turkey’s territorial integrity, and/or the core characteristics of the regime.

This study focuses on CSOs particularly vocal on the Kurdish question and political Islam/secularism debates and on their distinctive perceptions of EU/Europe. It is not the task of this article to engage in detail with the complex definitional debates about the meanings of civil society, which have been summarized effectively elsewhere (Keane, 1998; van Rooy, 1998; Parekh, 2004). Yet, for the purposes of the current contribution, the phenomenon of civil society was defined as ‘the coming together of free individuals of their own volition’ (Yerasimos, 2000: 15) in a national and or global scale with the aim of influencing the socio-political, economic and cultural agenda in accordance with the pre-defined collective objectives. The scholarship on Turkey-EU relations and Turkish civil society often assumes that strengthening of Turkey’s integration with Europe has facilitated the development of pluralist and democratic civil society (Kirişçi, 2007: 17; Göksel and Güneş, 2005; Yerasimos, 2000). However, a more nuanced account of the issue suggests that the intensifying impact of Europe has also opened up new spaces for the ‘undemocratic civil society’ voicing essentialist identity claims, characterised by religious and ethnic fundamentalism.

Whilst Europeanization as the EU-required domestic process of adaptation is already a subject of considerable academic interest, less attention has been paid to analyse varying ways in which European integration is conceptualised and politically used by domestic actors. The literature on Turkish-EU relations tends to explain the characteristics and trajectory of Turkey’s Europeanization via the EU-required domestic reform process (see, for instance, Müftüler-Baç, 2005; Aydın and Keyman, 2004; Hale, 2003) and the struggles between reformist and pro-status quo wing of the political and state elites (Öniş, 2002) in Turkey. The current literature focuses on the ‘ups and downs’ (Diez et. al, 2005: 1) of Turkish-EU relations and it is striking that Turkey’s Europeanization have so far been discussed largely in technical/institutional terms and in relation to the legal and constitutional harmonization processes. It fails to associate the impact of Europe with large-scale public debates, which have reshaped society and politics in Turkey and will continue to do so.

The scholarly attempts on the impact of Europe in Turkey have overwhelmingly been confined to either institutional/policy realms or policy elites. They largely depart from the mainstream definition of the term Europeanization as a linear process of domestic change and adaptation to the EU model. They focus extensively on the legal and constitutional reform processes and do not associate the impact of Europe with large-scale public debates reshaping society and politics in Turkey. 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, it aims at bringing the society back into the analysis.

Investigating how and in what ways the EU-required legal and constitutional reforms on the freedom of association and assembly have broadened the political sphere in which CSOs operate provides insightful data about Europeanization dynamics of civil society in Turkey. Yet, one also must explore how the CSOs react to and make use of the EU/European context to increase their influence and to promote their political agenda. Therefore, to get a better insight to the multi-layered impact of Europeanization, one needs to look at how Europe is politically and discursively constructed and used by domestic societal and political actors.

This study suggests a clear analytical distinction between EU-ization as EU-induced process of legislative, institutional and policy engineering and Europeanization as a wider socio-political and normative context. Such distinction allows us to reveal that Europeanization is more than formal institutional and policy adaptation processes and transformations that it triggers and it goes ‘much deeper than that’ (Diez, *et.* *al*., 2005: 3). This study argues that the impact of Europeanization is heavily conditioned by the extent of and the ways in which Europe is used as a context by domestic actors to promote their political/social projects. Civil society actors often support EU-ization reforms and consolidation of Europeanization as a political-normative context only when they think that this best serves to their causes or deliberative positions. In such cases, they strategically emphasize norms and values which they consider resonate with that of Europe’s. When CSOs do not support Europeanization, they either ignore or make negative references to European norms and values (Kaliber 2010). They try to explain how these roles conflict with the interests of the social groups that they claim to represent. Thus, unlike what the current Europeanization literature often implies, domestic actors are not ‘mediators’, but creators of Europeanization (Kaliber 2013). The reader may expect further explorations on that issue in the subsequent EUROCIV briefs.

Against this background, the article first explores and problematizes how change through Europeanization is conceptualised in the current new institutionalist literature. It then unpacks the distinction it has made between EU-ization and Europeanization and relocates the latter within a broader sociological context. The study finally turns to the case of Turkish civil society and examines different conceptions of Europe and Turkey’s relations with the EU articulated by different CSOs.

Defining the Concept

The concept of Europeanization has become common currency among students of European integration analysing the domestic impact and models of change prompted by European integration on particularly the EU member states. Even though the term Europeanization has been treated as a panacea or ‘default explananda’ by many to model the change of domestic politics in member states by virtue of the EU, its usefulness and explanatory power have been undergoing continuous interrogation (see, among others, Olsen, 2002). In the current scholarship the concept of Europeanization is often defined as a ‘process of change and adaptation which is understood to be a consequence of the development of the European Union’ (Ladrech, 2001: 1) both at the domestic and European levels. Boerzel and Risse (2000:6) understand Europeanization ‘as a process of change at the domestic level in which the member states adapt their processes, policies, and institutions to new practices, norms, rules, and procedures that emanate from the emergence of a European system of governance.’ This argument, presuming the existence of a distinct European system of governance, which is unique to Europe, reiterates itself in Cowles, Caporaso *et al*.’s approach to Europeanization (Radaelli, 2000:2). In the literature the EU is commonly referred to the only body politic in which European-wide norms, rules, institutions are reconstructed and exported to the domestic polities of the member states (see among others Radaelli, 2000:4).

The Europeanization literature is inspired by particularly the rationalist and sociological variants of neo-institutionalism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thereby, it tends to explain domestic change in the member and associate countries ‘via the institutional goodness of fit of domestic and European arrangements’ (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 1999: 4; see also Cowles *et al*., 2001).[[2]](#footnote-2) When there is a misfit between the domestic and EU level institutions and policies, the latter exerts an adaptational pressure for the removal of misfits. The intensity of this pressure is mainly dependant on the extent of mismatch between the domestic and European institutions. ‘The lower the compatibility between European and domestic processes, policies and institutions, the higher the adaptational pressure’ (Boerzel and Risse, 2000: 5). Hence, misfit is often taken as the exclusive factor inducing Europeanization mainly assumed as a matter of technicality realized stage by stage through the import of the EU arrangements into the domestic structure.

The literature, overwhelmingly adopting a ‘top-down perspective’ (Boerzel and Risse, 2000: 1) understands Europeanization as a one-way street through which the member and associate states “download” norms, rules, procedures and directives coming from the EU and implement them in their domestic/national polities. For instance, Checkel (2001, 182) formulates his question as ‘how does the norm get from out there (the European level) and down here (domestic arena) and have possible effects?’ Raising the question in that kind implies a hierarchical relationship between ‘the domestic’ and ‘the European’ in which the former is assigned an inferior position vis-à-vis the latter. Similarly, the literature is strongly inclined to conceive ‘the European-wide norms, principles and institutions’ as established and even fixed identities to be internalised by the member states. However, these norms, and values claimed to be ‘typical of Europe’ are always involved in a process of discursive-political reconstruction both at the European and the domestic levels. For instance, the norms attributed to Europe and particularly to the EU are subject to constant interpretations during the accession negotiations for the full EU membership. European norms ‘do not remain stable during the negotiation process, and in fact are often only constructed, or at least made explicit, in this context’ (Diez *et. al*., 2005: 3). Therefore, a more sophisticated analysis of Europeanization should embrace domestic public debates and deliberations where different notions of Europe, its norms and values are negotiated and politically used by domestic actors.

In order to better comprehend the transformative impact of European integration on societies, I suggest that a clear analytical distinction is needed between EU-ization and Europeanization. In this distinction, EU-ization refers to a more concrete and restricted sphere of alignment with the EU’s body of law and institutions. It is a formal process of adjustment the most radical impacts of which are manifest during the accession negotiations. Alignment with and implementation of the *acquis communitaire* is the *sine qua non* and the yardstick against which to measure achieved level of EU-ization. Europeanization however, rather than being a process, exists as a context embracing all other processes and institutions of European integration as well. It may be understood as a context or situation (Buller and Gamble, 2002) where European norms, policies and institutions are (re)-negotiated and constructed by different European societies and institutions and have an impact on them. Norms and values generating the transformative impact of Europe are always redefined by European societies in their domestic/national and European-level debates. Therefore, Europeanization works out not as a linear process of adaptation, but rather as a normative/political context; a context experienced and mobilized by different social groups in varying degrees and modalities in different historical periods of time. EU-ization is integral part and may be the most important instrument of Europeanization, but not the whole of it.

This study argues that 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 agenda. As Jacquot and Woll (2003:6) propose, ‘political usage is necessary for any impact of the European integration process on national political systems. Europeanization exists as a context to the extent that the European norms, values, institutions are incorporated into the public narratives by domestic actors. Thereby, its transformative impact is not procedural and linear, but is contextual, contested and contingent (Kaliber, 2013).

The demands for major socio-political transformations are justified through the discourse of Europeanization if there exists a strong will to be part of European integration at the elite and society levels (Diez *et al*., 2005). In Turkey, for instance, where state-society relations have displayed semi-authoritarian traits, Europeanization has led to large-scale critical discussions about the nature of domestic regime particularly in 2002-2007 period. It has widened the political space for the actors demanding the erosion of statist and elite-directed characteristic of Turkish modernity in favour of a more pluralist and participatory paradigm. However, the increased impact of Europeanization has also inflamed ‘reactionary nationalist’ and even xenophobic tendencies in tandem with calls for returning to the statist paradigm of modernization. Europeanization has triggered more loud articulations of essentialist claims and securitising discourses where Europe appears as a threat to the status quo and to the fundamental tenets of the domestic order. Therefore, to get a better insight to the multi-layered impact of Europeanization, one needs to look at how Europe is politically and discursively constructed and used by domestic actors to promote their political agenda while disempowering the others.

CSOs often support EU-ization reforms and consolidation of Europeanization as a political-normative context only when they thought that this best serves to their causes or deliberative positions. In such cases, they strategically emphasize norms and values which they consider resonate with that of Europe’s. When CSOs do not support Europeanization, they either ignore or make negative references to European norms and values. They try to explain how these roles conflict with the interests of the social groups that they claim to represent.

Thus, unlike what the relevant literature often implies, domestic actors are not ‘mediators’, but creators of Europeanization. Yet, they are not the only creators of Europeanization either. European level developments (policy making, the scope of integration and Europe-wide debates) shape perceptions of domestic actors and the political structure within which they react to and make use of this context. There is no doubt that how Europeanization is experienced in a society also depends on actions and discourses of European level actors shaping normative, ideational, and institutional structure of Europe-Europeanization. Europeanization manifests itself as a context where various meanings of Europe and being European have emerged, negotiated and mobilised by the domestic and European level actors. Change in such a context occurs ‘not simply because it is imposed from the outside, but also because it interacts with domestic developments on the inside’ (Tocci, 2005).

Emergence of Civil Society As A New Space for Political Mobilization?

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. The *coup d’état*, which denotes a traumatic experience for all politicised sectors of the society, closed all associations, labour unions in tandem with political parties[[3]](#footnote-3) and imprisoned various prominent political leaders. According to Silier, the former director of Turkish History Foundation, the aim was to force all NGOs to re-apply officially to gain a legal status by reviewing their goals and statutes within the context of the legal and political sphere redefined and extremely narrowed by the 1982 Constitution and repressive junta laws. 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.

The 1990s, however, were the decade where the political regime in Turkey came to lose its immunity from ‘the intense penetration of modern globalized artifacts and ideas’ and where the demands to civilianize and liberalize the polity began to be articulated more loudly. Throughout this decade, due to various reasons such as clientelism, economic and financial crises, political corruption, and the devastating Marmara earthquakes of 1999, the social contract between the ‘status quo-oriented middle classes’ and the state was broken. ‘Thenceforth, the drive toward an accountable, transparent and efficient government ruled by law would go forward on a stronger social basis than ever before. EU membership became all the more prized as an aid to this cause; some even saw it as a panacea’ (Özel, 2003: 90). Soon after the Marmara earthquake of 17 August 1999, exposing ‘fissures in the edifice of the Turkish state’ (Kubicek, 2001: 34), there appeared an upsurge of interest in civil society in Turkey.

From the 1990s onwards, new actors began to emerge with new claims to identity and politics challenging secularist and ethno-nationalist tenets of political regime and state-centric nature of Turkish modernization (Keyman and Öniş, 2007: 270). Yet, the rise of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims through different channels including civil society was deemed as an existential threat by the Westernised 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 passed by Turkish governments to meet the Copenhagen Criteria opened up new spaces for the actors of Turkish civil society. 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 them to be actively involved in the debates concerning hitherto untouchable political issues. 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). For instance, 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 legitimised its existence through the discourse of Europeanization.

In the post-1999 period, some Islamic, Kurdish and other groups defending political liberalization have increasingly exploited Europe as a normative-political context to emphasise and criticise 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. This military intervention, also coined as 28 February process, aimed to put an end to the increasing influence of Islamic groups in political, economic, and cultural spheres. This forced at least a substantial part of Islamic political cadres and business elite to review and amend 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 ‘undemocratic’ and ‘authoritarian’ aspects of Turkish politics, i.e. military supremacy over the civilians, can be challenged toward a more ‘participatory, active and direct democracy’ (Duran, 2004).

The late 1990s also witnessed the rise of staunchly secular and nationalist civil society groups such as Ataturkist Thought Association considered as a kind of antidote to neutralise the anti-systemic effects of particularly some Islamic and Kurdish CSOs (Açıkel, 2005). The increasing involvement of the EU and other European institutions in Turkish politics was instrumentalised 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 vocalise demands on Turkey, i.e. recognition of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims that could jeopardise its territorial integrity and secular nature (Piccoli, 2005). The post-1999 era has also been characterised 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 demonised 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 securitised as collaborators of Europe and a potential threat to sanctified cultural, national essentials of Turkishhood. These organizations which do not avoid the use of violence or threat of violence against the so-called enemies of Turkish nationalism, i.e. liberal or Kurdish intellectuals, leftist groups, deny the existence of any distinct identity and culture other than Turkish one in the country. As suggested before to better understand the dynamics of Europeanization in Turkish civil society, one needs to explore different conceptions of Europe and the EU articulated by different CSOs. The subsequent section of the study is dedicated to this aim.

Different Conceptions of The EU and Europe

As it may be expected Turkish civil society consists of a wide range of groups and organizations coming from diverging political and ideological backgrounds. To clearly reveal which perceptions and representations of EU and Europe are prevalent among the politically mobilised CSOs vocal on the debates about Kurdish question and political Islam, I subjected them to a rough categorization. The CSOs have been classified mainly according to their political stance and the positions which they held throughout these public debates, i.e. Turkish nationalist-Kemalist CSOs; leftist and human rights organizations; liberal and moderate Islamic CSOs; pro-nationalist Kurdish CSOs closely tied to the Kurdish movement. In parallel with the increasing penetration of European impact on Turkish politics, the civil society actors have been increasingly making references to Europe as a source of opportunities or insecurities. The ways in which they conceptualise Europe, its norms and values have become instrumental to justify and express their political agenda and deliberative positions as well as to delegitimise or to disempower the others.

An initial research shows that we can talk about a variety of discourses of Europe articulated and disseminated by the CSOs involved in important public debates in Turkey. Islamists traditionally opposed Turkey’s integration into the EC/EU since the 1970s ‘seeing this as the last stage of the assimilation of Turkey’s Islamic identity into the Christian West’ (Duran, 2004: 127). In late 1990s, they began to experience extensive socialization into penetrating European norms, values and institutions, which resulted in a shift in their arguments from Islamization to democratization of the Turkish republic. For the bulk of Islamic intellectuals and CSOs, Europe, instead of being the anti-thesis of Islamic values, transformed into a possibility where ‘undemocratic’ and state-centric nature of Turkish politics, i.e. military supremacy over the civilians, can be challenged toward a more ‘participatory, active and direct democracy’ (Duran, 2004). The bulk of Islamic civil society actors as well as liberal organizations who are against the narrowly defined notion of secularism tend to associate Europe with liberal democracy, pluralism and individual rights and freedoms. For them, European integration is a means for Turkey to be a regional and global actor, and to integrate with globalising world politics and economy. Thus, Europe also symbolizes transition from state-led modernization to a new paradigm characterised by economic and political liberalization.

For some of Kurdish civil society groups, which are close to Kurdish nationalist movement, i.e. the Peace Mothers Association (Barış Anneleri), or the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre (Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi) 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 strongly criticising the EU, which is for them ‘adopting the same line with the Turkish state’[[4]](#footnote-4). Yet, some other Kurdish organizations such as Solidarity and Culture Association of Immigrants (Göç-Der), Aid and Solidarity Association for the Relatives of Disappeared People (Yakay-Der) and the Human Rights Association (IHD) are often optimistic about Turkey’s integration into the EU, mentioning the positive role of EU-led reforms to democratise Turkey and open a space for dialogue between Turkish and Kurdish peoples, a view shared by liberal and social democrat CSOs, i.e. Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV). Meanwhile, KAMER and some other Kurdish women organizations who are trying to de-couple themselves from the Kurdish movement are particularly positive about the European impact on Turkey in general and on Kurdish question in particular (Kaliber and Tocci 2010). To them and to some other CSOs, intensifying impact of European norms, values and institutions in Turkey’s domestic politics could contribute both ‘to the peaceful solution of the Kurdish problem and problems related to secularism’[[5]](#footnote-5).

The CSOs working in the field of human rights converge on the assumption that there is a some sort of a correlation between deterioration of Turkey EU-Europe relations and decrease in human rights standards and a sharp increase in human rights violations in Turkey. According to them whenever EU induced reform process (EU-ization) loses its momentum and Europeanization as a context inspires overwhelmingly negative things for the bulk of Turkish society, their effectiveness and ability to influence is crippled to a certain extent[[6]](#footnote-6).

Various CSOs with a liberal view converge that EU-required legal and constitutional reforms have widened the political space in favour of the civil society. Yet, the belief that Turkey is not treated fairly and respectfully by the EU is very widespread across all CSOs coming from different social and political backgrounds. This not only cripples the EU’s credibility and capacity to influence (Kaliber and Tocci, 2010), but also renders the norms, values attributed to Europe disputable. It seems that the trajectory of Turkish EU and Turkish Europe relations is particularly important for the CSOs who have strong international links, i.e. Amnesty International, Open Society Institute (OSI) and Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly (HCA). All our interviewees from these CSOs mentioned that the rising of EU scepticism and the strengthening of reactionary approaches toward European institutions and sometimes individual European countries discredit these organisations and their activities. Kurdish liberal and the bulk of Islamic CSOs tend to emphasise the contradictions between authoritarian Turkish modernization and the ‘more pluralist, participatory and tolerant’ European paradigm. Yet, for Kemalist and nationalist civil society, Turkey, which is under constant threat of Islamic reactionism and Kurdish separatism, has to keep her own unique balance between democratization and modernization if it is to remain as a modern/Western nation which will sooner or later achieve to be part of the EU.

Civil society activists cherish their hopes about the peace process initiated by the incumbent government in Turkey. They deem the role of the European Union in this process as constructive yet feeble. The focus of the interviewed activists vocal in the Kurdish question has mostly been placed on the actions and discourses of the domestic actors in the country. What distinguishes the nationalist CSOs is that they do not avoid criticising the role of the EU in the ongoing process. They are also convinced that there is still some foreign intervention in the process also named as the Kurdish opening. Overall, the peace process dominates the agenda of the Kurdish civil society organizations and is likely to continue in the short and medium terms.

The activists that I interviewed from both moderate Turkish establishment and critical anti-establishment CSOs, though to varying degrees, adopt a similar sceptical and critical line towards the European Union. While also acknowledging the positive aspects of EU-led democratizing reforms in Turkey, they are often converging on the notion that the EU should have put more effort to support the current peace initiative. Yet, they have different views on the decrees and modalities of the support expected from the EU. Some pro-Kurdish CSOs did not hide their disillusionment with the EU. For instance, the activists from the Peace Mothers Association (Barış Anneleri), or the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre (Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi) stated that 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 strongly criticising the EU, which is for them ‘adopting the same line with the Turkish state’.

Yet, some other Kurdish organizations such as Solidarity and Culture Association of Immigrants (Göç-Der), Aid and Solidarity Association for the Relatives of Disappeared People (Yakay-Der) and the Human Rights Association (IHD) are more optimistic about Turkey’s EU integration and the on the positive impacts of this integration on the Kurdish question. These organizations did not avoid mentioning the positive role of EU-led reforms to democratize Turkey and open a space for dialogue between Turkish and Kurdish peoples and civil societal actors. As I have observed in my previous research, KAMER and some other Kurdish women organizations are particularly positive about the European impact on Turkey in general and on Kurdish question in particular. To them and to some other CSOs, intensifying impact of European norms, values and institutions in Turkey’s domestic politics could contribute both ‘to the peaceful solution of the Kurdish problem and problems related to secularism’.

They converge on the assumption that EU-required legal and constitutional amendments have widened the political space in favour of civil society and the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question. Yet alongside the typical problem of implementing these reforms, some gains from this reform process were even lost through some amendments such as in the case of the Anti-Terrorism Law (2006) and the Law on the Duties and Authority of the Police (2007). But, particular emphasis is placed on ‘Kurdistan Communities Union’ (KCK) operations and cases. In these cases thousands of Kurdish political activists and leaders as well as journalists accused of supporting terrorist activities were imprisoned.

On the other hand, nationalist Turkish CSOs tend to define the EU’s involvement and policy in the Kurdish question as ‘very selective which is characterized by double standards and hypocrisy. The EU-demanded reforms are all too often interpreted within an inter-state framework and represented as ‘interference in Turkey’s domestic affairs’.

For instance, for staunchly secular Kemalist CSOs, such as Ataturkist Thought Association (ADD), the Organization for Support of Contemporary Life (ÇYDD), the EU membership is the culmination of Turkey’s historical march toward the contemporary civilization and modernization set off by the Kemalist revolutions in early Republican era. Yet, they often also mention that European institutions, in particular the EU vocalise demands on Turkey i.e. recognition of Kurdish and Islamic identity claims that could jeopardise its territorial integrity and secularist characteristics, which they see as an existential threat to the country’s territorial integrity and secular nature. Nationalist CSOs tend to perceive the European integration as a new form of imperialism serving the interests of economically and politically powerful European countries. They often conceive Europe as a mono-bloc entity and they do not tend to differentiate between the EU and other institutions of European integration, i.e. Council of Europe, European Court of Human Rights. Similarly, the nationalist CSOs working for the rights of martyrs’ families such as Ankara Association of Martyrs’ Families and Istanbul Solidarity and Aid Association for Martyrs’ Mothers adopt a very critical and sceptical line particularly about the EU’s involvement in the Kurdish question. They do not attach two much importance to European norms and values, since for them, these only serve to mask the European country’s real ambitions and objectives. The EU officials are also accused of giving ‘open check and unjustified support’ to AKP governments which they held responsible from the current democratic and political impasses in Turkey.

Various CSOs with a liberal view converge that EU-required legal and constitutional reforms have widened the political space in favour of the civil society. Yet, the belief that Turkey is not treated fairly and respectfully by the EU is very widespread across all CSOs coming from different social and political backgrounds. It seems that the trajectory of Turkish EU and Turkish Europe relations is particularly important for the CSOs who have strong international links, i.e. Amnesty International, Open Society Institute (OSI) and Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly (HCA). All interviewees from these CSOs mentioned that the rising of EU scepticism and the strengthening of reactionary approaches toward European institutions and sometimes individual European countries discredit these organizations and their activities.

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1. For a few key texts, see March and Olsen, 1989; Mény *et al*., 1996; Di Maggio and Powell, 1991; Hall and Taylor, 1996; see also Featherstone and Kazamias 2001: 7ff. for a comparison of three variants of institutionalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For some problems of the ‘goodness of fit school’, see Radaelli, 2003: 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with Orhan Silier, director of Turkish History Foundation, Istanbul, October 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview with Hüseyin Ilden, Mesopotamia Cultural Centre, Istanbul. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Interview with Erol Kızılelma, Social Democracy Foundation, Istanbul. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interviews with Eren Keskin, Hüsnü Öndül, IHD; Hürriyet Şener, TIHV; and Feray Salman, IHOP, Istanbul and Ankara. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)