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Twitter as a Platform to Reflect Eurosceptic Views in Turkey

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ÇİĞDEM ÜSTÜN, MAR 5 2017

In 2016, one of the main discussion topics in Turkey-EU relations has been the EU-Turkey Statement on 18 March 2016, known as the migrant or refugee deal which foresaw prevention of illegal immigration as well as visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The acceleration of talks between Turkish and European leaders gave false hope to EU supporters and contrary to expectations the deal did not improve relations. After the deal was announced, it became the main story both at the conventional and social media outlets in Turkey. Since 2011, usage of Twitter has increased steadily and has become the second social media outlet used after Facebook in Turkey. In spite of the blockage against Twitter or slowing down of the services during social events, it continued to be used widely through VPNs. Twitter became a very popular arena especially for urban Turkey to express views on topical issues such as the migrant deal. Before and after the deal not only Eurosceptic attitudes but also Eurorejectionist ones became visible. The analysis demonstrates that the political discourse is feeding these attitudes and reflected in the social media messages.

This paper examines the period between May 2015 and June 2016. The dates were chosen to include the period when migrant flow was high (summer of 2015), as well as the negotiations between Turkey and the EU that were initiated to prevent this flow. Although the migrant deal was agreed in March 2016, it foresaw possible visa free travel for Turkish citizens by the end of June 2016. Thus, the analysis includes tweets after the deal was agreed. During this time frame, on 2 June 2016, the German parliament overwhelmingly voted to recognize the 1915 events – death of Armenians during the World War I – as “genocide”, which escalated tensions between Germany and Turkey. On the date of this vote in Germany, the hashtag “#sınırların” [#opentheborders] was trending. Although this decision of the German parliament and the resulting tension were not directly related to the migrant deal, tweets suggested that as a response to Germany, the migrant deal should be annulled and the migrants should be sent to Europe. In this analysis, only those Turkish tweets containing the words migration, Europe, refugee, European Union, EU, visa, deal, agreement, and visa free are discussed. In search for relevant tweets, those with and without Turkish characters have been taken into account, and both are included in the analysis.

Euroscepticism in Turkey

Anti-western views, which include not only anti-Americanism but also Eurosceptic attitudes, have been part of Turkish public opinion, especially after Turkey was granted the candidate status in 1999 Helsinki Summit. Euroscepticism literature provides a wide range of definitions, i.e. opposition to or scepticism towards the EU or Europe, which may be directed towards the Union in its entirety or towards particular policy areas or developments. (Sorensen, 2006) For the purposes of this article, two main definitions are utilized. Kopecky and Mudde (2002) define Europhobe pessimists as Eurorejects who oppose the idea of European integration and the EU. However, this definition has been mainly used for the categorization of political parties of the member states. Regarding candidate countries, EU scepticism has been defined as “reluctance of candidates to becoming a member because of unfavorable accession criteria and/or reaction against the EU’s own reluctance towards the candidate country’s membership.” (Gülmez, 2013)

In Turkey, Eurosceptic discourse harbors both Eurorejectionist and EU sceptic views and has been debated along the

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lines of national interest. Public opinion research demonstrates that nationalism has been an important factor and concerns over Turkey's national interests and national security are affecting Euroscepticism in the country (Çarkoğlu, 2003). Some of the opposition concentrates on negative discrimination by the EU towards Turkey, EU's minimal financial support to Turkey as opposed to other candidate countries, national values and territorial integrity. Regarding territorial integrity, EU requirements were compared to the Sevres Treaty (Çiçek, 2012).; also called the Sevres Syndrome, it is defined as the fear of Turkish territory being broken up by Western imperialist aims (Schmid, 2015). The Sevres phenomenon had been forgotten, but with an increase in the number of terrorist activities along with references to links between terrorist organizations and their support from European countries, the Sevres Treaty has come back into parlance as one of the core elements of Eurosceptic rhetoric. For example, JDP Parliamentarian Maviş said that "some countries in the EU are acting against us in the fight against terror, they are opening the corridors of their parliaments to terrorist organizations and they are clearly showing that they want to impose the second Sevres to Turkey." The trust issue (Eylemer & Taş, 2007) in Turkey-EU relations, together with a strong Turkish national identity, prevents individuals from supporting Turkey's membership to the Union. (Kentmen, 2008)

Migrant Deal

The EU-Turkey Statement on 18 March 2016, a.k.a the migrant or refugee deal expected the return of all irregular migrants to Turkey from 20 March 2016 onwards includes: resettlement of a Syrian in exchange for a Syrian returning to Turkey, measures to prevent illegal migration, a voluntary humanitarian admission scheme, lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens by, at the latest, the end of June 2016 if all (72 in total) benchmarks are met, 3 billion EUR for funding projects for refugees, negotiation on the Customs Union, opening of Chapter 33 on financial and budgetary provisions as part of the accession process, and a joint endeavor to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria.

Although in both media and academic circles in Turkey the deal was perceived as a positive and important political step since it reinitiated the talks, negative critiques were abundant because it disregarded the EU's own principles and it has been a tool for the EU in implementing its short-term policies and has lacked any long-term perspective on strengthening ties with Turkey (Şenyuva & Üstün, 2016). Since the readmission agreement was signed in 2013, visa free travel has been a hot topic. However, the benchmarks needed to be met were scarcely analyzed. It has been observed that the benchmarks were presented as technical steps in general, such as changes in passports and ID documentation. For example, Habertürk, one of the most read mainstream newspapers, ran a story entitled "How will the visa free travel to European countries be realized?", concentrating on the changes foreseen regarding passports, while Karar wrote about the changes in biometric data and new passports in its story "Visa free travel in 9 questions – EU advised visa exemption, what will happen next?". It was only possible to see references to requirements regarding the legislation on terrorism either in foreign or opposition media outlets. In his article in Al Monitor, Kadri Gürsel argued that a crisis between EU and Turkey is just a matter of fact if the conditions do not change i.e. anti-terrorism legislation.

The benchmark regarding the legal framework on organized crime and terrorism created especially fierce debate. The 2016 Regular Report on Turkey highlighted the importance of alignment of anti-terror law with the *acquis* and read "Both the criminal and anti-terror legislation should be aligned with ECtHR case-law, without reducing the capacity of Turkey to fight terrorism. The proportionality principle must be observed in practice." (p. 6) At the governmental level it was stated that it would be impossible for Turkey to change the anti-terrorism law due to the attempted military coup in July 2016 along with other terrorist threats.

During all these debates, Eurosceptic attitudes at the public level increased. According to Standard Eurobarometer 2016, support for future membership of the EU decreased to 39%. In December 2016, according to the Kadir Has Turkish Social and Political Trends Survey, the support for the EU had decreased to 45,7% as opposed to 65,1% in 2015. More importantly, belief in the possibility of Turkey becoming a member decreased extensively, to 27% from 38,3%.

Social Media: Twitter

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The same trend is observed among social media users, in this case Twitter. When tweets posted between 01 May 2015 and 30 June 2016 containing words related to the migration crisis and agreement on stopping the migrant flow are examined, one of the main issues arising is the lack of trust in the relations. As public opinion polls show, the tweets also demonstrate that there is a disbelief in the possibility of Turkey becoming a member of the EU while they correspondingly show the tendency to believe that the EU is creating new rules to prevent visa liberalization between the EU and Turkey. One tweet says “We are going to take back the ones who migrated to Europe and in return they are going to let Turkish citizens travel without visa... if you believe?” (@Chequevera06, 2016). Another states “You cannot see visa free Europe even in your dreams. Who are they fooling? Would they lift the visas to a country that they see as a refugee camp!”. (@AtillaTasNet, 2016) The lack of information on the requirements of the readmission agreement and the migrant deal reinforces the mistrust towards the EU and creates an image of the EU as a referee changing the rules while the game is on.

Secondly, imperialism is one of the main keywords which pops up, as the Eurosceptic literature suggests. European countries are perceived as the main source of the conflicts and wars in the region, since Europe has been exploiting it for centuries. References to colonialism are widely observed. Examples such as “Europe’s end will be because of the Muslims immigrating as a result of the wars initiated by Europe in the region” (@NetMuhalefet, 2016), “Right on! Europe’s slow collapse will be the result of migrant flow to Europe as a result of the wars started by them” (@NurMaiSu, 2016), “Europe sticks like a leech to Muslim world” (@Aczozturk, 2016), “They killed people, supported the murderers, and they expect Turkey to look after the migrants. No way!” (@plensip, 2016) demonstrate the way history shapes the people’s views on EU policies in the region. Here, it should be cited that although the political actor is the EU, as the entity that Turkey agreed with on the migrant deal, there is a tendency to address remarks to individual European countries rather than the EU.

One of the aspects of Euroscepticism reflected in Turkish tweets has been the belief in a hidden European agenda against Turkey. Tweets such as “There were lots of games played on Turkey. It looks like migrant politics is on the way to distress Turkey even Europe is secretive about it” (@salihekremlara, 2016), “EU plays games in Syria” (@zaferural2, 2015) suggest that neither the improvement of migrants’ living conditions nor protection of the people are perceived as the real aims of EU policies. Rather, the EU policies towards the region and migrants are mainly perceived as tools to hide their main agendas. One can deduce that the colonialist past of Europe, taken together with the historical legacies of the Sevres Treaty and Independence War fought against the European countries, continue to shape the opinion of social media users.

With reference to the past, they suggest that minorities in the region, such as Kurds, are manipulated by Europeans and that the Europeans want to change the demographic structure of the region, as they did in the past in favor of the Kurds. In relation to the Kurdish issue, Europeans are accused of providing weapons to the terrorist groups in the region and not supporting Turkey in its fight against terrorism, i.e. “All these years we have been fighting against terror alone. Now terror and migration hit Europe!” (@kosovali_erdal, 2015) One of the hashtags used was #ifyouplantteroryougetstorm [#terörEkenFırtınaBiçer] includes tweets suggesting that Europe is the one selling the weapons to the region, which escalates the terrorism in return.

Increase in the number of migrants from Syria to European countries, the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, closing of the borders by the European countries in the Balkans and conditions that migrants had to face on the way to EU countries, together with the details of the migrant deal, have raised eyebrows at the international level. The tweets’ characterization of the migrant deal as an immoral refugee bargain corresponds to the international criticism of the deal. Artists, academics and human rights activists also called the deal shameful, a moral disaster and immoral. Bridget Anderson says that the deal treats “people as if they are commensurable and tradable, which is morally bankrupt”. One of the tweets insinuating the deal is immoral reads: “Most European countries are ignoring moral values when it comes to the problem of migration. How can they talk about human rights?” (@omerosmanoglu, 2016)

Tweets suggest that although the EU has been vocal in promotion of human rights, protection of the people, and peace, the migrant flow demonstrated that the Europeans themselves do not respect any of these values. Some examples include; “Tragedy of refugees in Europe! Europeans torture the refugees to stop the migrant

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flow" (@bilalbayram07, 2016), "Europe is crying over so called Armenian genocide, Syrians you kill on the migrant routes are not human?" (@aktas_sinan, 2016), "People do not go to Europe because of their humanity, they are just looking for peace but Europeans begrudge this peace!" (@SeyyahOnur, 2016)

Tweets written under the #sınırlarıAçın [#opentheborders] on 02 June 2016 demonstrate nationalist views in addition to Eurosceptic ones. As most of the tweets give references to the Nazi era and Jewish genocide, opening borders and "sending" the migrants to European countries is seen as a way to show the power of Turkey. The tweets call the Europeans crusaders, hypocrites attacking Turkey because they cannot digest Turkey's rise in the world. The Eurorejectionist tendencies are clearly visible under this hashtag, since the membership to the EU is denied, and in rare occasions Islamic integration models are preferred rather than European integration. Examples include tweets such as "We do not want the EU. Open the borders, they deal [with the migrants]" (@feritgurkan, 2016), "I am against Turkey's membership to the EU" (@SahinFazi, 2016). "European Union Out, Islamic Union In" (@2023istanbul, 2016).

Conclusion

It was assumed (Kale, 2016) that the migrant deal had the potential to initiate talks and accelerate negotiations between Turkey and the EU since it has been the most serious step to revive the talks and cooperate on various platforms including the fight against terrorism, security cooperation, and strengthening border controls. However, we see that the migrant deal did not create a positive public opinion, neither among the nationalists nor the liberal EU supporters. The dismissal of the values of the EU for short term gains through the migrant deal and lack of support for democratic practices in the country raised eyebrows among the EU supporters, while rising nationalism at the global level, increasing numbers of migrants living in the cities, together with growing unemployment rates and economic difficulties in Turkey in addition to the rising security threats — i.e. suicide bombers, terrorist activities of ISIS, and the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016 — all increased anti-western views in general, but Eurorejectionist views in particular. Political discourse utilized by government officials is directly reflected in the social media messages. The long duration of the negotiations, negative political discourse in the EU countries towards Turkey, and the lack of information on and detailed analysis of the agreements with the EU foster EU scepticism and mistrust towards the EU, while increasing the numbers of nationalist tweets such as "Only a Turk can be a friend of a Turk."

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