Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey

Summary of Key Findings

"Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey" is conducted by Istanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research with the support of Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation - a project of the German Marshall Fund, completed with field studies in November-December 2017 and findings are presented on February 5th, 2018 in Istanbul Bilgi University **santral**istanbul Campus.

This research study is a follow up of the field study conducted in 2015 by Assoc. Prof. Emre Erdoğan who is a faculty member of Istanbul Bilgi University International Relations Department. The research study began in June 2017 and completed with field research. Field research is conducted through face to face interviews with 2004 people representing the 18+ population of Turkey from 16 cities. Also, polarization in Turkish society is assessed qualitatively with four focus groups. Focus groups were conducted with the participation of supporters of four different political parties -AKP, CHP, HDP and MHP. Findings of the research study can be summarized as follows:

Political Party Supporters and Exclusion

When participants of the research study are asked about the political party they feel most close, AKP is the most indicated party with 43.4 percent and CHP comes the second with 21.5 percent while MHP is the third with 11.5 percent. The ratio of those who feel close to HDP is 9 percent while 5.5 percent of participants indicate that they feel close to IYI Party which has just established at the time research was conducted.

When participants are asked about the political party they feel most distant, 53 percent of them indicated HDP while 24 percent answered as AKP. 13 percent of participants answered as CHP and the ones who answered as MHP is 8 percent of participants. When compared with the results of the research study in 2015, the percentage of those who state political parties that are seen as 'the most distant' have not been changed.

When it is examined on the basis of party supporters, all political party supporters consider HDP supporters as "the most distant". 65 percent of AKP supporters, 80 percent of MHP supporters and 63 percent of IYI Party supporters define HDP supporters as "the most distant". In addition, 62 percent of CHP supporters, 36 percent of HDP supporters and 27 percent of IYI Party

supporters indicate that they feel AKP supporters as the most distant. Another group to which HDP supporters feel themselves distant is MHP supporters.

One of the important indicators of political polarization is the social distance political party supporters feel towards "the most distant" political party supporters. This term identified by Bogardus (1925) aims to measure social segregation derived from individuals' tendency to be together with other individuals. Results of the research study show that 79 percent of participants do not want their daughters to get married with one of the supporters of the political party they feel most distant. While 74 percent of participants indicated that they do not want to do business with one of the supporters of that political party, percentage of those who do not want as neighbors is around 70 percent. 68 percent said that they do not want their children to play with children of that political party's supporters. Based on the results, it can be said that there is significant social distance between political party supporters in Turkey.

Another issue which shows the emotional dimension of polarization comes in sight when political party supporters compare themselves with other political party supporters; they consider themselves as morally superior. Feeling of moral superiority is a mechanism which makes it easier for individuals to exclude supporters of 'others', in this example 'most distant political party supporters'. When a group of attributions/adjectives are listed, it is observed that participants tend to choose all positive attributions/adjectives for the supporters of the party they support: Working for the benefit of the country (92 percent), Patriotic (91 percent), Honorable (90 percent), Smart (84 percent), Generous (83 percent) and Open-minded (83 percent). On the contrary, all other negative attributions/adjectives are considered to be relevant for the political party seen as the most distant by political party supporters: Posing threat to the country (86 percent), Selfishness (84 percent), Hypocrite (84 percent), Cruel (83 percent), Arrogant (80 percent) and Bigoted (72 percent). For both negative and positive attributions/adjectives, it was possible to answer "relevant for both" or "not relevant for either" and the fact that these options are not preferred may also be seen as an indicator of polarization. At this point, it is necessary to state that there is limited difference between different party alignments regarding Moral Superiority.

Political intolerance for individuals, limiting political rights of political party supporters who are most distant to them, is another dimension of polarization. Considering the most distant party supporter as different from oneself, social distance and most importantly seeing oneself as morally superior, almost automatically result in the acceptance of restricting the political rights. 47 percent of the respondents find it unfavorable for the supporters of the political party they feel most distant to make demonstration. 44 percent of them are not approving for that group to organize a meeting while 43 percent of participants are not approving for that group to make a press release. The ratio of those who approves that phones of members of the other group may be listened is 50 percent.

Political Parties, Identities, Group Superiority, and Exclusion

One of the most important reasons for the large extent of polarization between political party supporters is the overlap between political parties and political identities. Political identities, "place of oneself on earth", are shaped by shared victimhood and glorification, common preferences and characteristics and these identities are also defined in relation to who the 'other' is. Political polarization occurs more easily when political party identification overlaps with political identities. Political party choices are then no longer temporary and changeable; these preferences, defined by political identities may contribute to distance oneself from the other party supporters.

When participants are shown a list of group identities and asked how often they use the word "us/we" for each, the most indicated answer is "Turkish" with 76 percent. In the second rank there are Religious People and Educated People with 56 percent. Among frequently indicated identities there are Ataturkists (50 percent), Nationalists (44 percent), Modern People (43 percent) and Seculars (41 percent). Minorities (14 percent), Gezi Protest Supporters (20 percent) and Alawites (25 percent) are found to be comparatively less frequently indicated identities.

When participants are asked about the closest identity among identities they use to define themselves, "Turkish" identity is ranked as the first with 30 percent; followed by Ataturkists (17 percent) and Religious People (13 percent). Other identities are stated less.

Correspondence Map demonstrates the clustered relation between political party alignments and identities. CHP supporters mostly indicate Alawite, Ataturkist and Seculars identities and HDP supporters mostly indicate Minorities, Gezi Protest Supporters and Kurdish identities. For AKP supporters Religious People and Conservatives identities and for MHP supporters *Ülkücü*, Nationalists and Conservatives identities come to the forefront. IYI Party supporters are positioned closer to Educated People and Modern People identities. This strongly clustered relation between political parties and identities provides an important insight for understanding the existing polarization.

An important feature of political identities is the feeling of group superiority over other identities. The questions asked in this study show that there are significant differences between different party alignments about group superiority. Generally, it can be said that AKP and MHP supporters have a higher perception of group superiority compared with other party alignments. On the contrary, HDP and CHP supporters give the least number of positive answers to these questions.

Group exclusion also plays a role in identity formation. Among participants it is observed that HDP supporters are the most excluded group from their own perception. Supporters of this political party indicated that they are treated worse in police stations (43 percent), government offices (35 percent) and job applications (31 percent). Among CHP supporters 27 percent of participants think that they are treated worse in police stations, while this ratio is 28 percent for

government offices and 25 percent for job applications. The lowest level of exclusion ratios are observed among AKP and MHP supporters. Supporters of these parties indicate that they are not treated worse in the places stated above.

Echo Chambers and Spiral of Silence

One of the most important triggers of political polarization is to what extent individuals encounter with different ideas. If individuals live in places where they can only discuss their political opinions with people who have similar opinions, do not encounter with different ideas, then as a result, they do not have the chance to change their opinions. "Echo Chambers" indicates to the illusion that people tend to think that there are only similar opinions to their opinions as a result of living and encountering with people who share their opinions in their families, conventional media and social media. People who do not encounter different opinions assume that people who do not share similar opinions with themselves are minority, and they react to these people who are unable to comprehend the "facts". The second related concept that needs to be mentioned is "Spiral of Silence". Spiral of silence hypothesis is developed by Noelle-Neumann who indicates that individuals abstain from sharing their opinions when they think that their political opinions are minority.

17 percent of participants of the research indicated that they 'always' agree with their immediate surroundings and 55 percent indicated they 'mostly' agree with their immediate surroundings. Only 15 percent of the participants said that they disagree with their immediate surroundings about political issues. These results show that for most of the cases people's political opinions are shared by their surroundings.

Participants are asked whether they would participate in a discussion on 'state of emergency' to understand how relevant "Spiral of Silence" is in the context of Turkey. While 64 percent of the participants stated they would engage in such a discussion during a dinner with their families, the percentage of those who said they would discuss such topics during a dinner with their friends has fallen to 57 percent. The ratio of those who would discuss this topic in a neighborhood meeting is 45 percent, whereas only one third of the respondents are eager to discuss it at their workplaces or schools. Those who stated they would discuss this topic on Facebook or Twitter is only 25 percent of the participants. These numbers indicate that people hesitate to discuss a critical issue even among family and friends, let aside public spaces. Likewise, Twitter and Facebook, which are shown as alternative public spaces, do not constitute a real alternative.

Furthermore, when we asked participants whether they hold similar opinions on the current 'state of emergency' with people around them, we observed that majority of the participants share the same opinion with their close circles (spouse, brother/sister, close friend or family). The percentage of those who hold the same opinion as their colleagues or schoolmates is 63

percent, while 59 percent of the participants agree with their neighbors on this issue. Similarly, most people are friends with those who think alike on Facebook (57 percent) and Twitter (53 percent). These numbers imply that Turkish society is quite homophilic, which means they tend to maintain relationships with people who are like themselves.

Polarization in Conventional and Social Media

Polarization in media is both a reason and a result of political polarization. In this process, individuals follow the media sources that reflect their political views. Thus, they have the chance to interpret news that are framed in their own worldview. Polarization in media can reach to a point that supporters of different parties are surrounded by different perceptions of the world and they have difficulty in understanding others' way of thinking. The research study shows how widespread this phenomenon is in Turkey.

Regarding news channels on TV, which is the most common source of political information, supporters of CHP and IYI Party watch CNN Türk, FOX TV and Halk TV more than they watch other channels, and more than other party supporters watch these channels. AKP supporters profoundly watch A Haber, ATV, TRT and Kanal 24, whereas MHP supporters prefer Habertürk and Star. Based on this picture, we can say there is a sharp divergence between party supporters in terms of their preferences for following TV news channels.

Similarly, newspaper preferences are also related to political party alignments. Supporters of AKP and MHP prefer Milliyet, Sabah, Yeni Şafak and Karar as a source of political information, while CHP supporters follow Sözcü and Cumhuriyet, and IYI Party supporters follow Hürriyet and Yeniçağ.

The polarization in the choices for media also influences individuals' perception of impartiality of TV channels and newspapers. According to AKP supporters, Sabah, A Haber and TRT1 are more impartial news sources compared to others. Similarly, MHP supporters think Yeniçağ and Sabah are the most impartial sources. On the other hand, CHP and IYI Party supporters state that Fox TV, Halk TV and Sözcü are impartial. This picture clearly shows that the polarization in the media reflects the polarization in the society.

Our research shows that social media is not a cure to this polarization. One third of Internet users have a Twitter account. Only 15 percent of them frequently share political opinions on Twitter, and almost half of the users never share their political opinions on Twitter. Furthermore, 60 percent of Twitter users say they follow people who hold similar opinions. For Facebook users, who constitute 87 percent of all Internet users, the situation is no different. The percentage of those who share their political opinions on Facebook is 7 percent, whereas 56 percent of the users never share their political opinions through this channel. Two third of Facebook users state that their Facebook friends have similar political opinions with them. These numbers indicate

that echo chambers and homophily, as we have previously explained, are serious problems for these two channels of social media, Facebook and Twitter, too.

Political Participation, Trust in Institutions, Appreciation of Leaders, and Collective Memory

Political culture constructs people's normative views regarding the political system in their country and can be observed in factors such as political participation and trust in institutions and leaders.

First, considering political participation dimension, the results, in line with the previous studies, show that political participation in Turkey is low. Furthermore, two symbolic events clearly demonstrate the political polarization in the society.

The percentage of those who stated that they participated in Gezi Protests is around 5 percent in the overall public. This ratio rises to 12 percent among HDP and CHP voters, while no one among AKP, MHP and IYI Party voters attended these protests.

When the questions are asked for the protests that took place in the aftermath of 15 July Coup Attempt, we see the participation of different party supporters. The percentage of those who attended these protests among the general public is 26 percent, while this ratio is 43 percent among the AKP voters and 31 percent among the MHP voters. On the other hand, the percentages of those attended these protests among CHP, HDP and IYI Party are below 10 percent.

Similarly, confidence in institutions also reflect the above stated polarization. Although there is no significant difference in the list of most trusted institutions (Army 74 percent, Presidency 57 percent, Universities 57 percent, and Government 57 percent) compared to previous studies, there are striking differences between party alignments. First of all, AKP supporters shine out as the group who has the highest confidence in all institutions: the level of confidence is 93 percent for the Presidency, 89 percent for the Government, 89 percent for the Army, and this ratio never goes below 70 percent for any institution. MHP supporters have also relatively high levels of confidence in political institutions: 87 percent for the Army, 53 percent for the Presidency, and 51 percent for the Government.

On the other hand, CHP supporters do not have confidence in political institutions except the Army. Only 9 percent of CHP supporters have confidence in the Presidency and 10 percent in the Government. The figures for IYI Party supporters are similar to CHP supporters.

There is a similar polarization regarding the Parliament, Political Parties and Press. Compared to a CHP supporter, an ordinary AKP supporter has confidence in the Parliament and Municipalities four times, and in Political Parties three times more.

Appreciation of the leaders is another point that is elaborated in the research. As expected, every leader is liked by her/his party base. The average appreciation score for Erdoğan among AKP voters is 9.2 over a possible 10, the average for Binali Yıldırım is 7.3. Other party bases like their leaders in the averages ranging from 7.7 to 8.2.

When we look at the different party supporters, we can see that Erdoğan and Yıldırım are liked by the MHP supporters on the value near the average. Similarly, Bahçeli is liked by AKP supporters. These two are extraordinary examples as for the rest of the leaders there is no example of a political leader collecting sympathy from other party supporters.

There are some historical events and rupture in the memory of each society. These historical ruptures not only shape the society, but also constitute fault lines of political purity. While there is consensus on the importance of these historical events, some of them take place only in the memory of a certain political movement and it gives legitimacy to that political movement.

The extent to which political polarization is widespread is reflected in the difference in the historical ruptures/breaks put forward by different political party supporters. The most important historical breaks for AKP supporters are the February 28 Memorandum, the Gezi Park Protests and the July 15 Coup Attempt. The supporters of MHP also put forward the same historical breaks, while giving the utmost importance to the July 15 Coup Attempt.

The July 15 Coup Attempt is also an important issue for the CHP base, but voters of this party see the December 17-25 Corruption Accusations as a major rupture. What is distinctive about IYI Party is that they give importance to the Balyoz-Ergenekon Trials slightly more than other issues and other parties. For the HDP supporters, both the 1980 Coup and the Kurdish Question are in the foreground. The clustering of political party proponents around their own historical events can be regarded as another indication of polarization. Although commonalities exist - the Kurdish Question and the July 15 Coup Attempt - the differences draw more attention.

Commonalities

'Foreign policy' and 'attitudes towards Syrians' are the two observed commonalities among different party supporters.

All the political party supporters regard USA as the most important threat. Although there are differences among different political party supporters how they perceive EU, one needs to note that even the highest 'yes' score for a possible referendum to Turkey's participation to EU is only 49 percent (HDP supporters) and the lowest score of support is 20 percent (MHP supporters).

The most commonly shared perception is on the Syrians: almost all the above stated party differences can no longer be observed, when party supporters are asked about their perception on whether Syrians should return to their own country.

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