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Sceptical Image: Euroscepticism of Turkish University Students

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This study explores how Euroscepticism is [re]produced among a group of university students in the context of historical interpretations of European history and the image of EU. The data for this study was collected during a fieldwork with a group of graduate students from Ankara University and Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. The research included mostly informal, structured and semi-structured interviews.

For the students Europe as a space and EU as a union are not separate from each other or from Europeanness. In their “mental maps”, “continental Europe” and “real Europe” are different. England, Germany and France are considered “real Europe”; some other countries are being included in Europe stage by stage. Students relate the current economic relations of EU with the colonial past of major European countries; and thus EU is associated with colonialism, imperialism and also socialism. These associations form the basis for distrust of EU and doubts about truthfulness about EU. Historical roots of Euroscepticism are derived not only from Europe’s own history but also from the relations between Europe and Ottoman Empire, as well as Turkey. Students mostly point to the last century of Ottoman Empire, the Independence War of Turkey, the Cold War Era and the last two decades of relations with EU.

Image is one of the most important concepts of our time. Not only the famous people but also the politicians, companies and even states care about their image. On the other hand people imagine themselves and others both at the personal and the national level. Nations [re]produce many cultural arguments, stereotypes, stigmatizations, political explanations about the Others. But the concept of image involves whole meanings of “pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and ideas” (Mitchell 1986,9). Euroscepticism can be discussed in these contexts because Eurosceptic attitudes towards EU have also imaginative basis.

The aim of this study is to understand Euroscepticism in the context of the image of European Union (EU). This paper discusses how Euroscepticism is [re]produced among a group of university students. This study also tries to determine the basic components of Euroscepticism of these students. The data for this study was collected during an ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 20 September 2006 and 1 June 2007 with a group of graduate students from Ankara University (A.U.) and Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, Turkey. The research includes mostly informal, structured and semi-structured interviews. Interviews conducted with 53 people were complemented with observations.

A.U. was established in 1946. The history and the mission of the A.U. are related to the establishment of Turkish Republic (1923): it was the first university of the country and its establishment was influenced by the revolutionary ideas and principles of the Republic. At present, the relationship with EU is mentioned in the official mission statement of A.U.: “to take an effective, dynamic and reputable place on a respected platform of education and training, and with comprehensive participation in the research and educational strategies of the European Union.”¹ METU was founded in 1956 “to contribute to the development of Turkey and Middle East countries” and “to train people so as to create a skilled workforce in the fields of natural and social sciences.”² The mission of the METU is defined as “to reach, produce, apply and promote knowledge, and to educate individuals with that knowledge for the social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological development of our society and humanity.”³ Both universities have centers for EU studies: *European Research Center* in A.U. (1987), and *Center for European Studies* in METU (1997). Both centers have libraries, and their aims are conducting and promoting research; organizing panels and conferences; publishing books and journals about EU.

Hereby students have access to any information, activity or source from their universities. In addition, due to their internal and external relations and aims, both universities are the suitable places where the image of EU and Eurosceptic ideas can be observed.

Skeptical Image and Euroscepticism

Probably because of the European Economic Community, EU was originally imagined mostly as an economic union. But later after the introduction of such regulations as monetary union, European Parliament, free movement of capital and workers, this imagination has changed. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, not only the perception of “return to Europe” and “European integration” projects emerged but also EU entered into the daily life of its citizens with issues such as European citizenship, agriculture and industry policies. In addition, with the increasing influence of EU on the social life through regulations and institutions and inventing of new social discourses like “People’s Europe” Euroscepticism was removed from the political sphere to the popular life. Therefore, the meaning and the content of Euroscepticism becomes prominent for understanding how it emerges not only in the political but also in the social level.

Euroscepticism can be understood as a skeptical attitude towards EU, however it is more than that. First of all Euroscepticism is not a static term and it does not mean only being opposed to the EU. Euroscepticism first “appeared as an English phenomenon, further contributing to a sense of the country’s “awkwardness” or “otherness” in relation to a Continental European project of political and economic integration, at least since the early 1990s, a variety of forms of Euroscepticism have assumed an increasingly prominent place in Continental European political debate as well.”⁴ (Harmsen ve Spiering 2004,13). As Katz mentioned (2008, 154) Euroscepticism has changed after Single European Act (1986) and Treaty of Maastricht (1992); and since then “denotes opposition to “the European project”, notwithstanding that “skepticism” ordinarily refers to doubts or reservations rather than to outright opposition”

Euroscepticism can be discussed both in the context of nation state and of the European integration. Hence Euroscepticism can be defined as “doubt and distrust on the subject of European Integration” (Flood 2002,73). Some scholars distinguish between two types of Euroscepticism: “hard” one, “where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration” and “soft” one “where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership” (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008,2). But according to Kopecky and Mude (2002, 300), this kind of distinction is “blurred” and “unclear”. Instead of this, they prefer a more broad understanding of Euroscepticism which “can take different forms and shapes, following from different visions of European integration and different interpretations of the EU” (ibid, 304). Their definition also provides an interdisciplinary field for social scientists. However Euroscepticism is studied mostly by political scientists (e.g. Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008) and these works are usually focused on the party politics (e.g. Harmsen and Spiering 2004); how and why European integration has been opposed by societies is rarely studied.⁵

In brief, Euroscepticism can at the same time mean an opposition or a resistance, a movement, an approach, a party or country policy. But in any case it is also a reason and a result of imagination.

Europe in Euroscepticism

Enlargement of EU with the inclusion of new states, the deepening of EU with new legal and economic regulations, and widening with a large scale integration into its supranational structure resulted in the rise of Euroscepticism in member and candidate states. For example after the Treaty of Maastricht, the attitudes towards EU have changed in many member countries including the core founder states. In France, Euroscepticism had grown following the introduction of monetary union and European Citizenship (see Milner 2000).⁶ In Britain the Euroscepticism has grown with the idea that the influence of Britain in world politics has decreased (see Giddings 2004).⁷

Also the introduction of Euro as a kind of unity symbol has caused Euroscepticism that is based not only on economic reasons but also on social and even nationalist reactions against EU. For example German Euroscepticism emerged after the replacement of *Deutchmark*, which was the unique status symbol of Germans, by Euro.⁸ As a result of nationalist approach and economic concerns Denmark and the United Kingdom do not currently use the Euro.⁹ But among the Turkish university students the unity of Europe is in debate because these countries still do not accept Euro as their currency.

But for Turkish students the causes of Euroscepticism are neither Euro nor the Treaty of Maastricht. It seems that students' skeptical ideas about EU were produced recently. Newly added criteria, such as Copenhagen Criteria and the obligation to accept and practice them have caused tension in Turkish politics and society. For example "The EU harmonization of law proposal" from August, 1-2 2002 contained "sensitive" subjects for Turkey, such as abolishing the death penalty, regulating the use of violence by police, education in Kurdish, retrial, and minority associations. These amendments were criticized by nationalists and conservatives in Turkey at that time¹⁰. Also some comments, demands and recommendations of the European politicians about "Europeanness of Turkey", Cyprus and Islam have raised reactions against EU.

Moreover, these topics, especially the "Europeanness of Turkey" are discussed not only by the side of EU but also by the side of Turkey. For the students, Europe as a space and the EU as a union are not separate from each other or from Europeanness. In their "mental maps" (Gould and White 2002) "continental Europe" and "real Europe" are different. Europe is a network of power relations of some European countries. First, England, Germany and France are called "real Europe"; some other countries are being included in Europe stage by stage or sometimes excluded totally such as Hungary, Poland, Slovakia.

While students associated Europe with EU, for them the image of EU means from its economical and political power and domination. Within this association, for the students the past of European countries coincides with EU. They put forward mostly the "colonialist" and "socialist" past of European countries and combine them in the context of current EU politics and relations.

"Actually their aim is only one. A different kind of Capitalism [now], before that they had colonies and fought with them. Now it is different, dispossession is not valid. Now it is the time for getting into a partnership." (N.Ç., English Language and Literature, A.U.)

As a result, the actions and attitudes of Europe are approached with doubt and distrust. So the question of what the source(s) and dynamic(s) of these doubts and distrust can be, mostly finds an answer on the historical interpretations of students.

Historical Roots of Euroscepticism and Image

Historical roots of Euroscepticism are derived not only from the relations of Europe with Ottomans and later Turkey but also from Europe's own history. As mentioned above students combine the colonialist past of some European countries with current economic relations; and evaluate EU according to the terms of "colonialism" and "imperialism"; finally produce a kind of distrust against EU.

"Olie Rehn came here (Turkey) on last Wednesday. He was very relaxed, like he was appointed here, or like a commissar. Like the Governor-general in India; like he was effective in India, he (Olie Rehn) is effective here." (E.D., International Relations, METU).

Distrust continues with rereading the history as students compare some current issues with events from the past. Students mostly point to the last century of Ottoman Empire, Independence War of Turkey, Cold War Era and last two

decades. As a result, Eurosceptic EU image has been created by referring to the era of the Ottoman-European relations and later continues with the relations of Turkey and Europe.

Ottomans have been diplomatically disinterested in Europe till 17th century which could be accepted as a reflection of power (Tuncer ve Tuncer 1997,11). But later experiences of Ottoman State, like falling behind the Europe, being defeated in wars, unequal economic relations with Europe “are written” to the collective memory of the students by history education.

As “an official version of the collective identity of a group or a society” (Bilgin 1998,121) official history reveals how its citizens should imagine the other nations and in which perspective they should develop this imagination. Official history is a must for nation states; and in its social dimension it is the most powerful way for transmitting ideology. For example in the first years of Turkish Republic while Turkish official history was being prepared, the importance of Ottomans was downplayed and the focus shifted to separating Ottomans from Turkishness; the explanation of European-Turkish relations was developed along the “center of civilization” discourse. New Turkish Republic chose to point out its Middle Asian origins instead of associating itself with Europe (see Ersanlı 2006). In fact this approach is still present in Turkish nationalism.

“No! Both geographically and traditionally we are not a European country. We don’t need it either. It is very nonsense to take a name of continent.” (E.Ö.,American Culture,A.U.).

On the other hand and today’s agenda is mostly connected with the Independence War of Turkey (1919-1923) after World War I. For this reason, students remember and imagine the war only with reference to the Balkan problems, Treaty of Sèvres (1920), occupation and finally with the independence. And the most important component of this imagination in this limited memory is the category of enemies, which includes England, France, Greece and Russia. The external enemies were initially named ‘occupying states’ in the official history, but by 1930s this definition was turned into an anonymous one. Üstel, in her book examining the “acceptable citizen” image in the school books, indicated (2008,213-214) that the names of the “external enemies” are not mentioned but instead indirect and implicit naming such as “Western states”, “allied powers” or “occupying armies” are preferred. Nevertheless the “Greek occupation” is defined and discussed directly as “atrocities” (*mezalim*). The possible reason for this anonymity and blurred picture may be the change of attitude towards Westernization, as Kadioğlu noted (2008,42) “while Westernization had been a tool in the Ottoman Empire; it became an ideal in the Turkish Republic”. The point behind these implicit accusations instead of more open ones in the earlier period was to avoid open confrontation (with the West) while at the same time maintaining self-identity.

This policy of 1930ies changed after the developments of 1980ies. Tensions with Greece because of Cyprus and problems with Armenians because of the ASALA transformed “external enemies” in the official history and school books into “external threat” (Üstel 2008). This “external threat” image included such countries as Greece with the discourse of “hidden aims” in the Aegean Sea and Syria, France and Switzerland with the claim of helping the conflicts in Eastern and Southeastern parts of Turkey. Two decades later, negative attitudes of Sarkozy’s France and Merkel’s Germany against the accession of Turkey to EU were added to this background. Students reproduce their images of Europe by combining these historical and current discourses:

“But now we see there are racism and nationalism in Europe. [Countries] who say that they are secular, they do many different things. Here is France! Liberty, equality, fraternity! Now they are acting against these” (V.K.,International Relations,METU).

Hence memories of the Treaty of Sèvres and Independence War which influenced the Europe[an] image of Turkey come up again within the EU accession. Produced with the help of national history, European image as “the hidden enemy” and “the center of civilization” was turned into EU image.¹¹

On the other hand World War II which may be the most important motive for European peace and unity (Wilson and van der Dussen 1995), is absent in the European imagination of the students. Since Turkey was not occupied during the war, students did not mention any historical connection between Turkey and World War II or European peace.

Eurocepticism as a Production of Current Politics

As mentioned before, from the perspective of students, European history and even the history of individual countries are considered the history of EU. Imposition is the common point of students in binding the history of EU and today’s negotiations with early relations between EU and Turkey. Dynamics of current political relations are the second source of Eurocepticism. Many students have followed the process before negotiations and are informed about the relations. Along with this, students have opinions about the featured subjects like Cyprus, human rights; and economic and legal regulations. Skeptical critical arguments can be found in their opinions:

“I think they (EU countries) aren’t democratic enough. They say democracy like the Crusade spirit. They always see Turks as infidel. (...) If they are democratic they must see all the people Muslims or Christians same. (...) Although they seem democrats, they are different inside.” (B.K.,Library,A.U.)

Interpreting the relations and negotiations between EU and Turkey as an imposition has historical references. For the students, Europe and today EU are “imperialist” and try to act as a governor state. According to their definition a non-self-governing state is the one receiving orders from the governor state which is unacceptable for Turkey. Hence students connect these definitions in the context of EU – Turkey relations; and evaluate some controversial points and claims of EU as “imposition.” The historical connection of this image comes from the interpreting the last century of Ottoman Empire and its relations with European countries of its time. To this, students add events that happened after occupation of Ottoman lands by Treaty of Sèvres. Finally by rereading the current events and relations according to this view, they apply this historical perception to the EU:

“I see them as a unity and they have an organization named European Union. I want to say that they act according to Europe’s interests and this (EU) is their platform. May be this is a paranoid idea but I think they (EU countries) discuss and write everything according to their interests. They come together there. They show us interesting things but after this they say “You must do these! You must enact these! You must change these and we will give you these!” (İ.Ö.,History,A.U.).

Students also renew and reproduce “hidden aims” arguments within this skeptical perspective.¹² In the (Euro)skeptical imagination of the students the central countries use EU to impose some laws and regulations in the frame of their hidden aims. This supports the students’ distrust and doubts of EU.

“Really, I am not interested in EU because I don’t believe that they are honest in their support. I don’t believe Turkey will enter EU. At the same time their demands became so marginal.” (A.Ö.,International Relations,METU)

“For example they use these (human rights) as a motto; but when we look at them or when they turn to reality they do not practice this (human rights). They are different to us and different to themselves. They say we will offer you rights and so forth; but I think they do not offer [something]. They are not honest.” (B.K., Library,A.U.)

Conclusion

As a conclusion, *imposition* and *interest* are the main components of the students' Euroscepticism. Students [re]produce both their EU image and Euroscepticism with their "imperialism" and "colonialism" arguments. This EU imagination contains a very blurred and intangible definition that can be seen by the uses of "they", "them" and "there" by students. Moreover, by using "they", students can easily blame and differentiate the other side. The use of such words not only reproduces Euroscepticism, but also creates an image of EU that is at the same time unified and lacks clear boundaries.

On the other hand, although two universities have centers studying EU, students have much misinformation about EU; they do not know even that these centers exist in their universities. Only international relations and political science students use the centers, but just for their courses. Most of the students consider this kind of centers as the "collaborators" and accuse them according to their EU image.

To sum up, despite variation of the explanations of the students, their image of EU is skeptical and doubtful. Students' Eurosceptic image and perceptions are connected with history. Students interpret and reread historical facts to create today a Eurosceptical image of EU. This perception is in agreement with Gellner's point (1998,114) that "Turkey has never been occupied and colonized" but has lived with these fears for years in the arguments of popular nationalism. In the context of an ideology in terms of Ottoman experience, colonialism, and imperialism, students create their EU image which mainly contains distrust.

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¹ Ankara University Mission, accessed September 12, 2010

² Middle East Technical University History, accessed September 11, 2010

³ Middle East Technical University Misguide, accessed September 11, 2010

⁴ For other Euroscepticisms see also O'Hear, 2000 and Deschouwer, 2002.

⁵ For examples about public opinion see Vetik, 2003; Milner, 2000; Sørensen, 2009

⁶ For more about French Euroscepticism see also Milner, 2004

⁷ For more about British Euroscepticism see Baker and Seawright, 1998; Holmes (ed.), 2002 and Jones, 2007

⁸ Teschner, 2000, 71; Kaelberer, 2005, 283-296; Berdahl, 2005, 235-251.

⁹ See Buch and Kasper, 2002

¹⁰ See "TBMM'de Tarihi Gün", *Hürriyet*, <http://webarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/2002/08/01/hurriyetim.asp>, accessed May 12, 2009

¹¹ For an example see Şeni, 1999, 320

¹² This kind of "hidden" and "real" aim arguments and Euroscepticism are also seen by British rightwing. EU is the collusion between France and Germany driving to undermine British sovereignty (Flood, 2002, 78). And for Czech Republic, after communist regime EU membership is on the one hand the fear of a loss of national sovereignty linked to the Soviet experience and on the other hand the alleged "socialism" of the Brussels bureaucracy (Kopecky ve Mudde, 2002, 305).

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