

THE EU ACCESSION: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN TURKEY

This opinion piece aims to underline the potential importance of the European Union accession process for local authorities in Turkey. The EU accession process can be a window of opportunity for local politics in Turkey regardless of whether membership materializes. In other words, the EU integration process can be leveraged to consolidate local democracy and development in Turkey. Among many, Turkish local authorities are the primary actors in the position to take advantage of this opportunity and will receive great paybacks provided that they have a coherent and consistent policy.

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Starting from the early 1970s, the world has been rapidly transforming. New technological developments in transportation, communication and production brought about a different world economy. Lowered trade barriers and the rise of global financial markets gradually removed economic boundaries. In the political sphere, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain ended the Cold War which in turn transformed the nature of international and domestic political struggles. Greater attention is not paid to issues relating to ecology, gender, identity and even to animal welfare in policy agendas. On the other hand, the continuation of mass movement of people towards more advanced countries and cities, changes in demography and family structures, personal tastes and socialization tools such as on-line contacts, have qualitatively changed society. The concept of globalization is used to define this overall process. What is not in question is the fact that local economic and social realities are no longer just national but at different pace becoming global.

From the perspective of nation-states, the greatest political implication of the new world order is that it required change in the ways political authority is exercised over territory and societies. Delegation of certain powers to supranational authorities and to entities in the subnational level (region and local), public administration reforms and increasing involvement of various stakeholders in policy-making processes have been the main measures of dealing with this challenge. In parallel, as a consequence of the diminishing importance of economic and political borders, separation between “international” and “domestic” politics has become difficult to sustain. As an outcome of the globalization processes, everyday local life started to become tightly connected to global developments. At this point, it comes to our realization what is called global is actually a translocal phenomena. Hence, local politics and authorities started to gain more importance in order to enhance the political and administrative capacity of states and supranational authorities.

In a unique way, the European Union (EU), which can be considered an outcome of this process, was also a response to increasing transnationalization in Europe. Strong nationalism and state-centrism of European countries have been slowly replaced with pooling and redistribution of political power across different policy areas and authority levels. Today, democratic and effective functioning of the EU depends on the coordination among various authority levels: supranational (the EU institutions), national (both member-state representatives at Brussels and domestic level), regional and local. The initial pooling of sovereignty at the supranational level had been complemented with the delegation of policy responsibilities to lower tiers of government, which are closer to the local level of governance. The emergence of regional policy, establishment of the Committee of Regions and the inscription of the “subsidiarity principle” into the Lisbon Treaty formalized the prevailing multi-level governance in the EU. Currently, subnational authorities play

a vital role in both formulation and especially implementation of EU policies.

The EU Accession Reforms and Local Authorities in Turkey

Historically, during both the Ottoman and the early Republican eras, local authorities were seen as administrative arms of the central state, a strong system of tutelage prevailed.¹ Due to the state-centric system prevalent in both eras, democratic political culture did not have the chance to flourish at the local level. As a result, state-centrism and elitist politics left its strong imprint in the local political culture.

In Turkey there are three types of local authorities: special provincial administrations, municipalities, and village public entities [muhtarlık]. Among the three types of local authorities, municipalities are the most important ones due to their policy responsibilities and numbers (in total 2950). Currently, 83.5 percent of the Turkish population lives in municipal areas while 54.9 percent reside in metropolitan cities. Financial means of municipalities vary greatly. For instance, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's 2011 budget was 11 billion U.S. dollars. For a city of 13 million residents, some may argue this is not a big sum. Nonetheless, it is more than the combined budget of many ministries. The responsibilities of metropolitan municipalities range from running city theatres, transportation corporations, bakery factories, and managing the use of extremely valuable public lands. However, due to uneven and unplanned urbanization in Turkey, central and local authorities struggle to solve urban problems such as shortage of affordable and legal housing, inefficient public infrastructure, lack of green fields, traffic jam, unemployment and social exclusion of the socially disadvantaged.

Shortcomings in local democracy and governance became more salient with the EU candidacy. In 1999, when Turkey became an EU candidate state, politicians and bureaucrats in Ankara slowly realized what the EU's multi-level governance system meant for Turkey. As a candidate country, the EU's membership conditionality required various direct and indirect changes at the Turkish state structure, including local authorities. Integration into the EU's political system involves delegation of political powers to subnational authorities, democratic and effective policy-making with various stakeholders. Thus, the cost of integrating into the EU started to touch the core structure of Turkish state and political culture. When the then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer vetoed the first draft of Local Administration Reform in 2004, the issue became apparent; the unitary character of the Turkish state was at stake.² One year later, in 2005, AK Party managed to pass the Reform package at a second attempt by removing political decentralization while

¹ Levent Köker, "Local Politics and Democracy in Turkey: An Appraisal" *The ANNALS*, Vol.540,(1995), pp. 51-62

² Korel Göymen "Dynamics of Local Governance in Turkey: Demise of the bureaucratic ruling tradition?", https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/8872/1/Dynamics_of_Local_Governance_in_Turkey...doc

preserving the administrative reform measures. The Reform brought new responsibilities to local authorities in issues entailing social policy and local development and provided them with the right to engage in certain aspects of international relations. But stripped from the vital political and financial decentralization, the reform did not bring about the demanded structural change to local politics in Turkey.

The most important aspect of the Local Administration Reform Package was inclusion of the five principles of the European Governance³ (openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence). However, to what extent

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they have been practiced in local policy processes varies greatly depending on the discretion of local decision-makers. This is due to the fact that the central government has not backed up the reform with compulsory measures for implementation. The European Commission’s 2010 Progress Report declares that measures on these principles need to be strengthened or remains to be established. In other words, legislative changes have not been successfully implemented at the local level in the

last five years. Having said this, some local authorities took these changes seriously and made important voluntary advances in different fields. Some of the urban local authorities set up women centers, became members of European wide networks and engaged in social service provision. To name few some good cases, one can look at the works done by Nilüfer, Sarıyer and Seferihisar Municipalities, Yalova and Çanakkale City Councils, and Istanbul Special Provincial Administration. Yet, in private discussions, regardless of political party affiliation, almost everybody still complains from the prevailing issues: elitist decision-making, irrational use of public resources, strong political patronage, nepotism, lack of resources and disregard to the needs of local residents.

The incoherent position of the EU member states over Turkey’s membership is partly responsible for this failure. The conditionality mechanism lost its initial transformative magic and perhaps hit its limits.

³ “European Governance: A White Paper”, Commission of the European Communities, (2001), http://ec.europa.eu/governance/white_paper/index_en.htm

Furthermore, the AK Party government is no longer enthusiastic for the EU accession. Even if reforms continue, one could argue that the Turkish political culture operates informally and neither laws nor political parties are strong enough to change a culture that is ridden with political patronage, nepotism or corruption. In a globalizing world, Turkish local politics needs to improve in order to deal with the changing conditions. The interests of local actors need to be voiced in public platforms. Therefore, the principal responsibility still lies with the elected domestic actors, and especially with local decision-makers. Citizens, civil society organizations, media, universities, think-tanks, and of course, political parties also need to contribute.

Problems with the EU Accession Process

The conditionality policy is the main foreign policy mechanism of the EU in transforming its candidates and neighbors. In return for achieving the big prize (the membership benefits), the candidate countries should undertake various changes to meet the membership requirements which involve political, economic and social costs. In essence, the accession negotiation is about the timing and costs of these reforms rather than the content of the membership requirements. Establishment of democratic and effective local governance in Turkey is one of the main demands of the EU.

In particular, the membership conditionality for Turkey contains some direct prescriptions for local authorities. In terms of political conditionality (the famous Copenhagen criteria), the EU demands greater political and economic decentralization for local authorities. Because the Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party also demands similar measures in Southeast Anatolia, the issue of decentralization is controversial in Turkey and avoided by most mainstream actors. The other part of the political conditionality is related with public administration reform, namely implementation of good governance principles in central and local policy processes. Despite the 2005 Local Administration Reform, Turkey is far from practicing these principles.

The second direct conditionality concerns Turkish local authorities is about the implementation capacity of local authorities for EU policies. Although the central government is responsible with the adoption of laws, successful implementation of these measures mostly depends on local authorities. On this account, local authorities still suffer from financial burdens and lack of institutional capacity. Of course, the biggest hurdle is the informal political culture which allows for political patronage, nepotism and corruption. These characteristics prevent democratic and rational functioning of local policy processes. All legislative measures are open to manipulation or bypassing unless local authorities are open to participation of

civil society, public scrutiny of media and accountability to citizens. Under these conditions, transnational policy priorities, like environment or gender-equality, are unlikely to be translated into local agenda topics. For instance, according to the Municipal Act of 5393, all metropolitan municipalities and municipalities with population over 50,000 have to set up women shelters. However, by 2010, only 23 municipalities complied with the legislation.

Lastly, EU accession demands changes in the development policy in Turkey. Establishment of Regional Development Agencies is an institutional step towards the integration into the European Regional Development Policy. Formulation and implementation of regional development measures demand greater responsibilities from local authorities. However, due to the centralist and state-centric development tradition, this policy area is totally new for the local decision-makers and bureaucracy. Thus, adoption and implementation of this development model brings great challenges.

After having painted this bleak picture, it would be wrong to deny certain improvements that have taken place in the last six years. The introduction of the right to information, e-government and some successful international activities of local authorities are good examples.

In terms of potential for change, local authorities are the most dynamic political institutions. Given that the EU is overly preoccupied with its own problems and the relationship with Turkey is at its lowest point, the EU is in a weak position to further democratic and effective local politics in Turkey through the conditionality mechanism. Turkish domestic politics is already wrestling with the Kurdish autonomy demands. But, should it be left to the EU or the Central government?

The EU Accession and Turkish Local Authorities

It is a widely accepted fact that the EU has the most advanced social, political, and economic system in the world. Although the EU does not have a uniform local governance system, there are shared governance norms (subsidiarity, openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence). Similarly, European local authorities are much more active in environmental protection, social policy and local development initiatives. Local authorities implementing these governance norms and policies would have better chances to consolidate local democracy and development.

Turkish local authorities can voluntarily learn and benefit from the practices of European governance and policies regardless the problematic membership politics between the EU and Turkey. At the core, both European governance norms and

policies are aimed at enhancing the quality of public policy-making and achieving better sustainable development across different European countries. Turkish local authorities certainly do not need to lose any time to benefit from these practices in the face of uneven development level in the country. Additionally, advances in local democracy and development would contribute towards the EU accession process from the bottom level. More importantly, emerging active European (territorial) citizenship and the culture of democracy are good foundations to overcome ethnic, religious, or any other exclusionary conflicts. In sum, the EU accession process as a comprehensive and transformative content may be used as a leverage to improve Turkey from the local level.

Local authorities already benefit from the EU accession process. Between the years of 2002-2010, 314 municipalities in Turkey received a total of 93.5 million euros of EU assistance for projects. Local authorities in Turkey are eligible to benefit from most of the EU funds, not only from the Pre-Accession funds. Beyond monetary value, all these projects have had some sort of policy transfer and learning process. Additionally, project partnerships, town-twinning, and membership to European-wide institutional networks bring various benefits. The successful works of Istanbul Special Provincial Administration in the Assembly of European Regions, continued membership of many municipalities to EUROCITIES and other transnational networks confirms this claim.

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To materialize these potential benefits, local authorities need to adopt and implement a coherent institutional policy towards the EU. Initially some municipalities established EU project offices or employed relevant skilled personnel to have access to EU funds. More advanced steps that followed were the formation of EU and International Relations Directorates. However, beyond financial assistance or symbolic public relations, local authorities can use these units/directorates for institutional learning and capacity building by observing the ways European local authorities work.

Firstly, the aim of local authorities should be Europeanization of their governing practices and policies. They can perform better at their locale in dealing with new/ changing policy responsibilities such as waste-recycling, employment policy, or

social services for the disadvantaged. There are various measures to achieve this end such as policy transfer, town-twinning, training of personnel, visits by elected members to European counterparts, engagement in European networks. Through projects, local authorities can use international (e.g. UNDP) and EU funds to experiment with new policy measures or respond to certain issues at the local level. Furthermore, these institutional units are well positioned to promote their locale and institutions at transnational platforms. In partnership with other stakeholders, local authorities can also act as leader stakeholder in translocal cooperation between civil society, academia and business world. Last but not least, with engagement in this area, local authorities would have the opportunity to lobby with their counterparts in order to influence the EU and national policy processes.

In achieving these potential benefits, local decision-makers need to have a wider political vision which recognizes the emergent translocal/global phenomena. This vision must be supported with political receptiveness and commitment. Different policy areas need to be integrated, coordinated and well-funded. Political leadership and commitment should be supported with highly-skilled multi-lingual personnel. Without this, political leadership will not be able to stay abreast with the recent developments, produce solutions and implement the decisions. Also, other units of local authorities have to be well-integrated to utilize the collected information, knowledge and financial means in their own respective areas.

It would be naïve to think that these efforts will come out of political idealism. On the contrary, political realism and pragmatism dictates them as the priority at local level. Failing to recognize this would lead to irreparable social, economic and ecological costs. Therefore, more attention should be put into improving the political perspective and institutional capacity at the local level in Turkey. A sustainably democratic and developed Turkey can only be ensured by creating and perpetuating it in everyday local settings.