LEGITIMIZING EUROPE IN CONTESTED SETTINGS: EUROPE AS A NORMATIVE POWER IN TURKEY?

This article aims to explore whether—and if so, how—the EU is perceived as a normative power (NPE) in Turkey in the context of deteriorating Turkey–EU relations. By adopting the Habermasian understanding that legitimacy is a prerequisite for NPE and through employing a focus group methodology novel to NPE research, the article finds that a certain segment of the Turkish public views the EU as a normative power, suggesting that claims for the existence of NPE need to be qualified both by the level of analysis and by the local context which comprises socio-cultural factors as well as government/opposition dynamics. The article also shows that contestation of the EU's actorness takes place over moral and ethical-political arguments rather than utility-based debates, demonstrating that polarization is noticeably present as far as the EU's normativity is concerned, and not on the perceived costs and benefits of EU accession.

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T here has been a burgeoning literature on the conceptualization of Europe as a normative power (NPE) since Ian Manners published his seminal article more than a decade ago.[1] Some studies have focused on operationalizing NPE through a number of empirical cases, while others have contested its ontological and epistemological foundations or its Eurocentric focus.[2] More recently, it has been argued that there is a significant gap in the NPE literature concerning the perceptions of the outside world in attributing a normative role to the EU.[3] This argument rests on the conceptual assumption that for an international actor to be labeled as normative, it needs to be recognized as such by third parties. Hence a key question becomes whether international actors believe that "the EU plays a special role in defining the normal or as a beacon of norms."[4]

This article aims to contribute through focusing on the perceptions of the EU in Turkey. In so doing, it works from the conceptual standpoint that the recognition of the EU as a normative actor in a specific external context depends on how its presence is justified through argumentation in that particular case. Hence NPE can be argued to exist insofar as moral argumentation is used to justify the EU's presence in that given external context. In empirical terms, this study finds that contrary to the dominant narrative which points at the EU's diminished standing as a normative actor in Turkey, and despite the substantial deterioration in the overall Turkey-EU relationship as well as the outright Euroscepticism of the governing elite, the EU is perceived as a normative power by a certain segment of the Turkish public. Moral justifications are found to closely follow utility-based justifications in legitimizing the EU. This suggests that claims to the existence of NPE in a certain country need to be qualified by the level of analysis employed.

In conceptual terms, the study finds that in addition to EU policies, the local context—which comprises socio-cultural factors as well as the government/opposition dynamic—is a key determinant of whether the EU is perceived as a normative power. Especially in cases like Turkey where there is already a high degree of political polarization, NPE debates can easily mimic the government/opposition divide which both draws from and is reflected in society. Additionally, the article shows that contestation of the EU's actorness takes place over moral and ethical-political

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[1] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2002), pp. 235-58.

[2] Richard Whitman, "The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorising the EU's International Presence," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), pp. 171-93.

[3] Emilian Kavalski, "The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China in Context," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), pp. 247-67; Henrik Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power and the Research on External Perceptions: The Missing Link," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (2014a), p. 899.

[4] Henrik Larsen (2014a), p. 899.

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arguments rather than utility-based debates, demonstrating that polarization is noticeably present as far as the EU's normativity is concerned, and not the perceived costs and benefits of EU accession as might be expected.

> *"A deeper analysis of Turkish public perceptions of the EU matters from both an empirical and a conceptual standpoint."*

These findings are reached through analysis of data generated by focus group interviews, thus introducing a methodologically novel approach to NPE studies that can be used in other works that "take a sociological approach to the contextual elements of NPE."[5]

The article will first situate the research in the context of the literature on EU-Turkey relations as well as NPE studies, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and methodological bases of the study and analysis of the qualitative data generated by the focus group interviews. It will conclude by assessing the findings on how the EU is justified by Turkish citizens, the contestations over justifications and what this implies for the EU's normative power in a key country in its region, as well as the contextual conditions under which the concept holds or does not hold value in this particular case.

Turkey and NPE

Turkey is an interesting case worthy of study in the context of NPE due to its long-standing relations with the EU, its protracted accession negotiations, and controversies over its democratic track record also in relation to EU conditionality. Turkey was declared as a candidate country destined to join the EU in the 1999 Helsinki Summit. This was followed by a sweeping wave of significant political reforms in the country, leading to the opening of accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005. Yet, Turkey's accession negotiations have proceeded at a snail's pace, with 15 (out of 35) chapters opened by May 2017 and only one chapter provisionally closed.

There is a consensus in the literature that the stalemate in accession negotiations along with mixed messages from the EU on the desirability of Turkish membership have significantly weakened the EU's credibility of conditionality vis-à-vis Turkey, thus leading to a weakening of the EU's democratic leverage and the loss of its appeal as a normative actor in the country.[6] Scholars have demonstrated how the EU is no longer

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[5] Henrik Larsen (2014a), p. 899.

[6] Beken Saatçioğlu, "De-Europeanisation in Turkey: The Case of the Rule of Law," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), pp. 133-46.

being framed by political parties as a normative actor promoting the consolidation of Turkish democracy[7] and how Euroscepticism is vocally espoused by the country's governing elite.[8] Yet, with the exception of quantitative studies based on Eurobarometer and other survey data[9], there has been no empirical study to gauge the Turkish public's perceptions of the European project. Furthermore, largely due to the nature of the available data, such studies that do exist have generally focused on the reasons underlying the Turkish public's support or non-support for EU membership and /or the question of who in society tends to support or oppose Turkey's EU accession, hence saying little on the multi-faceted dimensions of the public's views on the EU.

One exception is Hakan Yılmaz's study on Euroscepticism in Turkey.[10] By conducting in-depth interviews, a comprehensive analysis of written texts and a public opinion poll, Yılmaz used a mixed-method approach in identifying the main arguments that the Turkish public uses in justifying their skepticism and/or opposition towards Turkey's EU accession. He found four major themes, listed here in order of declining salience as *concerns over national sovereignty*, *fear of a loss of moral values*, *the perception that Turkey is negatively discriminated against by the EU* (mainly on religious grounds) and *the Sèvres syndrome* (fear of territorial partition by Western powers)[11] as the main drivers of Euroscepticism in Turkey. However, the data on which these findings were based were collected in 2003 and 2004. Furthermore, the study was exclusively focused on the driving factors of Euroscepticism in Turkey, meaning that it did not take into account the positive attributions associated with the EU and also did not touch upon the ways in which public views on the EU relate to the perception of the EU as a normative power in the Turkish context.

Thus, despite the longstanding and thorny relations between the EU and Turkey, and the historically significant role of democracy and rule of law issues in this

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[7] Canan Balkır and Sedef Eylemer, "Shifting Logics: The Discourses of Turkish Political Elites on EU Accession," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), pp. 29-43; Başak Alpan, "From AKP's 'Conservative Democracy' to 'Advanced Democracy': Shifts and Challenges in the Debate on 'Europe,'" *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), pp. 15-28.

[8] Senem Aydın-Düzgit, "De-Europeanisation through Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of AKP's Election Speeches," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), pp. 45-58.

[9] Hakan Yılmaz, "Swinging between Eurosupportiveness and Euroscepticism: Turkish Public's General Attitudes towards the European Union," (ed.) Hakan Yılmaz, *Placing Turkey on the Map of Europe* (Istanbul: Bogazici University Press, 2005a), pp. 152-181; Çiğdem Kentmen, "Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey: Islamic Attachments, Utilitarian Considerations and National Identity," *European Union Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2008), pp. 487-510; Çarkoğlu, Ali and Çiğdem Kentmen, "Diagnosing Trends and Determinants in Public Support for Turkey's EU Membership," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011), pp. 365-79.

[10] Hakan Yılmaz, "Indicators of Euroscepticism in Turkish Public Opinion by the End of 2003: Basic Findings of a Survey," (ed.) Hakan Yılmaz, H. *Placing Turkey on the Map of Europe* (Istanbul: Bogazici University Press 2005a), pp. 182-185; Hakan Yılmaz, "Euroscepticism in Turkey: Parties, Elites and Public Opinion," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2011), pp. 185-208.

[11] Sèvres syndrome is named after the Sèvres Treaty which partitioned the Ottoman Empire among European powers after the First World War.

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relationship, we still know little about how the Turkish public views the EU and how its perceptions frame the EU as a (non)normative actor in this key neighboring country. The widely accepted view that the EU has lost most of its normative connotations in Turkey rests largely on the negative party-political developments at the macro level, the increasing aversion on the part of the main parties to referring to the EU in a normative context, and the deteriorating state of democracy, human rights and rule of law in the country.

> **"***Turkey's accession negotiations have proceeded at a snail's pace, with 15 (out of 35) chapters opened by May 2017 and only one chapter provisionally closed.***"**

Against this background, a deeper analysis of Turkish public perceptions of the EU matters from both an empirical and a conceptual standpoint. In empirical terms, this is necessary for not only providing insight into how the Turkish public perceives the European project, but also to demonstrate how the public receives and contests the normative identity of the EU, including the legitimacy of such a role. With one exception[12], existing NPE research considering external recognition of the EU as a normative power largely excludes public opinion to focus on how the elites of the "receiving" countries (including the media) receive the normative messages of the EU or perceive NPE. Nonetheless, public opinion can occupy a central place in the "dialogue between senders and receivers of the normative message,"[13] especially in enlargement countries where the EU is a domestic issue rather than a matter of foreign policy. In democracies, this can result in voting preferences of the electorates and thus also shape the positions of political parties vis-à-vis the EU. In a case such as Turkey where democracy is under erosion and the public is highly polarized between the government and opposition, substantive knowledge of the public stance on the EU, particularly in relation to its norms and normative legitimacy, can aid in extending the EU's democratic conditionality to the general public. In this way, the EU can preserve a certain degree of democratic influence, albeit at a different, more micro level.

From a conceptual standpoint, the study of public perceptions provides insight into the context and conditions which make NPE work (or not) at the broader public

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[12] Natalia Chaban, Serena Kelly and Martin Holland, "Perceptions of 'Normative Power Europe' in the Shadow of the Eurozone Debt Crisis: Public Perspectives on European Integration from the Asia Pacific," (eds.) Annika Björkdahl, Natalia Chaban, John Leslie and Annick Masselot, *Importing EU Norms: Conceptual Framework and Empirical Findings* (London: Springer, 2015), pp. 57-77.

[13] Natalia Chaban, Serena Kelly and Martin Holland (2015), p. 62.

level, thus avoiding the trap of "taking context for granted" in NPE studies.[14] This approach overcomes the traditional focus on the "one-way transfer" in NPE research which largely ignores the agency of the norm-receivers.[15] Thus, in addition to providing an empirical addition to the research on NPE, the current study also contributes to the "third wave" of NPE theorization which "moves away from a Eurocentric interpretation of NPE"[16] and "decentres" the concept by allowing for receivers' agency and the context in which they operate.[17]

Theory and Method: Discourse Theory Meets Focus Groups

The theoretical framework of this study rests on the Habermasian understanding that legitimacy is a basic prerequisite for the presence of NPE.[18] Following from Beetham's[19] view that justifiability is a central mechanism of legitimation, it can be argued that legitimacy can be inferred from people's justification of issues in terms of their beliefs, values, standards and normative expectations.[20]

A discourse-theoretical approach is apt for distinguishing between different types of argumentative justification and thus for tracing the sources of legitimacy in discourse. In this approach, a legitimizing discourse is observed "when participants enumerate gains/losses from a certain move; or an evaluation in comparison to some alternative."[21] From a discourse-theoretical framework, legitimizing discourses can rest on three types of argumentative justification, namely *pragmatic*, *ethical-political* and *moral*. *Pragmatic* justifications refer to instrumental utility, hence the costs and benefits of a certain action. *Ethical-political* justifications take the form of arguments that involve references to the discursively constructed collective identity, values or symbols, hence the notion of "we" in a given social group. Finally, *moral* justifications draw from the language of rights, law, and the universal concept of justice. While ethical-political and moral justifications can be argued to belong to norm-based arguments, pragmatic justifications can be treated as strategic arguments that exclude normative beliefs and principles.[22]

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[14] Henrik Larsen, "Normative Power Europe and the Importance of Discursive Context: The European Union and the Politics of Religion," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2014b), p 420.

[15] Natalia Chaban, Michèle Knodt and Amy Verdun "'Talking With', not 'Talking At'? Perceptions of the EU as a Global Normative Energy Actor in the Eyes of BRICS and 'EU Big 3,'" *Comparative European Politics* (2016), p. 6.

[16] Natalia Chaban, Michèle Knodt and Amy Verdun (2016), p. 6.

[17] Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaidis, "The De-Centring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), pp. 283-303.

[18] Henrik Larsen (2014b), pp. 424-25.

[19] David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

[20] Liam Stanley, "Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations," *Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2016), pp. 236-49.

[21] Ted Hopf, "Making the Future Inevitable: Legitimizing, Naturalizing and Stabilizing. The Transition in Estonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2002), p 410.

[22] Frank Wendler, "Justification and Political Polarization in National Parliamentary Debates on EU Treaty Reform," *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2014), pp. 549-67.

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This does not mean, however, that these justifications always appear separately from one another. In fact, all three can be used simultaneously, for both legitimating and de-legitimating purposes, within "a complex argumentation."[23] Nonetheless, one can expect more intense contestation across ethically-politically and morally justified debates than in pragmatic ones, especially in cases where normative justifications hold more relevance for contention in certain policy issues.[24]

> ❝*From a theoretical standpoint, the use of focus groups rests on the constructivist assumption that individual attitudes are not essentially given, but discursively constructed through interaction.*❞

Adopting the tripartite distinction of argumentation of discourse theory does not necessarily imply that we aim to uncover the key motives and actions of discourse participants, as can be observed in other studies that also employ the analytical apparatus of discourse-theory.[25] Hence the question of whether actors mean what they say is not among the interests of this study. Instead of an "action-theoretical" approach as such, this article adopts an "argumentation-theoretical approach" which focuses "on the structure, content and types of arguments at the intersubjective level [rather] than on the underlying motives and action-theoretical foundations at the subjective level."[26]

Doing this requires a methodology that generates data where actors justify their positions through in-depth debates in an intersubjective context, which suggests the utility of focus group interviews in the scope of this research. A focus group is mainly defined "as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher."[27] Such groups can thus be considered as "collective" or "semi-public" interviews where the discussion of participants (ideally five to 12 persons) is framed by a moderator, who "imposes the subject on the participants and makes sure . . . the discussion is kept alive."[28]

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[23] Marika Lerch and Guido Schwellnus, "Normative by Nature? The Role of Coherence in Justifying the EU's External Human Rights Policy," *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2006), pp. 304-21.

[24] Frank Wendler (2014).

[25] Helene Sjursen, "Why Expand? The Question of Legitimacy and Justification in Enlargement Policy," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2002), pp. 491-513.

[26] Marika Lerch and Guido Schwellnus (2006), p. 306.

[27] David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 130.

[28] Virgnie Van Ingelgom, *Integrating Indifference: A Comparative, Qualitative and Quantitative Approach to the Legitimacy of European Integration* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014), p. 83.

From a theoretical standpoint, the use of focus groups rests on the constructivist assumption that individual attitudes are not essentially given, but discursively constructed through interaction. Facilitated discussion encourages citizens' in-depth participation in debates on "sensitive or complex subjects," displaying the diversity of tensions and cleavages in the articulation of their opinions on a given topic.[29] Focus groups also provide an environment where politics is staged, in the sense that they create a politicized context within which individuals present their "mobilized opinions" through which key points of contestation come to the fore.[30] In that sense, focus groups present an ideal environment for identifying the sources of legitimacy of certain policies, actions and actors within a given social group since the method not only generates the "content" of each participant's justification, but also provides for group interaction which shows how contest and consensus are discursively produced within the group.

> *"The data show that pragmatic argumentation is the type most utilized by focus group participants in justifying their positive evaluations of the EU in the Turkish context."*

The literature on focus groups argues that convening four focus groups or 20 participants is sufficient to reach a "saturation point" where "research has enough data to pre-empt . . . the content of discussions."[31] For the purposes of this study, five focus groups were convened in Istanbul in March 2016, each with seven to 10 participants and with each session lasting around three hours. A total of 43 participants took part in the focus group discussions. They were selected by a professional recruitment agency, out of a participant data-set comprising of individuals who did not take part in a similar exercise in the last six months prior to the study. The groups were formed using a "simplified model of social stratification—based on education and occupation,"[32] as declared in their screening forms which contained personal information on the participants. The participants were grouped artificially, in the sense that none of them knew each other beforehand. To facilitate the discussion, each group had a more or less homogenous social composition (based on education and occupation), but a heterogeneous political make-up as measured by a short survey administered before formation of the groups, where participants were asked to declare the party they voted for in the last Turkish general elections in November 2015. A certain

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[29] Virgnie Van Ingelgom (2014), p. 84-85.

[30] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[31] Liam Stanley, "'We are Reaping What We Sowed': Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity," *New Political Economy*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (2014), p. 900.

[32] Sophie Duchesne, Elizabeth Frazer, Florence Haegel and Virgnie Van Ingelgom, *Citizens' Reactions to European Integration Compared: Overlooking Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2013), p. 160.

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degree of social homogeneity was necessary so that participants could "speak the same language" and "situate themselves in relation to the other participants" in articulating their views.[33] The heterogeneous political make-up and anonymity within the groups were chosen to foster diverse ideas and promote debates that would lead to the identification of participants' views on the EU.

It is clear that 43 participants in total cannot constitute a national sample. Yet, unlike studies informed by rationalist theories, the goal here was not to "reproduce in miniature the structure of the base population," but in line with interpretivist approaches, "to guarantee a minimum representativeness of the participants . . . in the qualitative sense of representing the diversity of opinions with regard to the topic of discussion."[34] Hence rather than reaching generalizable conclusions about whether the Turkish public supports or does not support Turkey's accession to the EU, or whether it bestows positive and/or negative attributes to the EU as a whole, the study attempts to display the structures of meaning within which individuals frame and legitimize NPE in complex argumentation and through participant interaction. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the claims reached through the analysis of focus group data cannot be extended beyond the individuals who participate in the focus groups. Here, the distinction between "empirical generalizability" and "analytical generality" becomes useful.[35] Whereas the former entails making generalizations for the population through representative samples consisting of individual responses, the latter shifts the focus away from the individual to the context-based justificatory narratives which "produce", "challenge" and "negotiate" normativity in social settings.[36] Indeed, if one is to treat "communication as a social phenomenon," then justification patterns that are key to NPE are expected to occur not so much through isolated responses in asocial contexts, but via collective conversations in social settings such as the focus group.[37]

The discussions were conducted by a professional consultant moderator and were organized around four questions that were broad enough to provide ample room for discussion, yet oriented specifically towards the topic under question. After being requested to briefly present themselves, the participants were asked whether they considered themselves as Europeans, whether the EU was a good thing or a bad thing for Turkey, what they thought about the issue of Turkey's (possible) accession to the EU, and the reasons underlying their support for and/or opposition to Turkey's

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[33] Virgnie Van Ingelgom (2014), p. 93.

[34] Sophie Duchesne, Elizabeth Frazer, Florence Haegel and Virgnie Van Ingelgom (2013), p. 164.

[35] Liam Stanley (2016), p. 243.

[36] Bente Halkier, "Focus Groups as Social Enactments: Integrating Interaction and Content in the Analysis of Focus Group Data," *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010), p. 79.

[37] Ted Hopf (2002), p. 412.

EU membership. The discussions were videotaped, audio-taped and transcribed ver-
batim as Word documents.

The analysis of the texts centers on the question of which types of argumentative
justification actors mobilize to justify their positive and/or negative evaluations of
the EU in the focus group discussions. In doing that, in line with the "argumenta-
tion-theoretical approach" adopted in the theoretical framework, we look for "famil-
iar narrative constructs" and not for the "genuine beliefs" of the actors.[38] In terms of
operationalization, we focus on "agreements" and "similarities" that build up to an
"ideal-type justificatory narrative"[39] as well as "contestation" which demonstrates
polarization, mainly based on the assumption that individuals express their contrast-
ing opinions at the expense of running the risk of disagreement in public only in
cases where they hold strong convictions.[40]

> **"***Despite the 2009 Eurozone crisis, the EU largely continues to be
> perceived as an economic force which is potentially beneficial to the
> countries engaged with it and especially for those countries which
> join as members.***"**

To this end, argumentative justifications were inductively identified from the data. Due
to the relatively small-scale of the data and the interpretivist nature of the study, this
was done manually without the assistance of specialized computer software. Pragmatic,
moral and ethical-political justifications (used to legitimize and de-legitimize the EU)
were separately coded, with the assigned focus group participant numbers attached
to each articulated justification.[41] A justifying argument was coded as pragmatic if it
enumerated losses and gains based broadly on economic conditions, living standards,
social rights and services, and mobility. Those that were coded as ethical-political ar-
gumentation rested on cultural and religious (in)compatibility and the fear of territorial
partition. The moral argumentative category consisted of coded utterances justifying
the EU's absence or presence based on a framework of democracy, human rights, the
rule of law, justice (including fairness and discrimination) and social solidarity.

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[38] Liam Stanley (2016), p. 242.
[39] Liam Stanley (2016), p. 244.
[40] Virgnie Van Ingelgom (2014), p. 98-99.
[41] Repeated references by one participant to the same argumentation type were recorded numerically as a single instance
of legitimation and/or de-legitimation through the given argumentation type. However, those cases where a participant
utilised more than one argumentation type and/or where a participant engaged in both a legitimizing and a de-legitimi-
zing discourse on the EU were counted as separate instances.

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Concerning the presence of NPE, which is the main object of this study, normative power will be argued to exist insofar as *moral* argumentative justifications based on specific norms— namely peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance[42] —give the EU's actorness in the Turkish context a certain degree of legitimacy.[43] While *ethical-political* argumentative justifications can also be considered to be norm-based, they are not treated here as constitutive of NPE since they are conceptually restricted to values and traditions that are constitutive of a restricted discursively constructed collective identity (including cultural identity), rather than a broader, more universal community.[44] In presenting *moral* argumentative justifications from focus group discussions, specific attention will also be given to the argumentative justifications used in contesting and/or rejecting such justifications, to demonstrate the argumentative limits imposed on NPE in the Turkish context and what this might also imply for the salience and sustainability of NPE in other cases.

Findings: How Does the Turkish Public Justify the EU?

A first look at the data suggests that the positive evaluations of the EU by the Turkish public are largely legitimized by *pragmatic* (29)[45] and *moral* (24) argumentative justifications, without a single instance in the focus group discussions of legitimization based on *ethical-political argumentative* justifications. Thus, the focus group participants were found to justify their positive views of the EU via utility-based and/or norm-based arguments rather than on a discursively constructed common European identity based on kinship. By contrast, as will be demonstrated in further detail below, justifications of negative evaluations pertaining to the EU (hence the de-legitimization of the EU) took place at all three argumentative levels, albeit more so on *ethical-political* (19) and *moral* (24) grounds than for *pragmatic* (12) reasons. Contestation, meanwhile, taken as the expression of contrasting opinions by the participants in consecutive focus group interactions, occurred mainly around *moral* and *ethical-political* argumentation, and to a much lesser extent on *pragmatic* grounds.

Does Utility Matter?

The data show that pragmatic argumentation is the type most utilized by focus group participants in justifying their positive evaluations of the EU in the Turkish context. The EU is perceived as an institution that can be beneficial from a utility-based perspective, mainly in strengthening social rights and services such as health and

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[42] Ian Manners (2002).

[43] Henrik Larsen (2014b), p. 423.

[44] Helene Sjursen (2002), p. 502.

[45] The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of separate participants who articulated a given representation.

education (11), improving living standards (7), allowing for increased mobility for Turkish citizens who currently face strict visa restrictions (6) and improving the overall economic conditions in the country (5). These perceptions are expressed by some of the focus group participants as in below:

> FG3 (3): The EU is mainly an economic force, a good force. Let me give you the example of Greece. Greece experienced an economic stalemate, an economic crisis. With support from Germany and other places, the EU rescued Greece.
>
> FG4 (6)[46]: Some say that the EU economy is getting worse, according to what exactly? Perhaps it is worse than it was in the past, but a retired person from the EU can come to Turkey with his/her pension for an entire month and stay in the most luxury hotels. This is the standard that the EU can provide.
>
> FG4 (2): Yeah, absolutely. They get about 1,800 Euros, close to 5,000 liras in Turkish currency.
>
> FG4 (6): Our retired citizens could never afford that, even if they saved up for years.
>
> FG4 (5): If they could buy 10 kilos of meat yesterday, now they are crying because they can afford 9 kilos instead of 10. What kind of a crisis is this? (*they laugh*) It would be good if we could have that kind of crisis, I wouldn't mind!

The excerpts above are typical positive evaluations of the EU from an economic point of view. Despite the 2009 Eurozone crisis, the EU largely continues to be perceived as an economic force which is potentially beneficial to the countries engaged with it and especially for those countries which join as members. As demonstrated in the final thread of exchanges above, the impact of the crisis on EU economies is often evaluated in relation to the state of the Turkish economy and the living standards of Turkish citizens, and is hence perceived as ridding the EU of little of its economic strength. This seems to be the case across the focus group participants regardless of their political orientation as expressed through their declared support for Turkish political parties.

Nonetheless, to a lesser extent, the utility-based arguments that are used to justify positive evaluations of the EU can be treated as reasons for the EU's potentially harmful impact on countries like Turkey, particularly across those participants who declare their support for the governing party, the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*,

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[46] In F(4) 6; 4 refers to the number assigned to the focus group from which the excerpt is taken whereas 6 is the number assigned to the focus group participant within that group to which the excerpt belongs.

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Justice and Development Party):

> FG1 (6): I think that the European Union is collapsing, it is collapsing economically. Even in Germany, where I have relatives, they used to send money to Turkey, they used to send Deutsch marks, more by the day. Now they can barely get by. I mean look at the state of Greece. Does anybody want to be like them? Who would ever want to be an EU member these days?

> **"*The local perceptions of the national economy, which also seem to be polarized along the government/opposition axis, filter into the perceived state of the EU.*"**

Based on an account of her personal experiences, the focus group participant above provides a typical negative evaluation of the EU with reference to the effects of the Eurocrisis, and argues against accession to prevent any potentially damaging effects on the Turkish economy. Despite the fact that similar negative evaluations are present across the data (12), they are rarely utilized to directly contest positive justifications based on instrumental grounds. In other words, pragmatic debates largely do not seem to result in consecutive and contrasting interactions, and thus do not lead to direct contestations between the focus group participants. Only in two instances was such a contestation observed; one of these was the following exchange between two participants:

> FG2 (7): People think that we will have better living standards with the EU as if it is a magic wand. Germany became poorer after it entered the EU. EU countries are holding referendums because they themselves are not happy with their economic and political systems. . . . We already enjoy decent standards without the EU. Education is free in our country, books are provided for free for the last 10 years.
> FG2 (3): Yeah, right, free! I paid about 500 liras for the school books this year. The teachers never use those free books.
> FG2 (7): Yes but you also have that in the EU. Also, I remember that we used to have a terrible health system, now we are doing even better than the EU when it comes to health services.
> FG2 (3): (*laughs ironically*)

In these two instances, as seen in the exchange above, the EU's perceived lack of value in utility terms (expressed here as the economy, living standards and health services) established in relation to the (at least equal if not superior) standards enjoyed in Turkey is contested by another focus group participant who holds the opposite view on the merits of the Turkish education and health system. In both this exchange and the other, the contestation takes place between participants who sympathize with the governing party and those supporting the main opposition CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, Republican People's Party), where the governing party supporters seem to have a more positive evaluation of the performance of the Turkish economy, living standards and state services in relation to the EU than those who back the main opposition, a finding that is parallel to current local dynamics.

Overall, it can be observed from the data that utility matters in justifying the EU, more so than in de-legitimizing the EU's actorness in its relations with Turkey. This does not, however, entail an exclusion of norm-based arguments in justifying EU's presence in the Turkish context, to which we now turn.

Contested Normativity in Context

Contrary to general expectations, the data generated by the focus group discussions reveal a heavy emphasis on the use of moral arguments entailing democracy, the rule of law, individual rights and freedoms (20), justice (3) and social solidarity (1) in the legitimation of the EU as a power for good in its relations with Turkey. This is particularly the case for those participants who have declared their support for the main opposition party (CHP) and the Kurdish nationalist party HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party) in Parliament. In fact, it is observed that moral argumentation based on these norms takes second place to the use of pragmatic arguments in justifying the EU's positive impacts in its relations with the country. Nonetheless, the data also show that unlike the pragmatic arguments discussed above, it is the moral arguments as such that are heavily contested in the Turkish context, as seen in the following exchanges between the focus group participants:

> FG4 (5): . . . I am aware of how dark and dirty its [the EU's] past is. But we are living in a different world today. If the EU was present more, if only it could take more decisions on our behalf, then we would not have corpses on the streets. We would not have a nine-year-old's body waiting in the fridge for a week.
> Moderator: Why not?
> FG4 (5): Because of human rights.

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> Moderator: So you are saying that Europe abides by human rights?
> FG4 (5): Yes, absolutely, especially inside, for its own people, but also sometimes for those around it. Having the EU present means pressure. It means that a person cannot be killed by the bullet of the police or a soldier when he is having his dinner.
> FG4 (1): Really, is that the case? I think the EU is a threat to the world. EU leaders and its publics do not like people from outside the EU. We can see it from how they treat the refugees. They don't possess humanitarian values. I lived in Germany for two, three years and I always felt like a second-class citizen, always felt crushed. No, it is not good.

The focus group meeting in which the exchange above was observed took place soon after the surge in clashes between the state forces and the PKK militants in south-eastern cities of Turkey where civilians were also killed. Hence the examples given by the first focus group participant refer to specific deaths that were incurred in the region during this period. The EU is perceived by the first participant in this exchange as a normative anchor in relation to the deteriorated state of human rights in Turkey. It is seen as a normative force not just for its members, but also for those in its wider vicinity, which works by imposing normative constraints on state behavior. Yet, this is clearly contested by the second participant, also via the use of moral argumentation which this time underlines the perceived discrimination by the EU towards its "outsiders" such as refugees and Muslim migrants. This underlying theme of religious discrimination also runs through other exchanges concerning the EU's enlargement policy and contests the EU's perceived normative standing:

> FG1 (4): Of course the EU is a good thing.
> Moderator: Why do you think it is a good thing?
> FG1 (4): I think of the EU as a civilization, that it can rescue this country.
> FG1 (5): Is there civilization only in Europe?
> FG1 (4): Well, yes, in terms of human rights, that is the case. It is a place where there are no child murders, women's murders, where everyone feels safe and at peace. When you reach those standards, you become a civilized country.
> FG1 (6): Is this why they admitted Greece to the EU?
> FG1 (8): No, they admitted Greece because it is a Christian country; they don't admit us because of our religion.

The exchange above involves interactions between four focus group participants

(and the moderator). The first one conceives of the EU as an idyllic place in terms of human rights, a place which sets the standards of a normative civilization that can help change Turkey. Yet, this conception is immediately challenged by three separate participants, questioning respectively the EU's unique role in defining civilizational values and Greece's status as a "civilized member" under these terms. The normative conceptualization of the EU by the first participant is contested by the EU's decision to admit Greece, which is not perceived to be an ideal democracy. The discussion over Greece reflects a repeated type of contestation of the EU's normativity in the data, where the EU is perceived as an unjust actor which applies double standards in its accession decisions by prioritizing those countries with which it shares the same religion, and not necessarily those which aspire to meet the accession criteria.

On other occasions, the normative role attributed to the EU is countered by moral argumentation which focuses not only on the EU's perceived discriminatory enlargement policy which supposedly rests on cultural and religious grounds, but also on Turkey's perceived superior standing to the EU on normative grounds:

> FG2 (6): I am pro-EU. It is absolutely necessary. What matters is international law. I see the EU as a means of settling on democracy and law.
> FG2 (7): I disagree, I don't think that the EU is a good union. It is like NATO, an institution that serves certain interests, with a purpose, and that is why they don't admit us, although we are doing much better than its member countries in economic terms and other matters. It is an institution that does not recognize any other country other than those that share their culture and beliefs. They show their double faces on every occasion, in the Middle East, in other places. . . . We are a leader country which brought peace to the world and we are capable of forming our own union.
> FG2 (2): No, it is good. For media freedoms if not for anything else.
> FG2 (3): I also think it is good for freedoms. We will have a free press. Our country is currently one-sided. With the help of the EU, everyone can feel free to express their opinion.
> FG2 (5): Yeah, then you can't have people who say "I don't recognize the Constitution."

The exchanges above present another typical case of building consensus and contestation in the focus group discussions over the normativity of the EU. For four

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of the participants involved in the exchange, the EU is perceived as an external actor which upholds democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. The significance of the local context in articulating the content of the normative value of the EU is visible in the way the supremacy of the rule of law and expansion of the freedom of expression repeatedly surface as key areas in which EU impact has the potential to make a difference. Freedom of expression, and in particular the freedom of the press, has been deteriorating rapidly in the last few years in Turkey, to the extent that the country's press freedom status ranks as "not free" in the Freedom House 2016 index.[47]

Similar to the other exchanges presented above, the EU is once again represented as a normative actor with the potential to constrain the powers of the country's leadership, and in particular President Erdogan who is known to have explicitly opposed some of the rulings of the Turkish Constitutional Court on the freedom of expression in the past.[48] Yet, such a standing is also immediately contested by another focus group participant on the grounds that the EU is a strictly interest-based actor rather than a normative one, which discriminates against non-Muslim countries in its enlargement policy as well as through other external policies in its wider neighborhood. Turkey is in turn relationally construed as superior to EU member states in economic performance as well as in its normative standing in its wider region ("leader country which brought peace to the world"). Other studies have demonstrated how this articulation of the Turkish Self based on a sense of both material and normative superiority in relation to the EU Other is frequently observed in the AKP discourse.[49] The fact that this representation was particularly taken up throughout the data by those participants who were supportive of the AKP government demonstrates once again the impact of the local government/opposition dynamic in the evaluations of the normativity of the EU in the Turkish context.

Another way in which the EU's normativity is contested in discourse is through ethical-political argumentation which stresses cultural and religious incompatibility between the EU and Turkey:

> FG1 (10): If the EU was not so important, we would not be fighting
> for it for all these years. It is worth fighting for.
> Moderator: Why do you think people fight for it?
> FG1 (10): Because it is good for our country.

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[47] Freedom of the Press 2016 Country Report: Turkey, *Freedom House*, https://freedomhouse.org/report/free-dom-press/2016/turkey

[48] "Turkey's Erdogan Says Does Not Respect Court Ruling on Journalists," *Reuters*, 28 February 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-media-erdogan-idUSKCN0W10E6

[49] Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2016).

> FG1 (2): It is good because of the rule of law, the legal system.
> You get a punishment commensurate with the crime. This is not
> the case in Turkey.
> FG1 (3): Yes, in every field, in every field that is imaginable, but
> most importantly in the field of law, the laws, Europe should be an
> example to us.
> FG1 (6): Can I please say something? I know that I have said too
> much already, but you know when you say there is freedom in the
> EU and all that. My relatives live in the EU. My cousin was edu-
> cated there, he made a life for himself with no connection to his
> family, had two kids. Is this really freedom, a civilization with no
> values, no respect for the family?

Here too, the EU is initially presented as a normative actor by the first three partic-
ipants once again with respect to its just legal system and its exemplary emphasis
on the rule of law. Yet, this claim is immediately countered by the final participant
who underlines the EU's perceived lack of traditional values such as the primacy
of the family. Indeed, the de-legitimation of the EU's presence through ethical-po-
litical argumentation based on the incompatibility of cultural and religious values
between the EU and Turkey occurs a number of times (12), mainly across supporters
of the AKP and the nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Action
Party) and, as in the exchange above, can be used the de-legitimize the normative
actorness that is attributed to the EU. These values are not restricted to the "primacy
of the family," but can take various other forms in discourse such as "traditions,"
"customs," "ethics" and "lifestyles."

Another type of ethical-political argumentation used in de-legitimizing the EU,
while rarely used to directly contest arguments in favor of the EU's normativity,
relates to the fears of territorial partition by the Western powers that surface widely
across the Turkish public, also referred to as the Sèvres syndrome in Yılmaz's[50] ear-
lier work on Euroscepticism in Turkey, as expressed in the following:

> FG3 (5): Right now we are heading towards partition. Germany
> and Israel are supplying the money, they give the guns, everything,
> to lead us to partition. . . . We have our own natural resources, but
> they are not letting us use them. They want to divide us and share
> our resources. . . . Right now, we are all alone, nobody supports us.
> Russia is trying to divide us, Iran, Syria, America, Israel, everyone.

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[50] Hakan Yılmaz (2011).

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The fear of territorial partition by foreign powers, a regular theme in narratives of Turkish collective memory and national identity[51], is expressed mostly by those focus group participants who claim their support for the AKP and the MHP (7). Nonetheless, the key foreign powers that are most commonly cited as those with the historical intent to divide Turkey are the United States and Israel, with specific EU countries (mainly Germany) and the EU playing a secondary role. When employed, however, this representation runs the risk of undermining normative justifications in favor of the EU by representing it essentially as Turkey's dangerous "Other" which is thus precluded from doing any "moral good."

Conclusion

This article sought to study the perceptions of the EU across the Turkish public with a focus on the perception of the EU as a normative power in this specific country context. In so doing, it aimed to contribute to remedying the gap between the external perceptions literature on the EU and the plethora of works on NPE by employing focus groups, an under-utilized methodology in interpretivist research in EU studies.

In conceptual terms, the study worked from the assumption that recognition through legitimacy is central to the branding of the EU as a normative power. Indeed it was observed that it was through discussions on the justifiability of the EU's engagement with and presence in Turkey that debates on the EU's normativity took place. On these conceptual grounds, the local context stands out as a key factor shaping the perception of the EU as a normative power. The local factors which shape this perception can include "cognitive" and/or "normative priors,"[52] otherwise also referred to as "cultural filters"[53] based on "historically constructed domestic norms."[54] Here, such priors would include the continued existence of the Sèvres syndrome, as also previously identified by Yılmaz[55], which runs the risk of undermining the EU's normativity in the Turkish context, or the perceived cultural and religious incompatibility, also observed in Yılmaz's[56] earlier data, which is used in countering arguments on the significance of the EU's normative impact. Yet, the data show that in the Turkish case, the notion of "cultural filter" needs to be expanded to account for the government/opposition dynamics concerning the state of democracy in the

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[51] Dietrich Jung and Wolfango Piccoli, *Turkey at the Crossroads: Ottoman Legacies and a Greater Middle East* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2011).

[52] Annika Björkdahl, Natalia Chaban, John Leslie and Annick Masselot, "Introduction: To Take or Not to Take EU Norms? Adoption, Adaptation, Resistance and Rejection," (eds.) Annika Björkdahl, Natalia Chaban, John Leslie and Annick Masselot, *Importing EU Norms: Conceptual Framework and Empirical Findings* (London: Springer, 2015), p 5.

[53] Ian Manners (2002).

[54] Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1999), p. 87.

[55] Hakan Yılmaz (2011).

[56] Hakan Yılmaz (2011).

country. Those who identify themselves with the opposition and who feel more constrained by the government's track record in fundamental rights and freedoms are more inclined to attribute to the EU a more positive normative role than those who are supportive of the government and seem to be content with the state of democracy in the country. This is also the case for pragmatic arguments in favor of and/or against the EU. The local perceptions of the national economy, which also seem to be polarized along the government/opposition axis, filter into the perceived state of the EU. Nonetheless, caution would be required in generalizing the overwhelming prevalence of the government/opposition dynamic in the Turkish case to other country cases where the perceptions on NPE are under scrutiny. This is mainly due to the fact that the degrees of popular polarisation in Turkey are very high[57] and thus the government/opposition dynamic, although needs to be accounted for, may not have a similar weight in shaping perceptions on NPE in other countries where polarisation levels are lower.

Although the "local" matters in shaping perceptions of NPE, it can be argued that EU policies also play a central role, particularly in feeding into perceptions which undermine the normativity of the EU. This can result from the EU's direct policies towards Turkey such as its hesitance towards the country's accession, as also expressed at times in religious and cultural terms, but also from its policies towards its own migrant populations and refugees as well as other countries in its southern neighborhood.

The analysis, however, shows not only the factors behind the perceptions of NPE, but also the polarization concerning the normative position of the EU. It is seen that the most intense contestation occurs not in pragmatic debates on the EU, but over the normativity of the Union. This is in line with Wendler's[58] expectation that in political debates, ethical-political and moral arguments are more intensely contested than pragmatic ones. In this study's focus group data, NPE is most commonly contested by moral argumentation such as the EU's mistreatment of its migrants, refugees and other Muslim countries or its perceived unjust policy towards Turkey as an accession country. To a lesser extent, it is countered by ethical-political argumentation resting on cultural and religious incompatibility.

This brings us to a final, more empirical and policy-relevant finding of the study, which is the presence of an NPE discourse across a certain segment of the Turkish public, despite the negative state of EU–Turkey relations at the macro level and the vocal Euroscepticism of the country's governing political elite. This shows that

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[57] Emre Erdoğan, "Turkey: Divided We Stand," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 12 April 2016 ,http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-divided-we-stand

[58] Frank Wendler (2014).

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claims about the presence or absence of NPE in a certain country or a region need to be qualified by the level of analysis that one chooses to look at. In this particular case, the data show that moral justifications seem to closely follow utility-based justifications in legitimizing the EU, which implies that retaining and strengthening the EU's normativity may require the EU to find novel and creative mechanisms of engaging with the Turkish public and civil society that are more resistant to the downturn in political relations. This seems to be all the more relevant after the further deterioration of EU-Turkey relations following the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Rapid worsening of Turkey's democratic track record after the failed coup attempt coupled with the increasing anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric of the government have pulled the two sides even further apart from one another in this period. However, the results of the April 2017 constitutional referendum have also shown that almost half of the Turkish public is against the current steps taken towards authoritarianism in the country. This is demonstrative of the need to take into account the political heterogeneity of the Turkish public, also reflected in this research, in devising EU policies geared towards enlarging the rapidly shrinking democratic space for Turkish citizens.