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Framing Turkey: Identities, public opinion and Turkey's potential accession into the EU

Azroun, R.

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the European Community, enlargement has been considered as an important policy area and an important part of the European integration process. In the past, European affairs were left at the discretion of political elites. Citizens were not interested, and as long as citizens were not negatively affected, politicians had a free hand.

With the signing of the treaty of Maastricht and the founding of the European Union, European cooperation became increasingly political in nature. Citizens became more interested and, also, more critical of what happened in the EU. As a result, politicians needed to take their constituencies into account when negotiating European issues. This illustrates the importance of understanding public opinion towards the EU.

Previous studies have shown that identity factors are important in formation of opinions towards the EU. Individuals are likely to approve cooperation with members of the same group, while opposing cooperation with members of other groups. The question is who belongs to the own group and who does not. In this dissertation we focus on the relation between identity factors and attitudes towards the EU.

For this, we focus on the specific case of Turkey's potential EU membership. The public debate around Turkey's potential membership has many facets, which relate to similar facets in debates concerning the EU. But identity issues (is Turkey actually European, and so should they be part of the EU?) are very prominent in the case of Turkey's potential membership, making it a most likely case to study identity issues. But it is also a good case to focus on, because given the relative straightforwardness and the high contestation of the issue, it is likely that most citizens have an actual opinion about it.

A central concept in this dissertation is *framing*. In a complex reality it is impossible to comprehend an issue in full, both in a communicating text and in an individuals' mind. Framing refers to how an issue is understood: which aspects of the issue are taken into account and which are not. Through this, frames give meaning to the issue and thus play an important role in opinion formation. Looking at the case of Turkey's potential EU membership framing is for example about whether citizens focus on the

question whether Turkey is European or not, and what this focus means for opinion formation.

In chapter 1 we begin with a description of the frames citizens use when evaluating the issue of Turkey's potential membership. By coding the presence or absence of frames in the answers to an open-ended question, we show that the frames citizens use strongly resemble the frames in political and media debates. The potential accession of Turkey is framed in terms of the degree to which Turkey developed in terms of democracy (development frames), what the (mainly economical) consequences of Turkey's accession would be for EU citizens (utilitarian frame), and whether Turkey is actually European (identity frame). Previous studies have often argued that citizens would use these frames, but until now this had not been empirically tested.

In chapter 2 we continue with the utilitarian frame and the identity frame. We ask the question how we can explain which citizens are likely to use these frames. We argue that the use of these frames depends on more general values of what someone thinks is important. Using a survey in 21 countries, we show that citizens who believe other utilitarian issues are important are also likely to use the utilitarian frame, and that citizens who believe other identity issues are important are likely to use the identity frame.

From chapter 3 onwards we focus on anti-immigrant attitudes. Previous studies have shown that anti-immigrant attitudes strongly affect attitudes towards the EU. This is explained by arguing that the anti-immigrant attitudes reveals to us to what degree the holder of these attitudes categorize the world in 'us' and 'them'. This does not depend on the specific group of immigrants, but depends on personal characteristics of the holder of the attitudes. Also, previous studies have shown that defining a group of people as 'the other' is sufficient to show a negative bias towards these people. Applied to the EU, this leads to the following argument: individuals who define immigrants as 'the other' are also likely to define other Europeans as 'the other', and because other Europeans are defined as 'the other' cooperation with these 'others' is assessed negatively.

In chapter 3, we test this argument using a mediation analysis. We show that individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes indeed define Turks more often as ‘the other’ and that because of this they are more negative towards Turkey’s potential accession. With this, we showed that the most important (empirically witnessed) predictor of opinion towards Turkey’s potential accession is indeed related to identities.

In chapter 4 we turn to the question under which contextual circumstances anti-immigrant attitudes are a stronger or weaker predictor of EU attitudes. For this, we first look at the presence of Turkish immigrants and Muslims. We argue that when a specific group has a stronger presence, citizens are likely to have experience with defining this group as ‘the other’, and this experience leads to the actual use of the frame when looking at the case of Turkey’s potential membership. Because the presence of immigrants is not a guarantee for actual direct contact with the immigrants (and thus for framing immigrants as ‘the other’), we also look at ‘indirect contact’ with immigrants. This indirect contact is formed by cues citizens receive from national politicians and the national media. Our study shows that although the presence of Turkish immigrants and Muslims matters, it is primarily the cues of national politicians and the media that affect the magnitude of the effect of anti-immigrant attitudes on support for Turkey’s accession.

Not only do media affect the way in which individuals think in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, this way of thinking also affects the way new information from the media is received. Individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes do not only show a negative bias towards other groups, they also have a strong need to protect their own group. From this, we argue that negative evaluations of Turkey’s potential EU membership in the media have stronger effects on individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes. In chapter 5 we describe a media-effect-study, where we linked data from a content analysis of news media from 21 countries to survey data. Although we could not explain the variation in support for Turkey’s accession with individual exposure to media content, we did find citizens to be receptive of the information that was available in the media system. As we predicted, we found that individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes were more strongly influenced by negative evaluations in the media.

Overall, this dissertation adds to our understanding of the role of identity factors in opinion formation in the case of Turkey's potential accession. But although the Turkish case may be an ideal case to look at identity factors, it also sheds light on the relation between identities and more general attitudes towards the EU. The EU is always about cooperation, sharing and integrating with other Europeans, who may be defined as 'the other' by their different nationality, language and/or culture. This raises the question where EU citizens draw the line between 'us' and 'them', and how this may affect the legitimacy of the European project.