



ENC SUMMARY

FROM COUP ATTEMPT TO REFERENDUM – Identity Groups Revisited.

June 2017

Research staff at European Neighbourhood Council (ENC).

BACKGROUND TO SUMMARY

The European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) held a European Parliamentary Roundtable Policy Discussion on the topic of identity and minority groups in Turkey with experts and academics, including think tanks and non-governmental organizations, on the 6th of March 2017.

The parliamentary roundtable included three key experts and field researchers from Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM): Ms. Sabiha Gündoğar, Research Director; Mr. Etyen Mahçupyan, Executive Board Member and Professor Vahap Coşkun, Dicle University.

Other speakers included Ms. Ayşe Yırcalı, Executive Director at PODEM and Mr. Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, Managing Director at ENC.

Part of a series of ENC roundtables on Turkey, the parliamentary roundtable aimed at opening the floor to questions from civil society concerning identity and voting patterns ahead of the Turkish referendum on the 16th of April, while providing expert advice and information to parliamentarians and commission officials about the concerns and expectations from the various groups and field data from interviews and research.

This summary includes the conclusions from the event, data from various field reports provided by PODEM, as well as ENC research and views expressed during the event and during the following months between March and June 2017.

The research information provided by PODEM helps get a better understanding of the intricate social and identity fabric, which is tied to current domestic and regional dynamics.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

In terms of sentiments expressed during the study by identity groups and minorities concerning Turkey's national unity and the 16 April referendum Ms. Ayşe Yırcalı, Executive Director of PODEM, made the following comments on the subject:

‘The political and social landscape in Turkey is very polarized after the coup attempt’, she claimed. She also said that the **conflict in Syria is affecting the situation in Turkey to a large extent.**

Having partaken in the field research process, Ms. Sabiha Gündoğar, Research Director at PODEM, noted that the polarization is not new – however, there are new divisions both politically and socially after the coup attempt. One example of the new

societal divide, that was brought forward by Mr. Vahap Coşkun, **is that two Kurdish sub-groups, the nationalistic and the Islamic, are unexpectedly approaching each other, according to various reports.**

According to Ms. Gündoğar it is important for the diverse social groups in Turkey as well as the political leaders to stand united and move forward, regardless of the political and societal divisions. The different identity groups may have at least one political interest in common: to help Turkey recover.

In terms of the parliamentary roundtable experts and field report researchers, Mr. Vahap Coşkun, Professor from Dicle University, made the following comments on the subject:

Importantly, **the general perception of Kurds as one singular ‘political entity’ appears to be incorrect.** Instead, the results indicate that various groups exist which perceive the Turkish government in very different ways, including supporters and various layers of more constructive groups that are willing to cooperate or oppose the government.

‘All the Kurdish sub-groups have different explanations of the coup attempt’, Mr. Coşkun explained, revealing that Kurds voting for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) **believe that the failure of the coup attempt was a victory for democracy** while Kurds voting for Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) **believe that the coup was orchestrated by Erdoğan** to strengthen the public image of himself and his party, the AKP.

According to the report, nationalistic Kurds who vote for neither AKP nor HDP believes the coup attempt was a military coup and fear that it would have been a more difficult situation for Kurds if it had been successful. The nationalistic Kurds criticized the HDP after the coup attempt because they were not vocal enough, but praise the public resistance towards the military, which holds a high societal status in Turkey.

The coup attempt was clearly a significant event for political leaders as well as for society in general, regardless of which point of view one has.

Mr. Coşkun said that there are three main conclusions to draw from the coup attempt: First, it could have created more solidarity than it did. The political leaders seemed to increase the societal divisions, and were pressured to handle the legal situation that occurred after the attempt. Second, it could have provided a better foundation for democracy and political processes; it has not been managed very well after the coup attempt.

In addition, the Kurds have been excluded from the post-coup processes. ‘As long as there is no solution to the Kurdish issue, there is always risk for another coup attempt’, he claimed. He furthermore revealed that the **Kurdish sub-groups altogether have four demands on future policy-making: reconsideration of the**

citizenship definition, recognition of Kurdish as mother tongue, centralization and election equality.

Nevertheless, political and social polarization is evidently a central component that must be addressed in the all processes taking place after the coup attempt.

According to Mr. Etyen Mahçupyan, Executive Board Member at PODEM, there should be a general optimism when looking at Turkey, even if it might not exist politically at the moment. Different identity groups are agreeing on several points, and the concerns ahead of the referendum taking place on the 16th of April was no exception.

For instance, research results demonstrate that an increase in anti-Erdoğan sentiments and corruption as well as a decline in the economic and democratic development was expected regardless of the referendum's outcome and of political affiliation.

In terms of how the secularist group in Turkey perceived the political and social developments after the coup attempt, PODEM's research publication *Secularists in Turkey in the Aftermath of July 15: Debates, Sentiments and Expectations* presents the following findings on the subject:

Regarding the coup attempt in itself, the **majority of the people interviewed for the report describe their uncertainty when receiving the news of an on-going coup attempt; several participants were surprised about the sudden event, but suspected that the government probably knew about the attempt beforehand and used the course of events to gain public popularity.**

Even though the participants in this research presented in the report were critical to the government and the fact that it allegedly abstained from preventing the coup attempt for its own interest, they were **pleased with having a strong leader as Erdoğan to handle the situation.**

Many participants also regret not taking to the streets during the coup attempt, as there were mostly AKP sympathizers present, while the rest did not want to get involved in the coup attempt's turmoil.

Yet again, the research publication suggests that the division within societal groups is clearly visible, creating sub-groups according to opinion or political affiliation rather than identity.

However, the secularist group agrees that there was an opportunity for all identity groups to meet on common ground after the attempt – an opportunity that was not seized. As a consequence, political tension and polarization is increasing.

In terms of the Alevi community's understanding of the coup attempt and expectations for Turkey's future, the research publication *The Alevis' Agenda from July 15 to the Present* was published by PODEM, presenting the following findings:

Alevis participating in the research make clear that they treated the coup attempt with caution and fear, bearing previous coup attempts in mind that ended bad for their community. Having a low credibility in the state apparatus, this identity group is hesitant to publicly share opinions on the aftermath of the coup attempt.

As they do not hold sufficient amount of information about the proposed amendments to the constitution either, they instead focus on the outcome and aftermath of the referendum. On top of the agenda is freedom of religion or belief, together with social peace and justice.

These circumstances and sentiments portray the Alevi community as passive and cautious in the political realm. However, the report suggests that the identity group is very self-determined to re-assure their demands – especially to avoid being discriminated by the government.

In terms of the Kurdish peoples' expectations and demands after the coup attempt, PODEM has published the research publication *From July 15 Coup Attempt to the Referendum: Impressions from Diyarbakır*, presenting the following findings:

According to the report, **Kurds believe that the blocking of the coup attempt offered an opportunity for social reconciliation in Turkey – an opportunity that unfortunately was not taken advantage of.** This, together with a general sense of exclusion from the process of amending the constitution, creates an opposition towards the government.

However, one should note that this identity group is consistently holding in mind Kurdish rights and freedoms, and is evaluating political parties according to this affiliation. One of the conclusions of the report is that, according to the Kurdish group's views, the new constitutional amendments do not solve any of the societal problems for either Kurds or Alevis, and should have encompassed more cultural rights and freedoms.

There is a serious need for new initiatives in order to solve the Kurdish issue, and the forthcoming political processes must learn from previous events and experiences.

The regional context could potentially offer some solutions to the current Kurdish situation.

One example of moderate stability is the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which continues to enjoy an important economic and political relationship with Turkey and the West. In the case of the KRG, radical Kurdish elements such as the

People's Protection Unit (YPG), a terrorist organization in the European Union (EU), are not tolerated and have been eradicated through the professionalization of the Peshmerga army.

Further research and surveying is needed on such regional stakeholders in order to better understand similar cross border identity groups and their beliefs and priorities vis-à-vis stability, Turkey and peace, as well as topics covering 'cultural rights and freedoms'.

The need for political progress on identity groups within Turkey and regionally is an important priority, which could potentially be addressed during the upcoming two years due to the 'electoral calmness' in Turkey.

PARTNERS AND RESEARCH

The parliamentary roundtable was held in cooperation with the Public Policy and Democracy Studies, PODEM.