

(Mis)communication across the Borders: Politics, Media and Public Opinion in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley defined public opinion “as a process of interaction and mutual influence rather than a state of broad agreement” in 1918. On the other hand, according to the American political scientist V.O. Key, public opinion was “opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed,” in 1961. During the 1990s, advances in statistical and demographic analysis helped the development of an understanding of public opinion as the collective view of a defined population, such as a particular demographic or ethnic group. In this view, the influence of public opinion is not restricted to politics and elections. Public opinion is considered a powerful force in many other spheres, such as culture, fashion, literature and the arts, consumer spending, and marketing and public relations.¹ Attitudes and values play a crucial role in the development of public opinion. Different variables embedded in the political, social and media structure of the country also have potential to make an impact on public opinion. These dynamics vary from the economics to the judicial system and democratic principles functioning in that country. On the other hand, public opinion has a power to shape politics and media’s priorities in reporting. The interaction among politics, public opinion and media of one country can be better analyzed with the findings of public opinion research administered regularly.

In Turkey, the research on and analysis of public opinion are most frequent during the election times. Therefore, it seems necessary to measure the public opinion more regularly to test the relationships among political, public and media agendas. Accordingly, the current study seeks to fill this gap. It is argued that in the absence of timely feedback from public surveys, decisions and policies for improving different services and institutions functioning in the country might not achieve their expected goal. The findings of surveys may not only yield important insights into public’s opinion regarding contemporary agendas of the country, but also into the correlates shaping public policies.

This article focuses on variables setting the current agenda in Turkey. For that purpose, two surveys were carried out in December of 2014 and consecutively in April 2015 to determine the social and political trends and perceptions on gender issues in Turkey.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Diffusion of Information, Public opinion, Politics, Media and Turkey.

¹ Public opinion. Accessed 12 March 2015:
<http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/482436/public-opinion>.

INTRODUCTION

In social sciences research, studies involving diffusion of innovation and diffusion of information have been used to examine the process of message adoption and examine the roles of intervening steps and conditions “which increase or decrease the likelihood that a new idea, product, or practice will be adopted by members of a given culture.”² It is important to know how and by whom the public is itself influenced: “A central idea in...diffusion research is that influentials—a minority of individuals who influence an exceptional number of their peers—are important to the formation of public opinion.”³ “A person evaluates a new idea and decides whether or not to adopt it on the basis of discussions with peers who have already adopted or rejected the innovation.”⁴ This dependence on peers underlines the role of opinion leaders in the innovation diffusion process.

Opinion leaders influence the opinions of audiences via personal contact, ‘but additional intermediaries called change agents and gatekeepers are also included in the process of diffusion.’⁵ Besides opinion leaders and other intermediaries, news commentators, presidents, political party leaders and special interest groups also have the power to shift public opinion, which has substantial proximate effects on policymaking. Policies are judged in terms of expected costs and benefits for the public. Since there is great uncertainty about the effects of policies, the expected utility of a particular policy alternative depends upon beliefs.

While making decisions about alternative policy choices, most people look to the media. Newspapers, radio, television and the internet are the cheapest and most accessible tools to obtain information. Public opinion about a specific topic might change if news about that topic reaches large audiences. However, the credibility of news media can be an issue. While the media has access to a variety of information sources, from presidents to average people, these sources have differing levels of salience and credibility, and therefore have different impacts on policy evaluation by the public. The discrepancy factor makes an effect on the process opinion formation as well. If what the media report is similar to previous news coverage of a given topic, it

² Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2010). *University of Twente, Communication and Information Technology*. Accessed 11 January 2015:
http://www.cw.utwente.nl/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Communication%20and%20Information%20Technology/Diffusion_of_Innovations_Theory.doc/

³ Watts D. J. & Dodds, P. S. (2007). Influentials, networks, and public opinion formation. *Journal of Consumer Research* 34 (4): 441.

⁴ Rogers, E. & Singhal, A. (1996). *Diffusion of Innovations*. In M. Salwen & D. Stacks (Eds.) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers: 410.

⁵ Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2010).

merely reinforces existing beliefs and opinions, therefore making it difficult to perceive changes in public opinion. But on the other hand, “if credible new information calls into question key beliefs and opinions held by many people, we would expect changes in public opinion. The extent of discrepancy with past news and past opinions must be taken into account.”⁶

Agenda Setters

Agenda-setting refers to the process in which the perceptions of a given issue are shaped by the mass media, the public, and/or policy elites. It has long been argued that the mass media plays a primary role in shaping public opinion. The basic assumption of the agenda-setting theory is that the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. Agenda-setting studies have revealed a variety of internal and external influences that affect the news agenda. The president, public information officers, public relations specialists, interest groups, press releases and press conferences have emerged as external sources that wield influence over news content. On the other hand, long-standing journalistic traditions, practices, values, and gatekeeping functions have existed as major internal factors that set the media agenda. With their agenda-setting power, the media may encourage policy makers to look at the issues that the majority of the public is interested in and can prompt them to take precautionary measures. By setting the agenda about the wrongdoings of policymakers, the media also can activate the public and as a result can cause dramatic changes in the political scene.

New Media’s Role in Agenda Setting

The evolution of new media tools created changes on some aspects of communication theories. In this regard, the basic assumptions of agenda setting theory have kept their importance but one aspect of the theory has changed. This change is called “Agenda Melding.” While agenda setting mostly concentrates on the power of media to set agendas; agenda melding analyzes the ability of audience members to select among media, issues, and elements of messages.⁷ The advent of the Internet made possible for people all around the globe to find others with similar agendas and collaborate with them. New communication technologies have increased the role of citizens in agenda setting process, making everyone both the reader and reporter of the news. In this aspect, the Internet plays role in forming Internet user’s opinion as well as the public space. Research on Internet mediated agenda setting⁸ revealed ‘reversed agenda effects’, meaning that public agenda could set media agenda.

Research on Public Opinion in Turkey

This study aims to reveal the current public opinion in Turkey regarding the most important issues of the country. For that purpose, two consecutive surveys were carried out in December 2014 and April 2015. The first survey was done to determine

the social and political trends in Turkey. At the verge of general elections, the second survey was done to reveal social perceptions of gender and women in Turkey. The subjects for the studies, which utilized a questionnaire in one-on-one interviews, included 1,000 individuals aged 18 years and older from 26 cities representing general population of the country, in both surveys. A stratified random sampling frames have been taken and face-to-face interview format have been used (Kadir Has University Social and Political Trends of Turkey Survey 2014; Kadir Has University Social Perceptions of Gender and Women in Turkey Survey 2015).

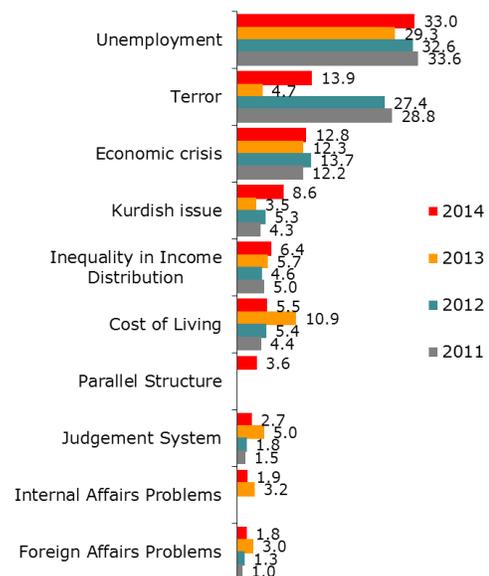
RESULTS

Political Opinions

The findings of the two surveys indicated that conservatism is on the rise in Turkey. In response to the question “How would you describe yourself politically?” 37.1% of the respondents described themselves as “Conservative” while 16.5% described themselves as “Republican/Kemalist”. 20.2% of the respondents defined themselves as being “Nationalist”.

Turkey’s Biggest Problem

In 2014, the most serious problem that respondents indicated was unemployment with 33%. Terrorism was found to be the second most pressing concern by 13.9% of survey participants. While 12.8% of the public showed economic crises as the biggest problem, 5.5 % saw expensive life, and 6.4% of them showed inequality in incomes as the most important problems. Taken as a whole, a total of 57% see the biggest problem of Turkey as related to unemployment and economics.



The findings of the survey revealed that economic problems are increasing in Turkey. As seen here, if the issue is something like unemployment that the average citizens experience directly in their lives, they don’t need the media to tell them that issue is important. Based on personal experiences, they can decide on the country’s most pressing issues. It should also be noted that even though media reports

⁶ Page, B. I; Shapiro, R. Y. & Dempsey, G. R. (1987). What moves public opinion? *The American Political Science Review* 81 (1): 23-24.

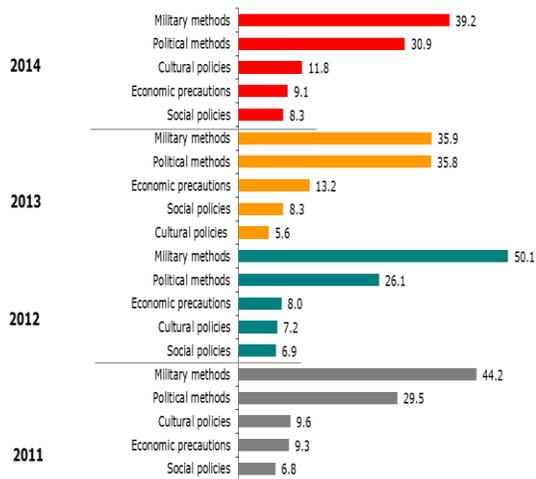
⁷ Shaw, D. & Colistra, R. (2008). Agenda Melding. In L. Kaid & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of political communication*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.: 12-13.

⁸ Kim, S. T.; Lee. (2006). New functions of Internet mediated agenda-setting: Agenda-rippling and reversed agenda-setting. *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies* 50 (3): 175.

regarding economic developments and progress in Turkey can be observed frequently, and in spite of government officials' statements such as "Turkey is immune to the turmoil engulfing the surrounding region, and is the country as an island of stability,"⁹ the public is still able to formulate their ideas on their own regardless of information disseminated by the media or political figures on this issue.

Terrorism and the Kurdish Issue

According to the majority of respondents (39.2%), military methods are the most effective way in dealing with terrorism problem. 30.9% of survey participants saw political methods as the way to solve the issue. In parallel to that, trust in the military has increased from 51.7% to 57.7% since last year, making it the most trusted institution in the country. Trust in the Institution of the Presidency has fallen from 40.7% to 40.5%. It is notable that although negative perceptions of the media and the government's negative discourses on military personnel in recent years have become prevalent, the public still points to the military as the most trusted institution. This is revealing in terms of how public opinion of the military is reflected in other issues, such as terrorism, as discussed above.

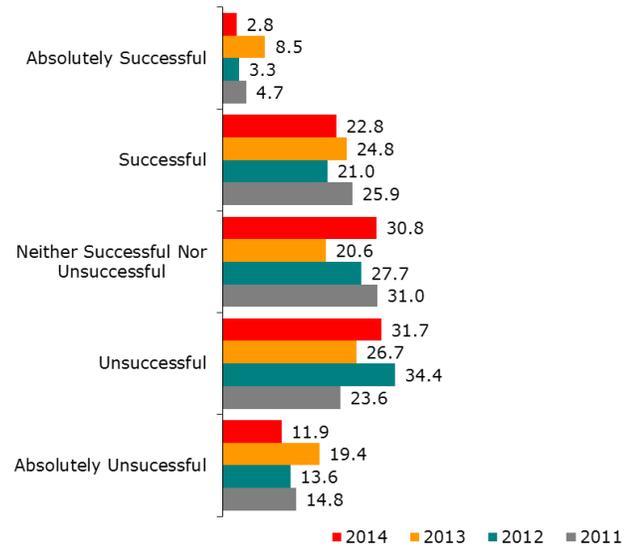


When the time gets close to the date of general elections, so-called "peace process" has become the popular issue in government's agenda, and directly has passed into the media's agenda. The ratio of people who thought that government's peace talks with Kurds will be resulted with success is 24.7%. On the other hand, 23.4% of respondents believe that more effort should be spent, and 19.4% find government's strategy on that successful. These findings of the survey would likely interest the authorities as regards dominant public opinion on the matter.

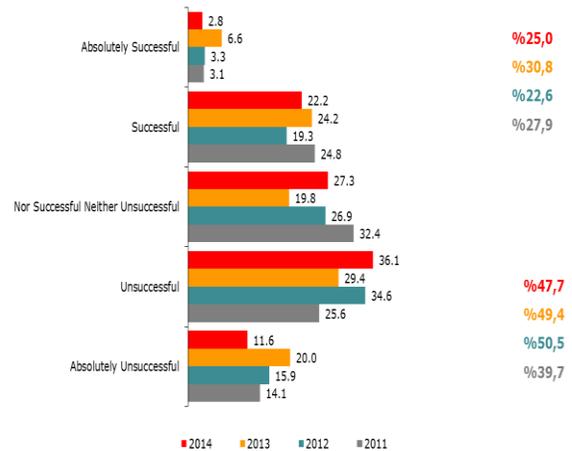
Notably, 43.6% of respondents stated that they thought the government's policy against terrorism was unsuccessful. It is probable that media's reports on terrorist attacks against government troops and consequent military losses may have pushed increasing numbers of people to think that

⁹ Canikligil, R. (2015). Turkish prime minister in New York quest to soothe investor concerns. *Hurriyet Daily News*. Accessed 25 May 2015: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-prime-minister-in-new-york-quest-to-soothe-investor-concerns.aspx?pageID=238&nID=79225&NewsCatID=344>

government's strategies in dealing with terror do not work. Since the terror is an issue not to be experienced directly in many people's life, it can be speculated that the media has been powerful in shaping public opinion.

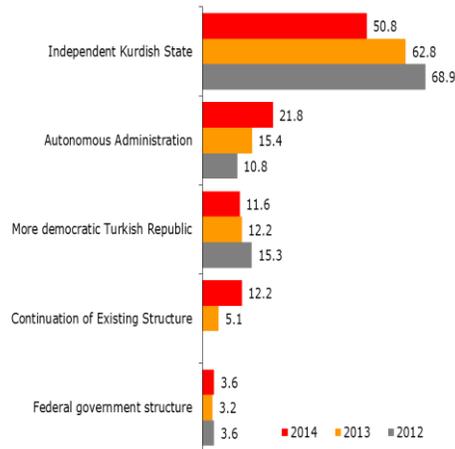


In 2014, there was a decrease in the percentage of people who thought that the government was successfully handling the Kurdish issue. While 30.8% of respondents stated that the government was handling the problem successfully in the previous year, this figure decreased to 25% in 2014. The ratio of people who found government's policy on Kurdish issue unsuccessful is 47.7%. A higher level of education was found to be in a direct relation with dissatisfaction of government's handling of the Kurdish issue.



When asked what kind of government Kurdish people would like to have in the future, 50.8% of respondents said that the Kurds would like to have an independent Kurdish government, while 21.8% of respondents thought that Kurds want an autonomous administration. The majority of people (80%) do not feel comfortable of Abdullah Ocalan's (PKK leader) prison term's turning into house arrest, if peace process becomes successful. The findings of the survey indicate that Kurdish issue is still a very sensitive topic for Turkish public. And for such a sensitive topic, it seems

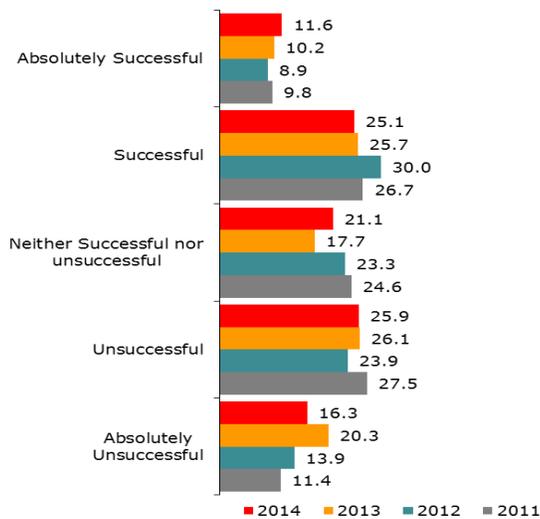
difficult to change old and deeply-rooted public opinion. Neither powerful opinion leaders nor the media have been able to successfully influence public opinion on certain aspects of the Kurdish issue.



Success Rates of Government and Opposition

43.5% of survey respondents described President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to be successful in 2014 while the ratio of those who found him unsuccessful was 35.9%. The ratio of those who thought positively about Presidency’s moving from Çankaya was 37.5%, but 48% of participants thought the opposite. 37.6% of respondents regarded the new Presidency Building as a waste of country’s resources. On the other hand, 33.2% of them argued that it showed Turkey’s power.

The responses taken for questions about internal politics showed that the ratio of those who describe the government as successful in general has risen to 37.5% from 35.8% since 2013, while the rate of those finding Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu successful has been 33.8%. In 2013, during Erdoğan’s term of office, the ratio of those finding the Prime Minister successful was 38.7%.

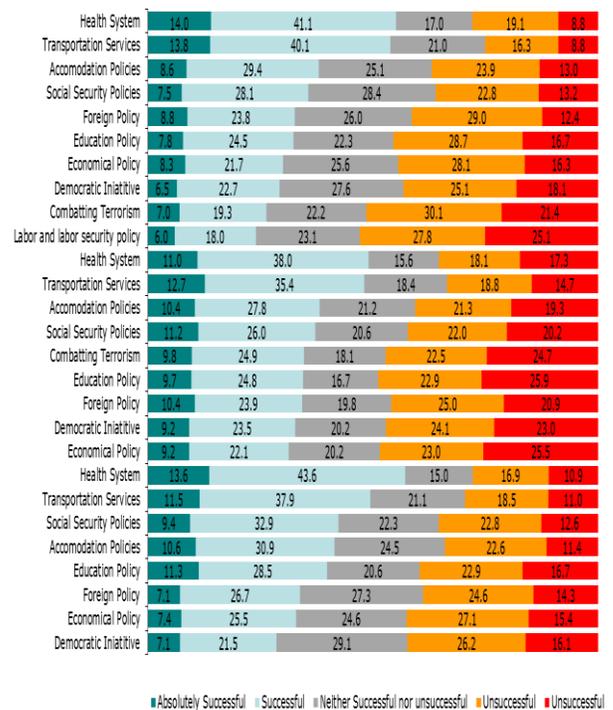


The percentage of respondents describing the main opposition CHP (Republican People’s Party) as being successful went down from 19.6% in 2013 to 15.4% in 2014. Those who find CHP to be unsuccessful has increased from 64.4% to 67.9%.

The ratio of respondents who finds the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to be successful has decreased from 19% to 13% since the 2013 survey while those thinking he is unsuccessful went up to 70.2%.

According to the 2014 survey’s results in which those who are undecided are distributed, 42.1% of respondents stated that they would vote for AKP (Justice and Development Party) if there is an election today. The ratio of those who would vote for CHP (Republican People’s Party) is 23.4%, for MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) is 14.3%, and for HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) is 9.1%. 10.6% of survey participants asserted that they would not vote.

When asked what they thought were the most successful aspects of government policy, respondents replied that the foremost developments were in the fields of health, transportation, and housing. This finding demonstrates that government’s investment in such social issues, the results of which were clearly visible in the eyes of the public, was deemed to be the best. Based on this, it can be assumed that the government’s performance on these areas would bring them some votes.

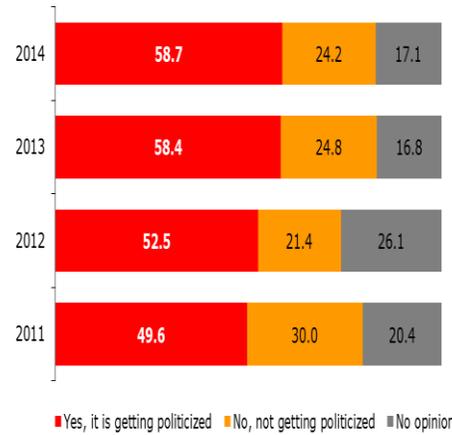
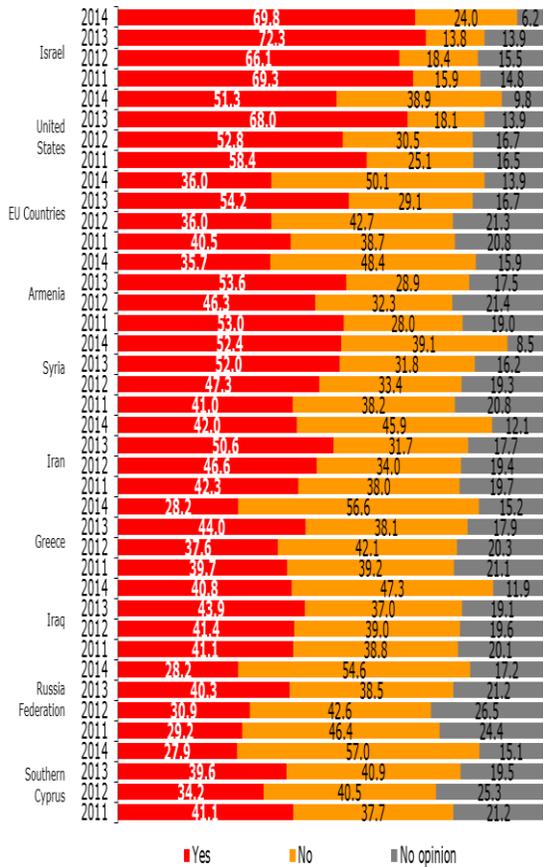


Foreign Policy

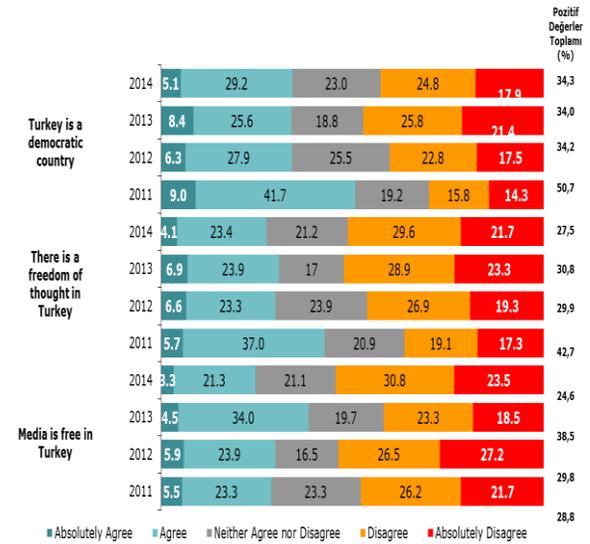
According to the survey, the rate of those who find the government’s foreign policy performance successful is 32.5%. It should be emphasized that the ratio of people who think that government’s foreign policy strategies are successful is decreasing gradually since 2011. In the survey, Israel is again at the top of the list of countries to “pose the biggest threat to Turkey” in 2014. It was also found that there was an increased amount of distrust in Turkey’s foreign relations with other countries regardless of political views; 34.4% of participants said that Turkey “should act alone” in response to the question “Who should Turkey work closely with in terms of foreign policy?” It should be noted, however, the latest political developments positively affected the desire of collaboration with USA in foreign policy. An increase was also reported in

the ratio of those (30.8%) who think that USA is Turkey's ally.

The majority of respondents found government's position about Syria (53.7%) and Egypt (47.4%) unsuccessful. Only 19.1% of survey participants support the government's views on Kobani (Ayn al-Arab). The amount of respondents who think that ISIS is a terrorist organization is 93.2% and those who believe that it is a threat for Turkey is 82.3%. These findings reveal the dominant view in public opinion that Turkey should remain unbiased and refrain from any forms of conflict in the Middle East, contrary to government's desire of involvement in Middle Eastern politics.



In 2014, there was majority support (79.3%) for a parliamentary democracy compared to the option of a presidential system (12.6%). At the verge of general elections in Turkey, President Erdoğan was asking support for presidential system frequently. But this finding and the results of general election did not give any support to him in that manner.



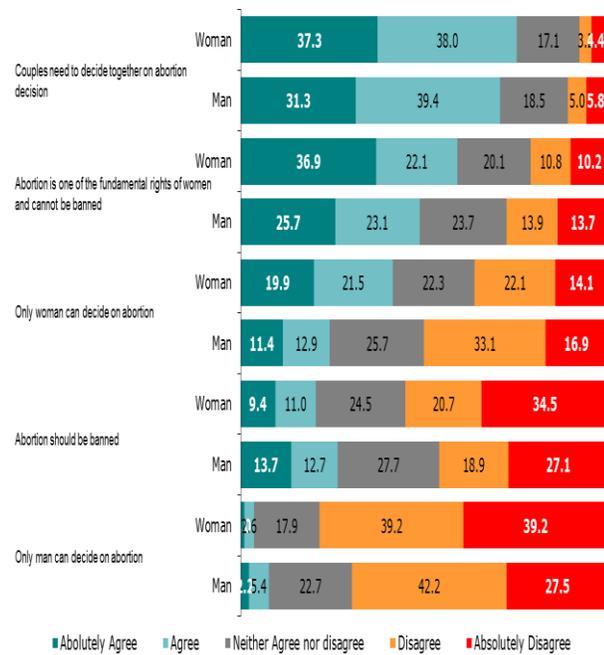
Judicial System and Democracy

58.7% of survey respondents believed that Turkish judiciary is becoming politicized while 24.2% of them thought the opposite. The finding suggests that this position is held across the political spectrum. It is probable that the frequent media coverages implying strong influence of government on judicial system and news about corruption of judicial officials may have caused to this perception.

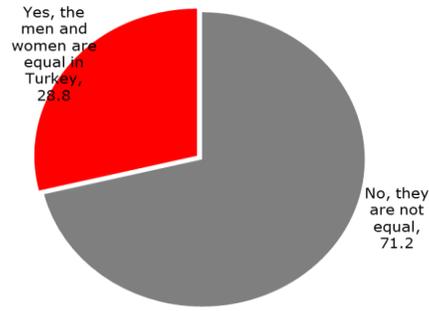
As regards democracy, freedom, and media; levels of discontent remain high. Compared to 2013, a decline has been observed in terms of perceptions concerning democracy, freedom of thought, and freedom of the media. According to the responses for questions about democracy and media, the greatest change compared to 2013 was in terms of the freedom of media. When asked whether they think there is free speech in Turkey, the rate of those saying "Yes" went down from 30.8% to 27.5%, while those saying "Yes" to "The media in Turkey is free" went down from 38.5% to 24.6%. On the other hand, only 20% of respondents believe that Turkey is a democratic country as opposed to 30.3% of them stating "Democracy is getting weaker." This opinion of Turkish public seems to be confirmed globally as well. The Freedom House changed Turkey's press freedom status from "partly free" to "not free" in 2015. And according to the 2014 World Press Freedom Index, Turkey ranked 154th of 180 countries.

Social Relations / Gender Perceptions

Kadir Has University's 2015 Survey of "Social Perceptions of Gender and Women in Turkey" reveals the inequality between men and women in Turkey and public opinion regarding abortion, the ideal number of children, women's employment, and family life. 53% of respondents stated that abortion is a fundamental right and shouldn't be banned, while 88.3% stated that young people under 18 years old should not be allowed to marry even with the consent of their families. 60% of those taking part in the survey stated that 2 is the ideal number of children in a family. These findings are in a great conflict with Turkish government's discourses arguing "abortion is a murder and should be banned"¹⁰ and especially President's statements emphasizing that ideal number of children in the family must be 3. The government issued even a law legalizing the state support for the amount of 1300 Turkish lira for those who will have 3 children.¹¹



The 2015 Survey further showed that the majority of participants (71.2%) believe men and women are not equal in Turkey, while 83.7% agree with the view that ensuring equality between men and women is the state's duty, and 81.7% of them assert that women's rights should be legally protected. 67.3% of respondents think that EU membership would be beneficial for women's rights. 77.9% of survey participants also mention that there are not enough women representatives in the Turkish Parliament and 72.5% of them support the view that "there should be more women representatives". The majority of respondents (61.4%) express that policies of political parties towards women would influence their votes.



Life in Turkey

According to 2014 Social and Political Trends in Turkey Survey, 55.7% of population felt that change in Turkey was taking a positive direction, while 44.3% of them believe the opposite. The number of people who stated that they are content living in Turkey decreased to 60.7% in 2014, compared to 67.2% rate in the previous year.

CONCLUSION

The article of Jack Walker on policy innovation diffusion in the United States which was published in *The American Political Science Review* nearly 45 years ago was one of the classic and most influential studies on policy diffusion. Since then, scholars of political science and communications have investigated various aspects of policy diffusion by showing how developments in communication technologies have created new channels for information dissemination. These developments have triggered new questions about the spread of ideas and policy change.¹²

Public opinion surveys are one of the best tools to measure the process and effectiveness of information diffusion on different issues. Measuring public opinion may also serve as a barometer of culture's contemporary sentiment and reflect the universality or differentiation of certain moods.¹³ Findings from these surveys are useful for understanding the behavior of the public toward different institutions and services and whether there is any change in them over years. Finally, an understanding of public opinion may enable researchers to better comprehend the cultural, social, and political structure of certain country and further enlighten us on why and how some problems exist in a particular society.

As the findings of this study indicate, the most important problem that Turkey is facing is related to economy. Unemployment and financial difficulties are talked most by the public in spite of government's frequent declarations about economic growth and progress in the country and concurrent media reports on this issue.

¹⁰ IMC TV (2015). Accessed 20 May 2015: <http://www.imctv.com.tr/67451/2015/02/kurtaj-yasada-hak-hastanelerde-yasak/>
¹¹ Hurriyet (2015). 3 çocuk doğuran anneye 1.300 liralık devlet desteği yasalaştı. Accessed 5 June 2015: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/28847165.asp>.

¹² Mintrom, M. and Mossberger, K. (2008). The Politics of Ideas and the Diffusion of Policy Innovations. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the APSA 2008 Annual Meeting, Hynes Convention Center, Boston, Massachusetts. Accessed 22 February 2015: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p279414_index.html.
¹³ Cao, L. and Burton Jr., V.S. (2006). Spanning the continents: Assessing the Turkish public confidence in police. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 29 (3): 452.

Another significant finding of the research is the rapid change observed in the content of agenda items. This, in turn, reflects to public opinion with a result of public's lack of understanding of certain issues. For example, the so-called "peace process" with Kurds could not be handled effectively by the government to allow public to perceive the priorities on the matter to be able to build concrete opinions. There has been a break in the information diffusion process. This issue did not go far beyond the discussions in the political scene and following media reports, and did not enter the public's agenda. As a result, the government could not mobilize the public opinion in a direction desired on issues including the Kurdish issue, the system of governance, democratic principles, on certain gender perceptions and some aspects of foreign policy. The majority of Turkish public people were able to develop their own opinions regardless of what the media and government officials have said on these issues. But it can be speculated that the ex-prime minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the most powerful actor that sets political, media and public agenda in Turkey. In 2012, when he was a prime minister, he gave an interview to NTV and stated that "as a Prime Minister it would be his job to set the agenda. He was the only one to schedule the timing of such disputes." Erdoğan still is successful in setting the agenda as the President mostly because of the lack of effective actors in Turkish political scene. The success rates of opposition leaders in this research seem to confirm this argument. On the media side, different types of pressures on media organizations and journalists create an atmosphere of fear with a result of ineffectiveness of media to set the real agenda, since they mostly had to depend on government officials in reporting.

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