



Emotional vs. Rational Divide in Turkey's Transatlantic Identity

By Özgehan Şenyuva

Recent studies on public opinion in Turkey reveal an interesting and worrisome picture: Turkish society has become extremely polarized.¹ The fault line, which appears to be very deep, lies between party affiliations, mainly between those who support the governing party and those who do not. Additionally, there are three major islands of agreements, areas where citizens agree on negative terms: opposing gender equality and extended women's rights; Syrian refugees; and most significantly, the dislike and mistrust of Europe and the United States.²

In 2017, PEW placed Turkey at the top for anti-American sentiments, globally. 79 percent of the respondents in Turkey stated that they have an unfavorable opinion of the United States and 67 percent have an unfavorable opinion of Americans. These figures are the highest among NATO member states, the highest in Europe, and second after Jordan in the Middle East region.

Public opinion in Turkey has been moving slowly but steadily toward anti-Western attitudes over time. We might see Turkey as a unique case of a society with very strong anti-European, anti-American sentiments. But it is more likely that Turkey is part of a larger phenomenon currently affecting other countries as well, especially in Europe.

These attitudes are motivated in large part by *fear*. One can clearly observe the politics of fear in Turkish society, and fear as an explanation for many attitudes and political choices by citizens. Individuals form opinions and make decisions based on their fears and not with reason. Zygmunt Bauman rightly coined the term, *liquid fear*, which can easily change its source and its direction.³ Liquid fear is an endemic in Western societies, where individuals live in a world increasingly marked with insecurity and vulnerability because of the uncertainties of the neo-liberal world.

It is only natural that certain politicians make use of this fear for personal and political gains. The reason liquid fear is so powerful as a social force is that it does not require a real danger. In the age of post-truth, one may easily create the perception of danger to trigger fear. Rational analysis and fact checking are secondary, fear rides on emotions. There are plenty of examples: the Brexit campaign and the use of Europeans as a source of evil, the Bowling Green Massacre which never happened, yet people held vigils for non-existent victims, and the "what happened in Sweden last night" statement by the U.S. president in February 2017, suggesting a terror attack took place (it did not). Turkey is no exception. During the Gezi park protests in 2013, then mayor of Ankara, Turkey's capitol, tweeted about blueprints of an atomic bomb being discovered in the tents of the protestors.

1 Istanbul Bilgi University, Center for Migration Research, "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey 2017," <https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/en/our-researches/25/dimensions-of-polarization-in-turkey-2017/>

2 Dimensions of Polarization, Commonalities Section.

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.



Fearmongering works better in societies where anti-elitism is presented as a virtue and the experts are demonized. The increasing popularity of ad-hominem politics, where it matters who said it rather than what is said, allows politicians to have a free reign in abusing the truth and bending facts — or even inventing them. All that fear culminates into a wide spread moral panic, which refers to a condition, episode, person or group of persons that emerge to become a threat to society, as coined by Stanley Cohen in 2002.⁴

Moral panic, fed by the liquid fear of the individuals and exacerbated by politicians, keeps segments of societies on alert, in constant search of an enemy. The current global economic and political state of the world strongly feeds this panic. Dani Rodrik lists increasing inequalities; constant economic anxiety; decline of perceived status and the chasm between elites and ordinary citizens as major grievances that autocratic populists have successfully exploited.⁵ The specific type of populism riding on moral panic is the right-wing populism that is on a steady rise throughout Europe. Cas Mudde lists the major characteristics of right-wing populism as “nativism feeding on us versus them; authoritarianism with special emphasis on law and order and populism as defending the rights of decent ordinary citizens against a corrupt elite.”⁶

These three elements have been quite powerful in determining the political and social debate in Turkey, similar to other European states like Hungary, Poland, and Britain. The number of people who are afraid of the others, who represent a potential threat to their social, economic, and political well-being are increasing and this is reflected in the political sphere, whether it be the results of Brexit referendum or local, national, and presidential elections.

Increasing polarization and anti-Western attitudes in Turkey are all a function of this moral panic and fear of individuals. Therefore the three discourses — nativism, authoritarianism, and populism — are becoming increasingly attractive to those individuals who fear

losing what they possess. As Bauman rightly points out, liquid fear is more effective among individuals who are in a precariat situation; who are aware that they are walking on a thin ice and are at greater risk of losing their perceived status. For instance, the high level of anti-Syrian attitudes in Turkey, according to a Bilgi University study, is a clear manifestation of nativism in Turkey.⁷ Nativism leads to a birth right social status that puts the individual in a higher position against those who came later. This is not too far from anti-immigrant attitudes throughout Europe. The increasing popularity of historic Turkish TV series also reveals a lot. These series — which are based on a glorified, nostalgic, and even distorted historical account of Turks and the Ottoman Empire — are viewed loyally by the majority of the Turkish society, going across party and ideology lines. The photos shared by individuals watching these shows dressed in medieval war gear, yielding swords and shields, are too serious to be taken lightly. These attitudes go beyond the living rooms and become determinants in political and social interactions and decisions.

At the international level, the notion of evil Europeans jealous of Turkey’s achievements and thus trying to undermine and sabotage it is a popular line of thought in Turkey. The corrupt foreign elite conspiring to damage Turkey’s well-being is a popular discourse that is affecting Turkey’s transatlantic identity and its relations with other European states and the United States. At the national level, these factors dominate the political discourse and are determinants in political actions of individuals. The upcoming snap presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on June 24 will take place in this very polarized and tense political atmosphere.

The important question now is: Will the electoral campaign period address the homo-economicus; the individual who will make a rational decision by evaluating the past performance of the incumbent government, and focus on prospective models for an alternative. Or, the individual may bypass the rational process and appeal directly to the heart and to the emotions. The best leverage for emotional mobilization is fear.

4 Stanley Cohen, “Moral Panics as Cultural Politics,” in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd ed.), Routledge: London, 2002.

5 Dani Rodrik, “What’s Been Stopping the Left?,” Project Syndicate, April 10, 2018.

6 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

7 Istanbul Bilgi University, Center for Migration Research, “Attitudes Towards Syrians in Turkey 2017.”

After all, targeting emotional instability through fear seemed to be the working formula for the previous round of elections in 2015. The results of the June 7 general elections resulted in a hung parliament where the governing party lost 9 percent of its votes, costing its parliamentary majority. It recovered its loss and majority in the November 1, 2015 repeat elections. What marked the period in between was the wave of unprecedented terror attacks in Turkey, including the deadliest attack in Turkish history. A bomb attack during a peace rally at the Ankara train station on October 10, 2015, left 109 dead and hundreds more injured. The repeat elections in November took place in a profoundly different atmosphere, voters searching for stability and security rather than change.

The initial stages of the electoral campaign already manifested the tendency to lean toward emotional-fear based framing, especially in the wake of the sharp decline of Turkish lira in the third week of May. In the face of Turkish lira's slide, pro-government circles immediately called wolf, transmitting the message that Turkey is under attack by foreign powers, a form of financial attack. The citizens are asked to unite behind the leader for a better defense and vote accordingly.

When fear takes over reason in making political, social, and cultural decisions, one should remember the excerpt of the Bene Gesserit Litany Against Fear from the book series *Dune Chronicles*: "I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration." If fear is allowed to take over rationality, it will leave nothing behind. Societies should be reminded that one cannot solve problems by fighting others; thinking that others are the only cause of their problems.

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