

Turkey's Kurds and the quest for recognition.

Transnational politics and the EU-Turkey accession negotiations.

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Abstract

The growing literature on transnationalism documents the ways in which immigrants and refugees stay connected with their communities and countries of origin and shows how homeland governments reach out to their former constituents. Social, financial and political ties are extended across borders. We know little, however, about the specific ways in which oppositional transnational political practices are shaped and made effective. What is more, research on transnational political practices has often limited itself to investigations of the connections between nation-states. This paper illustrates how transnational political practices articulate different levels of policy making (local, national, supra-national) in ways that multiply the effectiveness of engagement at any one site. It will be shown that homeland political activists can effectively shape the homeland political agenda through the mobilization of immigrants' and refugees' associations and institutions in multilevel constructions of networks, constituting a space of political engagement that needs to be considered in its own right.

Keywords: transnationalism, linguistic and ethnic minorities, discourse framing, Kurdish nationalism, Turkey-EU accession negotiations.

Introduction

This paper describes how the networks of politically self-aware national or ethnic groups active in a certain country can be extended to include significant communities outside the 'homeland'. This extension of the actors involved at different sites allows the oppositional homeland political actors to push their demands upwards to supra-national levels of political organization, which leads to pressure on homeland governments and institutional arrangements. But in addition to showing how this mobilization brings these resources to bear on change in the homeland, the case studied also shows how they give rise to new spaces of political engagement. The full significance of those spaces remains relatively unconsidered in existing studies of transnationalism. The particular case of how a Kurdish Mayor of Turkey's main pro-Kurdish opposition party managed to inscribe the demand for multilingual services into the Turkey-EU accession negotiations will serve to demonstrate how new spaces of political engagement come into being and successfully shape political agendas.

Data for this paper were collected from February to October 2007 and in March and April of 2008. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Europe (Brussels and Strasbourg) and in Turkey (Diyarbakir, Ankara and Istanbul) with leading members of the main politically active Kurdish associations, members of human rights organizations, politicians, academics, intellectuals and journalists, as well as with politicians in Europe who have engaged themselves with 'the Kurdish question' and thus have become mediators to certain levels of organization. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I took part in Kurdish delegations to the European Parliament in Brussels and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Interviewing and making observations was important to find out what initiatives the subjects under study had proceeded and were planning to undertake. As I was researching what could be called an

political activist ‘elite’, for whom it was of strategic importance not to reveal their activities very openly (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002), approaching them personally, conducting long conversations with them, and in particular observing them in their daily activities provided me with a kind of information that could not be gathered upon the basis of classical quantitative surveys. The interviews as well as the observations provided insight into the networks and their spatial arenas, the political demands and discourses, and the political activities directed towards members of the European institutions. This paper is written from an agency-oriented perspective, which incorporates the ways actors present their problems and develop coalitions (Smith & Bakker, 2005).

In the first section of the article I begin by discussing the significance for transnational political practices of network articulation over multiple policy levels, as well as the importance of ‘frame bridging’ therein. I then explore the case of Mayor Demirbaş and the Municipality of Sur. This case shows how networks and assemblages between different levels (local, national, supra-national) are constructed and how these new configurations reach beyond the limited boundaries of the nation-states in which the organizations that comprise them are presumably embedded. Special attention is given to the importance of ‘frame bridging’ in the construction of networks of state and non-state actors over these multiple levels as a discursive strategy to successfully set political agendas. In the final section, the supportive role of Kurdish associations of the European Kurdish diaspora in these transnational political practices is explained in detail.

1. Transnational political practices and multi-level network constructions

The literature on transnationalism is proliferating. However, most of it is concerned with: (1) the contacts immigrants sustain with their country of origin and the ways they give shape to transnational communities (Westwood & Phizaklea, 2000; Nell, 2004), (2) the effects of transnationalism on assimilation (Guarnizo et al. 2003), (3) the policy pursued by the sending country's government to sustain the loyalty of emigrant nationals (Portes, 1999; Margheritis, 2007), or (4) the explanatory factors for immigrants' transnational political engagement (Eccarius-Kelly, 2002; Adamson, 2001; Ögelman, 2003). Less attention has been given to the transnational political practices instigated by oppositional homeland political actors and to the multi-level network construction these actors engage in. My concern here is to use the case of Mayor Demirbaş to demonstrate how oppositional homeland political actors mobilize leverage, paying particular attention to the ways in which the articulation of networks across various sites of political engagement multiplies the effectiveness of their actions. With the exceptions of Shain (2002), Al-Ali & Koser (2002) and Grojean (2008), the literature lacks case studies that try to assess the effectiveness of transnational political practices.

Several authors have explored the transnational dimensions of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey (see, for example, Wahlbeck, 1999; Van Bruinessen, 2000; Lyon & Uçarer, 2001; Eccarius-Kelly, 2002; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, Watts, 2004; Grojean, 2008). However, most studies have confined themselves to the transnational political practices of immigrants and refugees living in Germany, where Turkish and Kurdish residents account for one third of all foreigners and comprise 30% of the asylum stock (Sirkeci, 2006: 74).¹ A 2003 study on the transnational political practices of Kurds and Turks in Germany found lobbying towards supra-national institutions to be a rare phenomenon (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Nevertheless, in a comparative exploration of the theoretically existing political opportunities for Kurdish nationalist activists in Turkey, Germany and the European Union, Vera Eccarius-

Kelly (2002) foresaw an increase in the transnational political practices of Turkey's Kurds towards the European institutions. The case presented here demonstrates that these predictions have been realized. However, it also shows that the study of the transnational political practices of Turkey's Kurds can no longer be confined to the study of transnational relations between home and receiving states, but that the political claim-making of Kurdish political activists needs to incorporate research on multiple levels of policy-making.

Transnationalism studies seek to overcome 'methodological nationalism' and 'methodological territorialism' (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). Methodological nationalism is the assumption that all social relations are organized on a national scale or are becoming nationalized (Brenner, 2004: 38). 'Methodological territorialism' is the assumption that all social relations are organized within self-enclosed, discretely bounded territorial containers (Brenner, 2004: 38). However, although most authors avoid the trap of methodological nationalism, most studies on transnationalism still tend to be restricted to the transactions of ideas, people and material between the home state and the receiving state (see, for example, Portes, 2001, Guarnizo et al., 2003; Argun, 2003). Therefore, the trap of 'methodological territorialism' is not entirely overcome, since the transnational political practices are still situated primarily in and between the national territories of the home and receiving states. If we follow the different trajectories of the actors involved, however, we see that transnational political practices oriented towards homeland political situations involve more actors and levels of policy-making than typically presumed. Furthermore, we also see how these organizations and connections are constitutive of a distinct political space – or 'space of political engagement' – that deserves to be studied in its own right. A space of political efficacy and performance is created that, in many ways, stands apart from the traditional levels of political organization (e.g., municipality, nation-

state, EU, etc.). Concepts that are crucial to understanding the making of this space and its political significance include the notions of ‘network articulation’ and ‘frame bridging’.

The case of Mayor Demirbaş and Sur demonstrates how marginalized actors manage to press their claims through engagement at spatial levels of policy-making (for other examples, see Haarstad & Fløysand, 2007 and Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). By developing networks that articulate multiple sites and levels of political organization, movements can circumvent the historically entrenched political hierarchies (Smith 1995). The ability to press claims at multiple levels of policy-making enhances the effectiveness of an otherwise local opposition group. A ‘new political space’ is developed, outside the boundaries of the nation-state. This spatial configuration is composed of networks of social, cultural and economic relations and occupied by the conscious association of actors in separate locations linking themselves via networks for specific political and social ends (Marden, 1997). The spatial configuration resembles what Thomas Faist has defined as a ‘transnational social space’: that is, a space consisting of ‘combinations of sustained social and symbolic ties, their contents, positions in networks and organizations, that can be found in multiple states’ (Faist, 2000:199). This new political space has the ability to change the relationship between the marginalized and the dominant, and as such it is a form of empowerment. Our case study demonstrates the complex spatial power configurations that emerge through engagement in transnational political practices. These configurations involve Kurdish politicians in southeast Turkey, Kurdish associations in Europe, immigrant media, non-governmental organisations, national politicians in the states in which Kurdish immigrants are residing, along with international advocacy groups and members of supra-national institutions, etc. Networks are constructed and maintained that make it possible to articulate issues at higher levels to mobilize leverage (Haarstad & Fløysand, 2007).

However, the production of such a space depends crucially on the effectiveness and flexibility of discursive strategies. Gaining access to influential politicians at different levels of policy-making requires deliberation over the discourses that will be employed. The success of transnational political practices depends on choosing the right problems to present as rallying points and paying attention to how these problems are presented or framed. Interest groups thus adapt their discourse and narratives to institutional realities. Vis-à-vis European institutions, Kurdish groups have successfully framed their concerns in terms of human rights and democracy (see also Adamson, 2001; Natali, 2005; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Frames help to interpret problems, to define problems for action and suggest pathways to remedy the problem. They enable (re)interpretation and representation, and help to (re)define grievances and claims. Social movements are involved in struggles over meaning as they attempt to influence policy – hence, an essential task is to frame problems and injustices in a way that convinces a wide and diverse audience of the necessity for, and utility of, attempts to redress them. Consequently, frames are not given but rather created and transformed in the process of contestation (Zald, 1996). Whether the information that is distributed will lead to common action depends on whether different actors will identify with the cause of concern (Tarrow & Mc Adam, 2003). The symbols, narratives and metaphors that are used by those who speak out must resonate with those of other actors; otherwise, they will fail to convey the meaning that the speaker intends (Hardy et al., 2000). Such actors are engaging in ‘frame bridging’ (Snow & Benford, 2000). Section 2 of this paper provides a lively example of how discourses are framed in order to successfully influence policy-makers at different levels. The case demonstrates how Kurdish associations and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) have developed their own particular narrative of this discourse on democracy, deploying it to renegotiate their position in relations of power

(Haarstad & Fløysand, 2007). First, however, I briefly sketch the contours of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

2. Lobbying the EU: the case of Mayor Demirbaş

Lobbying against the background of the accession negotiations

In 2005, the EU gave the green light to open accession negotiations with Turkey. This sparked debates in Europe about the authority of Turkey's democratic credentials, and the position of Turkey's Kurdish minority. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the limits of Turkish democracy, it is important to note that the ideology underpinning dominant state institutions forecloses the political opportunities of groups who identify themselves outside of it. According to Dorronsoro (2005), the Turkish political system can be defined as a 'security regime': a meta-ideology of 'national security' is central to the Turkish political system, and it stands particularly central to the ideological foundation of the regime that followed the 1980 military coup (Dorronsoro, 2005). This meta-ideology is present within the various political ideologies in Turkey and, more importantly, it dictates what can and cannot be regarded as politically legitimate. This hegemonic idea of the overall importance of national security justifies interventions by the security services and the judiciary in the areas of political parties, social activities, the distribution of information, the media, education, and so on (Dorronsoro, 2005). This meta-ideology also enables mobilization around the themes of internal and international plotters who seek to de-stabilize, or even destroy, the Turkish state and society. The Kurdish nationalist movement is regarded as one of the main threats to the integrity of the identity and territorial conceptualization underpinning Turkey's national institutions and, hence, as a threat to national security. The roots of the Kurdish question in Turkey can be traced back to the 1920s, the first decade

following the founding of the modern Turkish state, which abolished the Caliphate and introduced a centralized authority affecting the long time quasi-autonomy the Kurdish provinces had enjoyed under the Ottoman Empire (see Taspinar, 2005; Mc Dowall, 1996). These developments exacerbated a legitimacy crisis for the nationalist-secularist Ankara government in the Kurdish provinces. A national education system and military service were installed which served as instruments for the ‘Turkification’ of the Kurdish inhabitants in the Southeast of the Country. In answer to these changes Kurdish dissidents started to organize themselves and staged rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s (Taspinar, 2005). As the rebellions were crushed by severe military repression it took until the end of the 1960s for Kurdish dissidents to political organize themselves again. During the last thirty years the Kurdish nationalist movement however managed to gain substantial support among the Kurdish population in Turkey and turn itself into a mass movement (Romano, 2006).²

In the early 1990s, Turkey experienced a first period of liberalization under late president Turgut Özal. This opened public discussion about the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of the country – a discussion that was brought to the fore by the Iraqi-Kurdish refugee crisis on Turkey’s border following the 1991 Gulf War. Prior to that, the central discourse had been that Kurds could become Turkish (Yeğen, 2007). Every inhabitant of the country was considered to be a Turkish citizen and was expected to speak the Turkish language. In fact, during several periods in the last century, the private and public use of the Kurdish language was officially forbidden. Up to this day, politicians are still required to speak in Turkish.

Since 1984, an armed conflict has been fought between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK and the Turkish army. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the conflict and the subsequent violations of human rights drew attention – nationally and internationally – to the reality of the Kurdish

question. The armed conflict led to significant repression of the Kurds living in southeastern Turkey. The repression and the climate of insecurity led many Kurds to flee the rural areas and to settle in big cities in western Turkey or to apply for asylum in Europe (Sirkeci, 2000, Romano 2006). Exact numbers of the amount of Turkish Kurds currently residing in the West of Europe are unavailable, as ethnicity is not registered. Several authors have estimated the number around 650 000 by the mid-1990s (White, 2000; Van Bruinessen, 1998), but the number is still considered speculative (Sirkeçi, 2006: 68-69). The repression by the Turkish army and security forces was found to be partly responsible for shaping the opportunities for the PKK to become a mass movement in Turkey (Romano, 2006). The development towards a mass movement gave shape to the rise of civil society organizations and political parties working within the ideological sphere of the PKK. One of these parties is the DTP, and its Mayor's actions are the focus of our case study.

Kurdish activists consider the EU-Turkey accession negotiation period as one during which the brokers of Kurdish organizations and parties will have the best bargaining position to realize change at home. Yet they are aware of the power imbalances. As a state actor, Turkey has many more opportunities to propagate its views about the political situation in Turkey at the level of the European Union. Especially, as this entails unrest and reports of human rights abuses in the Kurdish heartland of Southeast Anatolia and the armed conflict with the PKK. During the period of the accession negotiations, Turkey has regular contacts with all the members of the European Commission, as well as with the Council of Ministers, with whom the final decision concerning accession rests. Although 'the Kurdish question' is presented by Kurdish politicians as the most important problem for the future of Turkey, it is only of secondary importance to the negotiating states. They consider the European Union primarily an economic union, and are still debating the political integration of Europe.

Notwithstanding these power imbalances, Kurdish organizations and the main pro-Kurdish party are actively engaged in transnational political practices, making use of the political opportunities at multiple levels of policy-making. Via the development of networks of both governmental and non-governmental actors, sites of cooperation are being developed that cut across established hierarchies (Khalek, 2006). Lobby activities are being directed towards members of the European Parliament, members of the Council of Europe and, to a lesser extent, towards members of the European Commission. Additionally, the legislative and judiciary bodies in Turkey are influenced indirectly by Turkey's many convictions on charges of human rights violations by the European Court of Human Rights. These convictions increase the legitimacy of the demands being made by Kurdish lobbyists and make it easier to advance claims about Turkey's policies towards its Kurdish minority.

Mayor in action

On 15 March 2007, thirty members of the European Parliament addressed the following letter to the Turkish Minister of the Interior:

Dear Minister of the Interior,

We as members of the European Parliament are highly concerned about your appeal of 5 January 2007 for the dismissal of the Mayor of Sur Municipality Abdullah Demirbas and the dissolution of the Sur Municipal Council.

The initiative of the Sur Municipality to adopt multilingualism in their municipal services for the local public is highly necessary, according to a public survey carried out in 2006. According to this survey, 72% of the local residents speak Kurdish. In order to fulfil its duties and responsibilities properly and in order to meet the demands of its inhabitants, it is of vital importance for the municipality to have a lively exchange with its residents.

One of the governing principles of European Union politics is the concept of "Unity in Diversity". With this political guideline, the European Union has grown to an entity of 27 States with more than 27 official languages.

In consideration of the above, we urge you, Mr. Aksu, and the Turkish authorities to reconsider your appeal for the impeachment of Mayor Demirbas and to respect the diversity of Turkey, especially with regard to the upcoming accession talks of the chapter "Youth and Culture".³

By the end of June 2007, Abdullah Demirbaş, Mayor of Sur, the centre of Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey, was flying to Europe for the second time in two months. He and his municipal council had been removed from office as the result of the Turkish High Court decision stating that the organization of municipal services – such as the dissemination of information on culture, hygiene, health, domestic violence and environment in the city – could not be delivered in any language other than Turkish. The Sur municipality's decision had been made on the basis of a survey conducted among 8,920 households in the municipality. As the members of the European Parliament noted, 72% of those responding to the survey identified Kurdish as their mother tongue. Only 24% identified themselves as native speakers of Turkish. The remaining gave Arabic, Armenian and Syriac to be their language of daily life. Based on the results of the survey, Demirbaş agreed with Osman Baydemir, the Mayor of Greater Diyarbakir, to implement a multilingual local policy. As a result of this agreement, Demirbaş had arrived in Brussels with a prison sentence of one to three years hanging over his head. Confronted with dismissal and prosecution, Demirbaş sought to mobilize sympathy and support in Europe.

The first time the Mayor called for a multilingual approach to municipal services in front of an international audience was at the January 2006 European Social Forum in Athens, Greece. Before and after the municipality's announcement of its decision to organize multilingual municipal services, this policy was discussed within the Council of Europe, seeking for their approval.⁴

One of the effects of the armed conflict has been an increased prejudice against the use of the Kurdish language by politicians, which is generally associated with the separatist claims of the PKK. Thus, the case of Mayor Demirbaş and the Sur municipality is an unparalleled

political initiative in the region. No other mayor or municipal council in Turkey has openly engaged in the public use of Kurdish. Mayors, as well as the staff of municipalities run by the DTP, do use Kurdish in day-to-day relations with their constituents, but they have never attempted to adopt its use through an official decision by their municipal councils. DTP Brussels considers this case a ‘test’ for Turkey. But the decision to take up and draw attention to this particular case is no coincidence – the strategy has been well thought-out and carefully planned by the Kurdish ‘lobbyists’, who aim to gain the sympathy of a broad and international audience.

Because of the 10% threshold for parliamentary representation in Turkey, the main pro-Kurdish party lacked political presence in Parliament until the latest elections in July 2007. This lack of national political representation encouraged some of the democratically elected Kurdish mayors to organize themselves internationally.⁵ In May 2007, Mayor Demirbaş first took part in a delegation of the DTP⁶-Brussels to the European Parliament. This trip was organized by the director of the Kurdish Institute in Brussels, and sought to draw attention to the threat of dismissal faced by the Mayor and his Council. Mayor Demirbaş presented his case to several members of the European Parliament (EP), and a press conference was hosted by a Belgian Member of European Parliament (MEP) from the Flemish Green party⁷. During the press conference in the European Parliament, the Mayor stated: ‘We believe that different cultures can live together in unity, and the best example of this is the European Union.’ (personal notes, 9 May 2007)

One month later, the Mayor’s agenda included the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, where short informal meetings were organized on the spot. Meetings were held through the intermediation of Kurdish journalists involved in the production of Kurdish media (directed at

the Kurds at home and abroad) and through the intermediation of members of Europe-based Kurdish pressure groups comprising Kurdish political refugees. Accompanied by the European representative of the DTP, Demirbaş visited members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (who promote local and regional democracy among the member states of the Council of Europe) as well as members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) from different European countries⁸. Those visited included observers of the last monitoring committee of the human rights situation in Turkey. As he had done earlier to the Members of the European Parliament, Demirbaş explained to the members of the Council of Europe (CE) that he and his council had decided to organize multilingual municipal services on the basis of a survey that gave evidence of the multilingual reality of the municipality. In the future, services would be provided in Turkish, Kurdish, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian and, to encourage tourism, English. However, only hours after the Mayor had announced these plans, a judicial investigation had been launched upon the request of Turkey's Minister of the Interior, so he explained.

Mayor Demirbaş:

This decision handicaps minorities and pretends as if their language does not exist. [...]

Senior member of the Council of Europe:

I totally agree with you! Language is existential. There is the aspect of cultural identity and the aspect of communication, as well as the democratic aspect. This is the standpoint which I defend within the European Union as well.⁹

Demirbaş argued that, on the very day he was removed from office because of his multilingual initiative, Turkey turned to the United Nations to insist on the implementation of measurements to safeguard the language of Turkish-speaking citizens in Kosovo. On the other hand Turkey was requesting from Germany to acknowledge Turkish as a second language.

Mayor Demirbaş:

Thus they want protection for the Turkish language for their own people, but at the same time they fired me.¹⁰

Furthermore, Demirbaş and the DTP European representative stressed that Turkish authorities responded repressively to an initiative that, would be considered standard procedure in European countries such as Belgium or Spain. Picking up on the criticisms expressed in previous progress reports by the European Commission, the DTP delegation characterized the Turkish measures as clear illustrations of the freezing of reform by Ankara.¹¹

Member of the post-monitoring committee of the Council of Europe:

What was the the legal basis of this decision [to dismiss the Mayor and the Council]?

Mayor Demirbaş:

It is forbidden to use other languages besides Turkish. It is in contradiction with the Constitution.

Member:

But a law was accepted to allow for the use of Kurdish in education and broadcasting?

Mayor Demirbaş:

Well, this reaction of Turkey shows that these were merely ‘make-up’. I have been in Compostella and have seen how Spanish, Galician and English is used. We want to do the same. In Europe there is a mentality in favour of multilingualism.¹²

That the Mayor and the council had been dismissed – with criminal prosecution and possible prison sentences – as the consequence of their decision to organise multilingual communal services did not fall on deaf ears in the EP and the CE. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities had already been informed about the developments through letters from Mayor Baydemir and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). The UCLG includes municipalities from all over the world and is committed to local democracy and autonomy and participative local governance. Membership in this union allows the municipality of Diyarbakir to have a more direct impact on the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe since they have many overlapping memberships.¹³ So, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was happy to announce that it would send a delegation to Diyarbakir to see if there were impediments to the guaranty of local democracy.¹⁴ Members of PACE promised to criticize Turkish members of the Council and to write letters of concern

to the Turkish Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior. Mayor Demirbaş was advised to take his case to the European Court of Human Rights if no further appeal were possible on the national (Turkish) level.¹⁵

When evaluating Turkey's progress regarding EU membership criteria, the European Commission's progress report of 6 November 2007 explicitly referred to the court ruling on the case of Sur municipality in pointing out that no measures had been taken to facilitate access to public services for non-Turkish speakers:

‘No measures have been taken to facilitate access to public services for non-speakers of Turkish, although interpretation is usually available in courts. In a case against the municipality of Sur in June 2007 the Council of State dismissed the Mayor from office and dissolved the Municipal Council for providing multilingual municipal services.’

For the organizations involved in lobbying, access to the members of the Enlargement Commission (which is part of the European Commission) is limited, but the case did show up on this commission's agenda nonetheless. The Enlargement Commission is to support and monitor Turkey in its legislative reforms. The Kurdish question, which is cautiously discussed as an individual human rights problem, is being discussed directly with the Turkish authorities. However, when it comes to information gathering on the human rights situation in Turkey, the Commission relies mainly on the information it gathers through its delegation in Ankara and the Turkey experts in Brussels.¹⁶ The Ankara delegation of the European Commission, as well as its Turkish Unit in Brussels, base their reports on the recommendations of the Council of Europe and international institutions and the information that is distributed by international human rights organizations.¹⁷ The international human rights organisations receive information from various Kurdish human rights organizations and parties, which is then investigated and, if confirmed, made public. Demirbaş' case came to be mentioned specifically in the July 2007 briefing paper on human rights concerns in Turkey –

first in the lead up to the election (Human Rights Watch, 2007), in the Council of Europe's report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and later that year in the European Commission's Progress Report of November 2007.

Questioning the boundaries of the legitimate

In August 2007, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities sent a fact-finding mission to Sur/Diyarbakir and Ankara. The mission's final report states the following:

‘For the Congress and for the maintenance of high standards of local authority autonomy, the dismissal of elected local government officials by means other than popular vote is plainly a matter of the highest importance...’ (CG/BUR (14)29REV2: 3).

In its concluding statements, the report demanded that the government of Turkey take Kurdish language rights into serious consideration, given the European Commission's and the EU Parliament's demands to draft a new civil constitution. The Congress invited the newly elected Turkish Minister of the Interior to the November 2007 autumn session of the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg to ‘outline the policy that the new government of Turkey intends to follow with regard to these issues.’ The report stated further that:

‘the Congress should encourage the Turkish government, as it ventures on a new phase of reform and modernisation, to underpin its commitment to diversity and pluralism by signing the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.’ (CG/BUR (14)29REV2: 6)

Subsequently, Mayor Demirbaş, together with Mayor Baydemir of Greater Diyarbakir, took the floor at the November 2007 session of the PACE in Strasbourg. This event greatly embarrassed other Turkish mayors present, some of whom began to cross-examine the two mayors like state prosecutors arguing at a highly politicized court case. To the disappointment of the members of the Congress for Local and Regional authorities, neither Turkey's Minister of the Interior, nor any other high-ranking official, turned up at the session.¹⁸

Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Watts has described how Kurdish politicians in the southeast engage in ‘symbolic-politics’ by using Kurdish in their municipalities (Watts 2006b). What happens is that Kurdish politicians act ‘as if’ new rights and freedoms are in place. Engaging in the frameworks of the European Institutions and the current discourses on improving the democratic standards of Turkey, they act, confrontationally, ‘as if’ they occupy a political space within which this initiative is legitimate. Keeping in mind that Turkey can be regarded as a ‘security regime’ with the fear of national and territorial disintegration at the core of its meta-ideology, the political initiatives in Sur municipality consciously intend to stretch the boundaries of what can be considered legal and legitimate behaviour within Turkey’s boundaries (Wedeen, in Watts, 2006b). The initiative for providing multilingual services, taken by the Mayor and his council, obviously has juridical repercussions. From the standpoint of the Kurdish lobbyists, the juridical harassment in this case reveals what they perceive to be the current condition of democracy in Turkey and the lack of serious political reforms. By exposing this reality to the outside world – and, more specifically, to members of the union of States with which Turkey is in a bargaining position – the Kurdish party, supported by the Kurdish organizations in Europe, can embarrass Turkey and may thus indirectly force its authorities to lift the charges in certain much-discussed court cases. If they succeed in this political embarrassment (Hobson, et al., 2007), they will be stretching the boundaries of what is considered legal or illegal and thus giving shape to what they think the democratization of Turkey should be like.

Enhancing democracy

Kurdish lobbyists share a discourse that emphasizes the importance of enhancing democracy within Turkey. Kurdish organizations and the DTP generally place the Kurdish question, and thus themselves, in a key position within a narrative on the democratization of Turkey. In

their narration of the political situation, democracy will reign only once the Kurdish question in Turkey is resolved. In this way, they pose the Kurdish question as the root cause of the lack of democracy in Turkey. In their opinion, Turkey's policy towards the Kurds reveals the power of the military over civil power, the lack of human rights, the centralist character of political authority and the intolerant character of Turkish nationalism. In contrast, the Kurdish politicians demand restriction of the military's power and enforcement of civilian authority, the decentralization of political power, and the organization of a multi-cultural society, with respect for people's language, culture and religion.

The demands of the Kurdish organisations fit within the frames of the Parliament of Europe and the Council of Europe. Many MEPs personally regard the European Parliament as the most democratic and idealistic institution of Europe and bear witness to the ideological bargaining space that exists within Parliament. This is even more the case for the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, since the Council of Europe considers Human Rights and the rights of minorities as two of its main objectives and is actively involved in monitoring its member states accordingly.¹⁹ Turkey has been a member since 1949. Since the Council of Europe presents itself as the guardian of Human Rights, political issues are often re-framed as human rights questions. Instead of propagating an ethno-nationalist message towards the European institutions, the Kurdish movement defends respect for individual human rights and demands equal treatment of all citizens within Turkey (see also Natali, 2005; Adamson in Al-Ali & Köser, 2003). The case of Sur Municipality is only one of many cases that can be seen as examples fitting within this strategy of frame bridging. However, it is important to remember that reaching out to multiple policy levels can have a transformative effect on the actors and their messages. Adopting a discourse on human rights and democratisation leads the actors to incorporate the meaning of that discourse, so that we

cannot reduce it to a mere strategic move, but we have to see it as something that is changing the actors themselves as well. Thus, while initially this discourse might have been primarily a pragmatic choice, over time it grew more important in the general discourse of the political party.

The successful exposure of the judicial obstacles the Mayor and his council members have encountered, due to the seemingly rightful decision to organize multilingual services, has turned the Mayor into one of the central figures in the Kurdish opposition party's 'foreign relations' department. Clearly, the Kurdish political activists have learned how rewarding lobbying around this case has been in order to increase awareness and support for their political positions and goals. So, it was no surprise when, on 2 October 2008, the Kurdish satellite television Roj-TV broadcasted how Mayor Demirbaş, upon the initiative of the Kurdish Institute of Brussels, was honoured by six well-known Flemish politicians from five different political parties for his encouragement to increase tolerance and respect for ethnic minorities and their right to be served in their mother tongue by the civil servants of their municipalities. This brings us to the importance of the Kurdish associations in the receiving states and their networking to access politicians in these states.

European Kurdish associations and multi-level network construction

Network construction can be a question of mobilizing those who identify with the goals of some agent or organization or who share its interests (Cox, 1998). With the support of Kurdish associations in the receiving state, Demirbaş' case was taken to members of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. As such, the DTP 'jumped' from a local (urban) level of policy-making in southeastern Turkey to that of the immigrants' and refugees' receiving states, and then – via established and newly construed networks with

different policy-makers – to the institutions of the European Union.²⁰ These multi-levelled networks include local peoples and organizations and demonstrate that what may be perceived as a local movement (the Mayor and his council) is never wholly local but produced in part by extra-local actors and forces. This recognition confounds perspectives that view ‘the global’ as powerful and dominant and ‘the local’ as powerless and subordinate (Perreault, 2003) and calls attention to conceptualizations and configurations of power that have been obviated by the dominant rhetoric of order (Parker, 2009). Through the construction of networks over multiple levels, local actors can enlarge their spaces of political action considerably.

Without the existence and support of Kurdish associations and federations in the European states on the one hand, and global networks such as the UCLG on the other hand, it would have been hard for Mayor Demirbaş to access members of the European Parliament and members of the Council of Europe. In a state like Belgium, ethnic associations appealing to members of a single ethnic community are prevalent (Hooghe, 2005). Since the beginning of the 1980s, the Kurdish Institute in Brussels has developed ties with Flemish (and, to a much lesser extent, Walloon) politicians, who work either at a regional (Flemish/Walloon/Brussels), national (Belgium) or supra-national (European) level. Ever since the foundation of the Institute, a strong relationship has existed between the principal figures of the organization and the Flemish nationalist parties (with the exception of the extreme right party). These parties have long shown sensitivity to problems concerning language rights, and they are defenders of a people’s right to self-determination. The European representative of the DTP in Brussels depends to a certain extent on the Kurdish Institute of Brussels and its relations with politicians for its lobby work in the European Parliament. In the particular case of Demirbaş, the Kurdish Institute of Brussels advised the DTP European representative on who to talk to, and meetings were organized via its connections in the cabinet of one of the Flemish MEPs.

Over the past few years, Flemish Members of Parliament and the Senate have been taking part in a monthly working group on the Kurdish issue in the House of Parliamentarians in Brussels, which is part of the Belgian Senate. During these meetings, initiated by the Kurdish Institute of Brussels, participants share information about the current developments in Turkey and in the Kurdish region. Concerted activities are organized, including conferences and delegations to the Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iraq. The possibilities of interpellating Belgian Ministers are discussed. One of the group's main goals is to put pressure on Members of the European Parliament to attach amendments to the EU's progress reports on Turkey and to write letters of concern to Ministers of European member states and the government of Turkey.²¹ The variety of state and non-state actors active on different levels and brought together in this work group can be regarded as constitutive of a particular political configuration that incorporates actors from very different levels of policy-making. Via participation in this political configuration, constructed by the efforts of the Institute, a political party such as the DTP and its local politicians in Turkey can gain attention and influence. Connections with nationally based Kurdish associations (in the receiving states) and their networks within a specific state (or states) are indispensable to a political party, like the DTP, in its struggle to gain Europe's attention. Dependent on only one official European representative for all contacts within Europe, the party relies on information and contacts provided by Kurdish associations and institutions in their different countries of residence. Although this dependency is an advantage for a political opposition party, it also implies that these European Kurdish associations (composed mainly of politically active members of the Kurdish diaspora), which are part of this political configuration, can weigh significantly on the initiatives that are undertaken by the DTP. We cannot explore this further in this paper, but clearly this has the effect of limiting the autonomy the party enjoys within Europe.

The political configuration formed by the working group constitutes a base from which information is diffused and new contacts are brokered to extend the network of influence. As such, the members of the working group, who are employed in the cabinets of the Members of the European Parliament, arranged formal and informal meetings between the Mayor and other members of the European Parliament. Meanwhile, members of Kurdish associations supported the Mayor's lobby work in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Through these political configurations, as well as the efforts of the Greater Municipality of Diyarbakir within the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments, Turkey's Kurds have established a new space of engagement, outside the boundaries of any one state, but nevertheless dependent on access to various actors in multiple states. From this political space, the transnational political practices of Turkey's Kurds clearly affect the agendas of the European Institutions in their relations with Turkey.

Conclusion

The preceding case study demonstrates how the DTP mobilized resources at multiple levels of political organization to set agendas in Europe and bring about change at home. This case illustrates the importance of network constructions that imply the transgression of levels of policy-making, which, in transnationalism studies, are still too often assumed to be confined to the home and receiving states. Transnational practices can transgress borders continuously and are organized in a space of engagement that can no longer be regarded as part of any one place.

What is more, this particular case sheds light on the importance of discursive framing on our understanding of the ways in which transnational political practices can affect the exogenous institutions to put pressure on the home state governments. The Kurdish nationalists of the

DTP sought to publicize the harassment they faced from the Turkish judiciary, inviting EU lawmakers to view the case as a yardstick of democracy in Turkey. By exposing this harassment to the outside world – and, more specifically, to members of the States of the European Union with whom Turkey is in a bargaining position – and by drawing on the complex web of actors assembled through the actions of Kurdish organizations in Europe, the pro-Kurdish party can embarrass Turkey and indirectly increase pressure to lift the charges in certain much-discussed cases. In this way, Kurdish political activists can stretch the boundaries of what is considered legal or illegal and give shape to how they think Turkey should be democratized. Concretely Turkey was scrutinized over the case of Mayor Demirbas and the Sur municipality in the EC Commission 2007 Progress Report, in the report following the fact-finding mission of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, in the writings of members of European Parliament and in briefings by Human Rights Watch on Turkey.

This case, which demonstrates the complex entanglement of a variety of actors distributed across multiple levels of political organization, testifies to the importance of multi-level networking and the framing of discourses as strategies to change unequal relations of power. Moreover, it shows the relevance of these conceptualizations for future studies on transnationalism, as following the trajectories towards the networks that constitute this space of engagement unravels the multiple agents engaged in transnational political practices over multiple spaces and makes one less likely to fall into the trap of methodological territorialism that transnationalism has sought to avoid.

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Notes

- ¹ It is argued that most of the 1990s asylum seekers from Turkey to Europe were Kurds, as human rights violations during the last 25 years were mainly suffered by Kurdish citizens and most cases were related to the practices after the military coup of 1980 and the armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish Army (Sirkeçi, 2006: 69).
- ² It is hard to find data on the precise number of Kurdish people living in Turkey and in the diaspora, since ethnicity is not officially recorded. Koc et al. estimate the number of Kurdish-speaking people in Turkey to be 10.2 million (or 14.4% of the total population of Turkey). This estimation is based on the results of the 2003 Turkish Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS-2003). Through interviews, the TDHS gathered information about the mother tongue of 11,950 women in Turkey. This let them determine the 'language group' these women belong to. Other estimates of the number of Kurds in Turkey and in the Middle East are less conservative. In 1996, for example, McDowall estimated that around 24-27 million Kurds were living in the Middle East, of which around 13 million were living in Turkey, which made up about 23% of the total population. An important remark made by McDowall is that it is not clear how many of these people actually consider themselves to be Kurds, due to the high numbers of people who have assimilated into the Turkish society. However, it is likely that, due to the repression of the past few decades, many people have rediscovered their Kurdish identity. This is probably the case in Turkey (McDowall, 1996; Van Bruinessen, 1998), as well as in the space of immigration, among first and second generation immigrants (Grojean, 2008, Van Bruinessen, 1998). According to many Kurdish nationalists, the number of Kurds living in Turkey is no less than 20 million, but most scholars consider this to be an exaggeration, and very little evidence supports this number.
- ³ Official letter, dated 15 March 2007, addressed to Mr. Abdülkadir Aksu, the Turkish Minister of the Interior, signed by 30 members of the European Parliament.
- ⁴ Interview with an active member of the Freedom Initiative in Strasbourg, 27 May 2007.

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- ⁵ On the political role of the Kurdish mayors in Turkey, see Watts 2006a and 2006b.
- ⁶ DTP is the Demokratik Toplum Partisi or the Party for a Democratic Society, the main pro-Kurdish party in Turkey with about 54 democratically elected mayors. The DTP is considered to be the successor of DEHAP, HADEP, DEP and HEP. The latter three were closed down during the 1990s and the beginning of the current millennium because of alleged separatism. DEHAP disbanded itself before the party was sentenced, and its members established the DTP. All DEHAP mayors subsequently joined the newly founded party. At the time of this writing, the pro-Kurdish party was again under serious threat of being closed down, and its successor, Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (BDP) or the Party for Freedom and Democracy, had already been established in case the verdict demanded the party's closure.
- ⁷ Personal observations in European Parliament, Brussels, 8 & 9 May 2007.
- ⁸ Personal observations in the Council of Europe, 27 and 28 May 2007, Strasbourg.
- ⁹ Personal observations in the Council of Europe, 28 May 2007, Strasbourg
- ¹⁰ Personal observations in the Council of Europe, 28 May 2007, Strasbourg.
- ¹¹ Personal observations in the Council of Europe, 27 and 28 May 2007, Strasbourg
- ¹² Personal observations in the Council of Europe, 28 May 2007, Strasbourg
- ¹³ Interview with member of the Foreign Relations Office of Greater Diyarbakir Municipality,, 27 March 2008.
- ¹⁴ The European Charter of Local Self-Government came into force on 9 September 1988. It is the instrument of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, in which the signatory States undertake to recognise the principle of local self-government in domestic legislation. At the time of this writing, Turkey had not yet signed this charter.
- ¹⁵ Personal observations, 26 May 2007, Congress for Local and Regional Authorities in the Council of Europe, Strasbourg.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Enlargement Commission member, July 2007, Brussels.
- ¹⁷ Interview with member of the Ankara delegation to the European Commission, Ankara, April 2008,
- ¹⁸ Interview with advisor in the Foreign Relations Office of Greater Diyarbakir Municipality,, 27 March 2008.
- ¹⁹ See the website of the Council of Europe:
http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/default_en.asp
- ²⁰ It must be added that the networks explored here are only a few of several, interconnected networks. The support base in the European Parliament, for example, is broader, especially given the strong relations of the DTP with the Greens and United Left/Nordic Green Left fraction, the existence of a friendship group of members of diverse fractions, and the DTP's membership in the Socialist International and the European Socialist Party.
- ²¹ Based upon interviews with the former president of the working group, 9 August 2007, Antwerp and several encounters with the director of the Kurdish Institute in Brussels in spring and summer 2007.