Linkage, Leverage, and Authoritarianism: An Overview of the Collapse of Turkey’s EU Membership Prospect

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Abstract

The effects of the linkage and the leverage over countries that either go through a democratic transition or further advance on the democratization path have been widely discussed by comparative democratization scholars. Western leverage designates governments’ level of vulnerability in the face of foreign pressure for democratization, while linkage is meant to be the intensity of the connections and the cross-border streams between a democratizing country and the Western world. It is generally acknowledged that the linkage is a more determinative factor than the leverage. On the contrary, the authoritarian shifts of many countries that took place during the first two decades of the 21st century challenged the optimistic and deterministic role assigned to linkage. Turkey is a noteworthy example in this regard since the intensity of its linkage to Europe could not compensate the negative effects of a declining leverage over Turkish democratization since 2006. The argument that linkage matters more than leverage does not apply to Turkey. The evolution of domestic political regimes in European Union candidate countries in parallel with their accession processes constitutes separate cases differing from one another. Turkey is not only a separate case for its part, but also a unique one.

Keywords

leverage, linkage to the west, Turkey, authoritarianism, AKP

Introduction

The effects of Western leverage and linkage over transitory political regimes have been widely discussed in the democratization literature since the early 1990s. Although academic research works began in the 1980s with the democratization processes some Southern European and Latin American countries started to experience, the post-communist transition processes that occurred after the collapse of the pro-Soviet social bloc intensified the debate. Levitsky and Way (2006) have a particular place in the study of democratization (and failed attempts of democratization) as most of the scholars analyzing the effects of the leverage and the linkage refer to their works. Western leverage is the “incumbent governments’ vulnerability to external pressure for democratization” (Levitsky & Way, 2006). The Western pressure may include rewards or punishments that address the incumbent governments. Linkage basically means the density of ties between the Western world and a particular (democratizing or authoritarian) country based on five dimensions: economic linkage, geopolitical linkage, social linkage, communication linkage, and transnational civil society linkage (Levitsky & Way, 2006, pp. 383–384).

Turkey’s long-term relations with the institutions of European integration encompassing more than 60 years resulted in intensive linkage varying from society level to trade relations. However, despite Turkey’s bid for European Union (EU) membership and the EU’s support for democratization in return, Turkish democracy has been backsliding since 2006. Notwithstanding, Turkey’s linkage to the EU has not weakened, and even the leverage of the EU has been in decline in recent years. Hence, Levitsky and Way’s (2006, 2010) argument that linkage matters more than leverage does not apply to Turkey. Based on mostly secondary data, this qualitative research aims to demonstrate Turkey’s authoritarian shift despite the continuous linkage between EU and Turkey. Our research thus constitutes a case study. The evolution of domestic political regimes in EU candidate countries in parallel with their accession processes constitutes separate cases differing from one another. As will be demonstrated throughout the article, Turkey is not only a separate case but also a unique one. In Yin’s words,
“case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are being posed [ . . . ] and the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2003, pp. 1–2). On the same token, Gerring notes that case studies seek to “shed light on a question pertaining to a broader class of units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 344). Given the complexity of the issue and the variety of the factors taken into consideration, the case study is selected as the research design.

In the following section, the concepts of leverage and linkage will be discussed in detail. The EU–Turkey relations, Turkey’s democratization, and its linkage with the EU will be dealt with afterward. The article will then focus on the dimensions of the linkage. Leverage and linkage within the Turkish context will be analyzed subsequently. Finally, we will present our concluding remarks.

### Leverage and Linkage

Levitsky and Way define Western leverage as the “incumbent governments’ vulnerability to external pressure for democratization.” Performing as a carrot and stick mechanism, Western pressure may both include rewards such as the EU accession for a candidate country and means of punishment such as “aid withdrawal, trade sanctions [ . . . ], diplomatic persuasion, and military force.” (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 382). Rewards could be termed as positive or political conditionality, and within the EU accession context, which is the relevant context for this article, it means “the adoption of democratic rules and practices as conditions that the target countries have to fulfill in order to receive rewards such as financial assistance [ . . . ] or—ultimately—membership.” (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2010, p. 445).

The three factors Levitsky and Way cite as the dynamics that shape the intensity of the Western leverage are as follows: “the size and strengths of the country’s economy, strategic or economic interests of the West [ . . . ] and the presence of [ . . . ] counterhegemonic powers that shield [ . . . ] their allies from Western influence” (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 40–43). They regard linkage as a more determinative factor than leverage by contending that “leverage in the absence of linkage has rarely been sufficient to induce democratization since the end of the cold war” (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 379). In a latter work, they maintained the same argument, this time by adding the “organizational power of the incumbent regimes” as a third factor alongside linkage and leverage into the equation (the organizational power here designates the rulers’ capacity to repel the pro-democracy challenge coming from the opposition). They (Levitsky & Way, 2010) therefore arrive at the conclusion that when the linkage is high, one should expect a higher probability for democratization irrespective of the extents of leverage and organizational power, whereas the leverage becomes a determinative factor only when the linkage is not strong, along with a weak organizational power.

Linkage basically means “the density of ties and cross-border flows between a particular country” (Levitsky & Way, 2006, pp. 383–384) and the Western world, with these five dimensions: economic linkage, geopolitical linkage, social linkage, communication linkage, and transnational civil society linkage. Levitsky and Way note that

economic linkage includes trade, investment, credit, and [ . . . ] aid flows. Geopolitical linkage includes ties to western governments and participation in western-led alliances, treaties, and international organizations. Social linkage [ . . . ] includes migration, tourism, refugees, and diaspora communities [ . . . ]. Communication linkage [ . . . ] includes cross-border telecommunications, internet connections, and [ . . . ] western radio and television penetration [ . . . ]. Transnational civil society linkage includes local ties to western-based nongovernmental organizations [ . . . ] (Levitsky & Way, 2006, pp. 383–384)

The authors highlight the role played by linkage extensively (Levitsky & Way, 2006, pp. 379–380 and 384):

Linkage has raised the cost of autocratic abuses by increasing their international salience and the likelihood of external response [ . . . ] In high linkage regions, such as Central Europe and the Americas, nearly all competitive authoritarian regimes democratized. [ . . . ] Linkage generates several sources of antiauthoritarian pressure. First, it heightens the international salience of autocratic abuse. [ . . . ] Second, linkage increases the likelihood that western governments will take action in response to abuses. [ . . . ]

In an era where many established and relatively new democratic regimes are dominated by a transnational sociopolitical tide called populism, right(-wing) populism, or authoritarian populism by several authors, the importance Levitsky and Way attach to linkage has proved to be highly optimistic, though. What Diamond (2008) calls the period of “democratic recession” is preceded by the glorious democratization wave that rose in the 1990s and coincided with the 2008–2009 global economic recession that instigated a crisis of representation in many European countries, shaking the societal foundations of the traditional parties located near the center of the political spectrum. It is just one of the striking examples that in Central Europe, which is portrayed by Levitsky and Way (2006) as a region where the democratic transition has completed, Hungary under Fidesz rule and Poland under Law and Justice Party rule stand among the right-wing populist governments of the Western world.

It should be noted that Levitsky and Way’s optimism in identifying a firm connection between linkage and democratization is not a personal error of analysis. The positive role assigned to linkage is a structural characteristic of the modernization theory, which regards democracy as “a function of the level of social and economic development of a country” (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 891). This theory identifies a strong connection between democracy
and the indices of economic development such as industrialization, urbanization, and wealth by contending that “economic development goes together with better education, less poverty, the creation of a large middle class and a competent civil service” which, in their turn, moderate the class struggle and diminish the appeal of extremism (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 891). In short, modernization theory is an optimistic theory.

Levitsky and Way’s theory has not only been challenged on the grounds of linkage but regarding leverage as well. Even they themselves admit that the effect of the leverage may be limited when a regional power provides “support to neighboring autocracies, thereby mitigating the impact of the western influence” or when an autocratic regime manages to portray itself “as the best means of protecting [western] interests” (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 383). However, other systemic analyses go further by demonstrating that the United States and the EU do not certainly endorse democracy in every case while pursuing their foreign goals (Börzel, 2010; Schimmelfennig, 2012). Similarly, as opposed to the optimistic approach (Vachudova, 2002, p. 4) which argues that “domestic actors do not just react differently to the incentives of EU membership [but] they are also shaped by them,” Börzel and Van Hüllen (2011) define the prospective EU accession as a stabilizing factor rather than a driving one for a candidate country government’s willingness for democratic consolidation. The latter argument could be said to be in line with Schmitter’s (1986) contention that it is actually the national actors who play the essential role in democratic transition, compared with the marginal role played by foreign actors.

Another approach (Freyburg et al., 2011, 2015; Lavenex, 2004; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011) incorporates governance to linkage and leverage by arguing that transnational cooperation among states contributes to the development of democratic governance whose components are accountability, participation, and transparency. External governance is a part of the EU’s democracy promotion (Lavenex, 2004); however, the latter also brings about the disappearance of the distinction between the domestic and the external governance and promotes democratic governance instead (Jachtenfuchs, 2001). Democratic governance is therefore a third variety of governance that influences the incumbent governments (Freyburg, 2011), especially when the leverage is limited. However, Wietzel (2011) posits that “the EU’s democratic governance promotion policy is likely to be inconsistent when significant adverse sectoral economic interests are at stake” (p. 990).

EU–Turkey Relations: Historical Background

In the postwar international order, Turkey instituted close relations with Western Europe throughout the 1950s (Kramer, 2006). Following the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958, Turkey was among the first states that applied for membership (1959). The EEC responded to Turkey’s application by offering an interim status, which led to the signing of the Association Agreement (Ankara Agreement) in 1963 (Aksu, 2012, p. 6). This agreement would later be supported by an additional protocol, which was signed in 1970 and came into force in 1973, with the purpose of establishing a Customs Union between the EEC and Turkey. Although the Ankara Agreement and the additional protocol brought EEC–Turkey relations to a new level, no further step was taken in the 1970s and 1980s due to the political turmoil and military interventions. In addition to the political instability, the economic crisis in the late 1970s gave birth to the economic measures that were taken in 1980, known as the “January 24th Decisions” (Mango, 2004, p. 79). The January 24th Decisions consisted of a series of economic policy changes, such as quitting protectionism, stimulating exports, devaluing Turkish currency, adjusting exchange rates on a daily basis, deregulating interest rates and prices, reducing agricultural subsidies, limiting subventions, and liberalizing the foreign trade regime. Turkey’s economy therefore experienced a shift from the import-substitution model to the export-led model, which was also meant to be the liberalization of finance (Aksu, 2012). This large-scale economic restructuring program aligned the Turkish economy with the EEC rules that stand on a market-oriented logic.

Turkey’s Bid for Democratization: 1983–2002

The military coup on September 12, 1980, was followed by a relatively short period of military rule, and a civilian government was established following the November 6, 1983, election, held under the supervision of the military. It was Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party that came to power. The Özal government took many steps for liberalizing the economy and integrating Turkey into the European Community (EC) as a full member (Hale, 2013, p. 131). Turkey’s application for membership (1987) was rejected by the EC due to economic and political reasons, but the Customs Union Agreement would be signed later on (1995). Significant progress in terms of democratization was achieved toward the late-1990s in parallel with the EU accession process gaining pace. EU granted the “candidate country” status to Turkey in December 1999; hence, an intensive legislation process for the EU membership started. August 2002 constituted a milestone in the EU reforms: Death penalty was abolished and broadcasting in languages other than Turkish (namely Kurdish) was allowed. The current governing party, Justice and Development Party (AKP) under R. T. Erdoğan’s leadership, came to power in November 2002. Turkish democracy’s trend was upward between 1983 and 2002, whereas its direction went downward between 2003 and 2014, according to V-Dem Institute’s liberal democracy
The number of people who died as a result of police violence referred to as the use of lethal force. As a result, was adopted in 2007, widening police's competence for least, a new Law on the Duties and Competences of the Police Party) combatant and a civilian demonstrator. Last but not distinction between an armed PKK (Kurdistan Workers' sion, and assembly. [ . . . ] This legal framework makes no nalize the legitimate exercise of freedom of opinion, expres- "The laws [ . . . ] offend against international law as they crimi- crime on behalf of an organization without being a member of internal legislation activity in the Turkish parliament in which the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) generally took part too. The AKP government cooperated with the EU regarding the Cyprus question too, but this was not welcomed by the CHP. Finally, during the December 2004 Brussels summit, the EU decided to start membership talks with Turkey on October 3, 2005. The year 2005 also marked the first signs of the end of the honeymoon between the EU and the AKP, though. The reform process in Turkey slowed down. 

Authoritarian Shift: 2005–2013

The legal amendments between 2005 and 2007 paved the way for an authoritarian regime and the sophistication of the state’s tools of political violence and oppression. The new Penal Code that was adopted in 2005 included more than 20 articles entailing penalties that were to limit the freedom of expression. The new Criminal Procedure Code that passed the same year established the Special Heavy Penal Courts. All the politically motivated cases such as KCK, Ergenekon, and Sledgehammer would be dealt with by these courts from 2008 onward.

A new Anti-Terrorism Law was adopted in 2006. That included vague clauses on terrorism such as “committing a crime on behalf of an organization without being a member of it.” As put by a Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2010) report, “The laws [. . .] offend against international law as they criminalize the legitimate exercise of freedom of opinion, expression, and assembly. [. . .] This legal framework makes no distinction between an armed PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) combatant and a civilian demonstrator.” Last but not least, a new Law on the Duties and Competences of the Police was adopted in 2007, widening police’s competence for recourse to force (including use of lethal force). As a result, the number of people who died as a result of police violence rose from 17 (2007) to 29 (2008) and came out as 29 again in 2009 (Saymaz, 2012). Furthermore, the number of people being detained under the anti-terrorism laws more than doubled in 4 years (1,537 in 2005 and 3,361 in 2009; Sarp, 2014).

On the contrary, harassment of Kurdish politicians began in the lead-up to the 2007 general election and accelerated in late 2009. By June 2010, 151 officials of the pro-Kurdish party were indicted for membership of an organization connected with the outlawed PKK (HRW, 2010). By September 2012, the number of Kurdish politicians and activists being detained was nearly 1,000, and Turkey was a country holding “more journalists in jail than China and Iran combined” (Rodrik, 2012).

Just to cite an example for politically motivated cases based on fabricated evidence, the case about the alleged Sledgehammer coup plot was noteworthy. The coup plans that were allegedly prepared in 2003 proved to “contain references to fonts and other attributes that were first introduced [in mid-2006]” (Rodrik, 2012). Moreover, they contained information from later years that could not have been known back in 2002–2003 (Doğan & Rodrik, 2010).

Authoritarianism Consolidated: From 2013 Onward

The year 2013 constituted a milestone. A nationwide public rebellion comprising millions of protestors who gathered in almost every city throughout June, known as Gezi Protests, shooed the government. However, the AKP rule survived. In December, prosecutors and police officers who were members of the Gulenist organization, a former ally of the AKP and the main perpetrator of the cases based on fabricated evidence, launched an anti-corruption investigation against the government. The government took certain measures against them, including large-scale purges from the bureaucracy that mounted to the elimination of 150,000 civil servants following Gulenist junta’s failed military coup attempt in 2016. All these developments largely destroyed the rule of law in Turkey.

Furthermore, the principle of free and fair elections has been undermined since 2017 because of the biased decisions of the High Electoral Council—especially concerning the 2017 referendum and the 2019 municipal elections—which are not in conformity even with the existing laws and jurisprudence. Another controversial situation is that the former leader and a number of high-level officials of Turkey’s third biggest party, the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, are in prison since the end of 2016.

Apart from the V-Dem Institute’s and Freedom House’s works that have been referred to previously, Reporters Sans Frontières’s (2019) press freedom rankings for Turkey after 2013 also demonstrate the widening democratic deficit: Among 180 countries, Turkey ranked 154th in 2013–2014, 149th in 2015, 151st in 2016, 155th in 2017, and 157th in 2018.
What Has EU Done Since 2005?

The membership negotiations between the EU and Turkey have always been open-ended since the day they started (October 3, 2005). Unlike other candidate states, a roadmap for Turkey’s accession which is to include specified dates has never been agreed upon. Paul Kubicek (quoted in Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 901) notes that “the envisaged duration of accession negotiations moved any rewards for [Turkish government’s] reforms far into the future.” Kubicek also points to the negative attitude of the prominent EU leaders and public opinions of EU countries after 2005:

...conditions worsened after 2005. Popular disapproval across the EU and the principled opposition of major EU member state governments cast doubt on the EU’s commitment; further reforms and the implementation of promises made became more costly for the government [...].

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy made several statements between 2009 and 2011, stating that they preferred Turkey to have a privileged partnership with the EU instead of full membership. European Commission President J. Manuel Barroso (in 2007) and the President of the EU Jean-Claude Juncker (in 2014) affirmed that Turkey would not be fit for membership in the foreseeable future.

EU–Turkey relations rapidly worsened following the failed coup in 2016: In late 2016, the EU foreign ministers decided not to open a new negotiation chapter with Turkey. In late November 2017, some of the financial aids to Turkey regarding the accession process were lifted. In 2018, the EU Commission issued the most critical country report for Turkey ever. In June 2018, the European Council noted that Turkey moved further away from the EU (Cop, 2019).

A Closer Look Into the Components of Linkage

Compared with most of the relatively new democracies, Turkey has a long history of democratization. However, there were also a number of military interventions throughout the 20th century (1960, 1971, and 1980), and in addition to them, “Turkey experienced a fast-paced democratic regression” after the failed coup in 2016 (Dalay, 2019, p. 7). Today, the opposition parties are struggling against the authoritarian consolidation, and the local elections in 2019 demonstrated that they still have the potential to end the authoritarian rule of the AKP (Dalay, 2019). Turkey’s authoritarian shift and consolidation coincided with a foreign policy change too. The AKP government sought to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy from the West (Cop & Zihnioğlu, 2015) and develop Turkey’s relations with other regions, especially the Middle East and North Africa (Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014). The assertive foreign policy resulted in improved economic relations between Turkey and many Asian states, but the EU is still the main trade partner of Turkey (Perchoc, 2018).

These developments have not eliminated Western influence anyway. Turkey–EU relations and Turkey’s bid for full membership are deeply rooted in history. During the first years of the AKP rule, domestic pressure for Western modernization over the government coincided with the Western pressure itself (Öniş, 2004). The EU countries and the United States still occupy top positions in the list of Turkey’s trade partners. When it comes to the foreign policy change, it should be noted that Turkey has not abandoned Western linkage altogether. The United States still stands as an important ally of Turkey in the Middle East, despite the deteriorated relations. In short, Turkey’s linkage to the West is still worth examining.

Geographical proximity. Although not cited among the five components of linkage, geographical proximity is deemed the most important source of Western linkage by Levitsky and Way (2006) given that countries having such proximity tend to have closer economic ties, extensive intergovernmental contracts, and high mobility and interactions concerning people and organizations. Geographically, Turkey stands next to Greece and Bulgaria that gained full EU membership in 1981 and 2007, respectively. A small part of Turkey (Eastern Thrace and Istanbul) is located in Europe in strictly geographical terms but that area is of vital importance given that Morocco’s bid for EU membership was rejected on geographical grounds in 1987 (Redmond, 2007). In addition to the proximity being mentioned, it is important to note that Turkish elites have adopted Western values as their reference since the formation of modern Turkey (Öniş, 2004). Turkey’s first formal step toward European integration was the Ankara Agreement (The EU–Turkey Association Agreement, 1963) which aimed to develop trade and economic relations between the two sides. Since 1963, linkages have deepened in commerce (especially after the signing of the Customs Union Agreement in 1995) and in other areas such as communication and transnational civil society.

Turkish society insistently maintains its positive attitude toward EU membership despite the serious deterioration in EU–Turkey relations. The relations have worsened in parallel with Turkey’s authoritarian shift, and President Erdoğan has frequently raised an anti-Western rhetoric (Hoffman, 2018); therefore, the public support for EU accession has dropped to 51% in 2018 (this was 71% in 2014; M. Aydin et al., 2019). Still, more than half of the population continues to support full membership, and according to another research (TEPAV, 2019), as of 2019, that support is 60% in general, being higher among the youth (66%). Regarding the EU side, there has always been a skeptical perspective toward Turkey’s full membership. According to Kramer (2006), “EU-Turkey relations have not been perceived as an integral part of the European integration process by most EU member states” (p. 24). Opinion
polls too sustain this view. In 1996, support for Turkish membership was 36%, which dropped to 31% in 2010 and dropped further to 7% in 2016 (Lindgaard, 2018). In another survey conducted in 2016, support for Turkey was even found to be less than that for Russia (Smith, 2016). The Islamist orientation of the AKP government, the authoritarian shift in Turkey, and the rising anti-immigration sentiments in Europe are thought to be the reasons for that dramatic decline (Lindgaard, 2018).

**Geopolitical linkage.** As mentioned earlier, since the establishment of modern Turkey, the country has pursued a modernization/Westernization agenda. Following the transition to multiparty politics in 1946, the geopolitical linkage brought about an alliance with the United States. That alliance became more apparent with Turkey’s membership to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) membership in 1961, the Ankara agreement in 1963, the Custom Union agreement and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED) in 1995, and Turkey’s long-standing bid for full membership to the EU all demonstrate that Turkey has a strong geopolitical linkage to the West. Recently, Turkey has perpetuated this linkage with the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which replaced earlier EU programs developed for candidate countries. The first IPA was signed for the 2007–2013 period and included assistance for environment, transportation, regional and rural development, and Syrian refugees (European Commission website). New areas such as assistance for democracy and governance, rule of law, civil society, and education are included in the IPA II (2014–2020; European Commission website).

Throughout the last decade, Turkey has tried to increase its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, North Africa, and the Middle East. Turkey has also sought to be more active in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Although Turkish foreign and domestic policies under the AKP rule have often been criticized by the EU (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2019) and despite the recent foreign policy fluctuations (most notably the strong rapprochement with Russia), Turkey is still an important ally of the United States, a crucial partner of the EU, therefore maintaining its long-standing geopolitical linkage to the West. It must also be noted that Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe and NATO, while the EU is by far Turkey’s major trade partner (Perchoc, 2018).

**Economic linkage.** We have mentioned that the Ankara Agreement (1963) paved the way for the development of economic relations that further improved following the 1995 Customs Union Agreement that allowed both sides to make tax-free trade. Since 1995, the steady increase in trade has continued. According to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Trade (2018), “by 2018, Turkey’s exports to the EU reached 84 billion USD and its imports from the EU reached 81 billion USD. In this context, the EU accounts for 50% of total exports and 36.3% of total imports of Turkey.” Officials from the EU and Turkey have mentioned the necessity for the revision of the agreement that has benefited both parties. “An underlying reason for this development is Turkey’s integration into the production networks of European firms,” as put by Yalcin et al. (2016, p. 6). Turkey is the only country having a customs union agreement with the EU without being a member. The demand for revision shows not only the continuity of the linkage but also the fact that it has strengthened over time.

As Chart 1 shows, since 2002, economic relations between Turkey and the EU have developed, mostly favoring the EU in terms of balance (Eurostat, 2019). Although there was a decrease during 2008 and 2009 due to the global economic crisis, both import and export rates are in steady increase since 2010. Hence, Turkey’s economic linkage to the EU continued to develop despite its authoritarian shift and consolidation. Furthermore, both sides decided to revise the customs union agreement (Vesterbye & Akman, 2017), although the decision has not been implemented yet as of early 2020.

Throughout the last decade, Turkey expanded its trade diversity by developing economic relations with Asia and Africa, mostly based on the foreign policy strategy “theorized” by the former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Turkey also sought to increase its political, social, and cultural influence over a number of Asian and African nations. An important purpose behind Davutoğlu’s assertive foreign policy was balancing Turkey’s linkage to the West by developing relations with the Muslim world. Meanwhile, Turkey adopted free trade agreements with the neighboring countries (Adam, 2012). However, the share of trade between Turkey and these countries remained limited compared to its commercial relations with the EU members. With regard to Turkey’s need for energy sources, Russia stands as the major supplier of natural gas and petroleum. However, apart from the rapidly growing economic cooperation with Russia which not only includes commerce but also investments in many areas, the EU’s dominant position in Turkey’s foreign economic relations has not changed during the AKP rule.

**Social linkage.** The most problematic aspect regarding the flow of people between Turkey and the EU concerns the visa regulations. Turkish governments have always pushed for lifting restrictions on visa regulations since the membership bid started. That issue was recently revisited as part of the Turkey–EU Deal on Syrian refugees. Although no progress could be achieved for solving the visa difficulties Turkish citizens face, “the European Commission has received the green light from the Council of the EU and the European Parliament to deepen cooperation with Turkey, both in the fight against terrorism and with regard to better data exchange” (Perchoc, 2018, p. 4), mostly due to the willingness of both
EU and Turkey to solve the problems that emanate from the war in Syria.

Regarding the flow of people for educational purposes, Turkey has been benefiting from the exchange programs introduced by the EU since a considerable time. Among them, the most popular one is the Erasmus student exchange program, which was established in 1987 for both EU members and non-members. Turkey joined that scheme in 2003. The Erasmus and Erasmus+ programs allow students and academics from EU countries and Turkey to visit each other. According to a recent report by European Commission (2015), Turkey stands after Croatia and Southern Cyprus in terms of student mobility; the number of Turkish students has more than doubled between 2008 and 2015. These interactions must be expected to build a strong social linkage in the long run.

Given Turkey’s authoritarian consolidation, the EU considered some sanctions and financial reductions in Turkey. For instance, concerning the 2014–2020 period, the EU first allocated around €4.5 billion to Turkey (approximately €3.5 billion was provided by the IPA); however, due to the political developments that followed the failed coup in 2016, the EU decided to reduce the amount to just €70 million in 2018. Funding for civil society organizations and education programs such as Erasmus+ has been maintained, although (Stanicek, 2020).

Another important aspect of the social linkage is the Turkish diaspora living in the EU countries. Migration to Western Europe began in 1961 following a guest worker program based on an agreement signed between Turkey and Germany. Following this first example (Martin, 2012, p. 127), “Turkey subsequently signed labour-recruitment agreements with Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden.” Migration to Europe thus started in the first half of the 1960s, and according to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019), currently around 5.5 million Turkish migrants live in Western Europe, with the majority of them being in Germany. These people, some of whom having EU citizenship, constitute an unbreakable link between the EU and Turkey. In Germany, “they maintain close and permanent relationships to Turkey and possess a high degree of organization [. . .] they are now perceived as a target group by political parties more strongly than in the past” (Y. Aydn, 2014, p. 10).

Communication linkage. The visibility of international media plays a significant role in developing the communication linkage between the West and a democratizing state. A well-developed communication linkage may ease the flow of information across borders via free media. In the last decade, however, the censorship and extensive control of Turkish media by the AKP government has become more apparent as “Erdoğan systematically pressured media owners to fire certain columnists and journalists who criticized the government” (Erdem, 2018, p. 5). In 2011, a mainstream media group (the Sabah-ATV Group) was sold to the Çalık Holding that was directed by Erdoğan’s son-in-law Berat Albayrak, whereas two newspapers from the Doğan Media Group (Milliyet and Vatan) were taken over by the Demirören Holding (Freedom House, 2014), which would deepen its ties to the Erdoğan government in the years ahead. The remaining components of the Doğan Media would be bought by the Demirören Holding in 2018, just 3 months before the June 24, 2018, general election. CNN Türk, a news channel that was founded in partnership with CNN International, and NTV, which signed a protocol with the BBC Turkish service, were transformed into relatively pro-government TV channels after the Gezi Park Protests in 2013.

As a result of all these developments and many others, we omit for the lack of space, and some journalists who had lost their jobs started to use the internet as a new media platform while the share of the pro-government media in the Turkish
market was increasing (Shahbaz, 2019). Some independent media organizations such as Medyascope.tv benefit from the funding of the Western-based international organizations, namely the Chrest Foundation (the United States), the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (Germany), and The European Endowment for Democracy (Dulger, 2019). In contrast to the freedom enjoyed by internet journalism, 90% of the daily newspapers in Turkey are considered to be affiliated with the government (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

Western-based media outlets such as BBC Turkish, Deutsche Welle Turkish, and VOA Turkish have become increasingly active and popular in Turkey especially since 2013, in parallel with the decline in trust mainstream media suffers. In addition, with the financial support from UNESCO and the EU, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) has been supporting the freedom of expression in Turkey since 2013 under the project “Building Trust in Media in South East Europe and Turkey.” The project aims to develop accountability in media, prevent the spread of disinformation, and improve capacities of media outlets (EFJ website).

To sum up, there is a strong communication linkage between the EU institutions, Turkish civil society organizations (CSOs), and Turkish independent media. AKP’s authoritarian consolidation is often raised by the EU officials who criticize the decline in the rule of law and regressions in the area of rights and freedoms, including restrictions on the freedom of speech and media freedom—especially after the arrests of journalists and opinion leaders such as Osman Kavala. The AKP government dismisses such criticisms. However, CSOs and independent media outlets that are followed and supported by a significant part of the Turkish public opinion keep Turkey’s communication linkage to the West resilient.

Transnational civil society linkage. Considering the CSOs an important component of democracy promotion, the EU has long been funding them in Turkey. The EU continues to do that despite the authoritarian consolidation. According to Zamfir and Dobreva (2019, p. 11), “one of the EU’s preferred responses to increasing authoritarian tendencies has been to focus its support on independent civil society.” Although EU’s support for the CSOs in Turkey is criticized by some scholars for depoliticizing and adapting them to the neoliberal governmentality (Kurki, 2011; Zihnioğlu, 2019), the EU regards their development as a democracy promotion instrument.

Before the AKP came to power, in 1995, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) created a body named EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee (JCC). Its members consist of the representatives of 18 CSOs from Turkey and 18 CSOs from the EU. During its first years in government, the AKP was eager to support CSOs in line with the expectation of moving on the path to full membership. The government passed the Associations Law in 2004 and the Foundations Law in 2008, enabling Turkish CSOs to cooperate with foreign CSOs and receive foreign funding. This policy was also supported by the EU. “Since 2008, EU’s Civil Society Facility has provided direct grants to democracy promoters in Turkey” (Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center, & Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017, p. 32). These include the Civil Society Dialogue, the IPA, and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Especially, the EIDHR is the main institution that supports the CSOs in countries where the democratization process is in advance or the democracy is at risk. The EIDHR funds the CSOs in relation to their projects for consolidation of democracy, and the scope of the funded CSOs is widespread, including education, women’s rights, human rights, and so on (Kurki, 2011).

The situation changed dramatically after the Gezi Park protests in 2013. The AKP government put restrictions on the CSOs such as limited fundraising opportunities; however, the linkage between Turkish CSOs and the EU deepened beyond the JCC framework. According to the report of the EESC (Metzler, 2015),

However, following the Gezi Park events of May 2013, the Section for External Relations of the EESC decided to broaden EESC’s relations with Turkish civil society organization beyond JCC meetings. A fact-finding visit by three members was then organized in Istanbul and Ankara in September 2013. During this visit, contacts with new organizations were made, such as representatives of journalists, lawyers, doctors, human rights’ activists, environmentalists, which allowed to hear new views and to get new perspectives on the growing difficulties for Turkish civil society organizations to conduct their activities.

As seen in the report, the EU sought to strengthen CSOs in Turkey irrespective of its worsening relations with the government after 2013. However, the declaration of state of emergency 5 days after the 2016 failed coup brought about more restrictions on the CSOs. More than 1,500 CSOs were closed between 2016 and 2018, and the range of activities of the CSOs shrunk (Youngs & Küçükkele, 2017). Despite the restrictions, “the EU has still been the biggest financial supporter of the CSOs in Turkey. The EU has committed pre-accession funds to Turkey over the 2014–2020 period, including €1.58 billion for democracy, governance, and rule of law” (Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center, & Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017, p. 19).

Concluding Remarks

Turkey’s linkage to the EU has not weakened neither during the decline of the leverage (after 2005) nor during the large-scale deterioration of the relations (after mid-2016). Vachudova (2002, p. 8) wrote in 2002 that the cost of exclusion (from EU) for Eastern European economies would be severe as “a steady flow of money, expertise and foreign direct investment will be diverted away from states that do not join towards those that do.” On the other contrary, Turkey,
which moved further away from the EU each year since 2006, has not suffered neither in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) nor regarding the trade with the EU. The FDI in Turkey reached its peak in 2007, and following a sharp decrease in 2009 due to the global crisis, it achieved relatively high levels in 2011 and 2015 (the net inflow was a record 22 billion USD in 2007 and came out as 18 billion USD in 2015; The World Bank, 2019). Similarly, in 2018, Turkey “was the fifth largest partner for EU exports of goods and the sixth largest partner for EU imports of goods” (Eurostat, 2019). We have demonstrated in this article that Turkey’s linkage to the EU remained strong in every aspect even after Turkey’s accession process entered a state of deadlock following the 2016 coup attempt.

This article thus agrees with Kubicek’s argument (quoted in Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 900–901) that “the cultivation of civil society” (an important component of linkage) in Turkey “could not compensate for the worsened conditions of leverage [after 2005].” Hence “the change in democratization had mainly do with a variation in the conditions of conditionality.” In other words, the intensity of Turkey’s linkage to Europe could not compensate for the negative effects of the declining leverage over democratization. Levitsky and Way’s (2006, 2010) argument that linkage matters more than leverage does not apply to Turkey. Throughout the article, we sought to demonstrate Turkey’s authoritarian shift despite the continuous linkage between the EU and Turkey. The evolution of domestic political regimes in EU candidate countries in parallel with their accession processes constitute separate cases differing from one another in many aspects. Turkey is not only a separate case for its part but also a unique one.

The results of the March 31, 2019, and June 23, 2019, local elections along with major opposition parties’ continuing willingness to democratize the regime may signal the fall of the authoritarian Erdoğan regime and the hope for a democratic revival. If this happens, Turkey will suit Schmitter’s (1986) contention that domestic actors play the main role in the democratization compared to the marginal role of the foreign actors. However, it should also be noted that a democratic revival is still far from being an inevitable finale as the ruling alliance between Erdoğan’s AKP and the nationalist conservative MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) under the former’s leadership makes every effort to harass, divide, and even criminalize the heterogeneous opposition in Turkey. A broader point we can make based on our findings is that the democratizing potential of the EU should not be overrated. EU did not manage to hamper the democratic backsliding in some of its members (such as Hungary and Poland) which started after their accession, in addition to Turkey’s candidacy and autocratization that went hand in hand with each other in the last 15 years. It must not be forgotten that the EU is a pragmatic political actor that may disregard the level of democracy in other actors it interacts with when “higher” interests prevail, as seen in the refugee deal concluded with Turkey.

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