



Turkish diasporic responses to the Taksim Square protests: Legacy media and social media uses in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany



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ABSTRACT

Based on an offline and online survey of 967 people of Turkish origin living in these countries, we test how legacy and social media have influenced the participation of the members of the Turkish diaspora in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands in the mid-2013 protests in Turkey's social movement referred to as Gezi Park. This study also investigates how living in Europe can influence the behavior and attitudes of the sampled individuals from the Turkish Diaspora of Germany, Belgium and Netherlands during the period when the Gezi Park demonstration took place. Our results make it clear that social media were used by those who supported the protest movement, while those who opposed the protest movement primarily used or followed traditional sources of media, including Turkish and European television. Furthermore, supporters amongst the diaspora for the Gezi-protests were primarily active in accruing social capital through bonding and social networking among those who belong to the Turkish diaspora under the guise of the Gezi Park protests. Finally, a significant number of the supporters of the protests in the three countries took part in several different means of supporting the movement, including: disseminating awareness about the Gezi protests through social media, engaging in meetings, and in some cases, even severing contact with friends and acquaintances who did not share their support for the protest movement.

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1. Introduction

Civil protests and alternative forms of participation in social movements are gaining popularity and are often seen as signs of democratic health (Norris, 2002). While some Internet researchers demonstrate the empowering potential of online social media, others are commentators who find it naive to believe in their politically liberating power (Gladwell, 2010; Jones, 2011; Coenen et al., 2012). Turkey's restrictive Internet policies and surveillance legislation, which included their resultant blocking by the state of nearly 79,898 different web sites* since the Gezi protests began, are examples of a regime bent on thwarting their revolutionary potential (Akdeniz, 2010; Krajewski, 2010). The protests that began in Istanbul's Gezi Park in May 2013 and the use of legacy media and social media in the relations between civil society and the state are central in this

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* Up-to-date statistics can be found on engelliweb.com.

study. We identify the mechanisms that led members of the Turkish diaspora in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands to engage in or stay away from this social movement, taking place far from their European homes.

According to Tilly (2004), who was writing before the emergence of social media, protest is primarily perceived through the media in terms of 'worthiness', 'unity', 'numbers', and 'commitment' (WUNC); these are the defining elements of social movements and the basic concepts for measuring their strength. The higher the protest scores as determined by police or other official sources on these characteristics, the higher their impact (Lohmann, 1993). In concrete terms, many participants making worthy claims, sharing common symbols and goals, and committed to resist repression, are more likely to be successful. This study further elaborates on these 'WUNC' characteristics, applying them to the Gezi Protests as seen by 'members of the Turkish diaspora' in Western Europe.

Generally speaking, this study provides some concrete evidence about the role of social media in a social movement from the perspective of a diaspora's engagement. It is based on an offline and online survey of the attitudes and behaviors of members of Turkish diasporic members in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany during the Gezi Park protests in the early summer of 2013. Owing to the impossibility of locating a random sample of participants with Turkish ethnicity, we used a variety of online and offline recruiting tools to reach potential respondents (Ogan et al., in press). Participation in activist forums was not required for survey completion as we solicited both respondents who passively or actively participated in the protests and those who were opposed to such protests. In all, 967 questionnaires were completed.

This research further operationalizes the social capital concept in the context of social media being used for political mobilization, by looking at both bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison et al., 2011). We investigate whether or not the diasporic 'group' under scrutiny accrued communication-generated social capital through the use of legacy and social media. Our study will introduce the use of social media for activist purposes within a diasporic context to the literature on social capital. Using social media for activist purposes among the Turkish diaspora may lead to new opportunities (e.g., stronger sense of (be)longing and community feeling). In addition to the examination of social capital, during a time of intense focus on the country of ethnic origin by a group of European residents or citizens, this study examines in contrast the European context for respondents' attitudes and behaviors.

2. Context for the study

On the morning of May 31, 2013 people in Turkey witnessed the largest civil unrest in the country's recent history. On May 28, some 50 activists gathered in Gezi Park in central Istanbul to protest an urban development plan that called for the destruction of an urban park situated next to Taksim Square, in Istanbul, and replacing it with a shopping mall designed to resemble a faux Ottoman-style "military barracks" (Yuksekk, 2014). After a few days, the small environmentalist protest escalated into a countrywide uprising against Prime Minister Erdoğan's government owing to its confrontational approach towards protesters, including liberal use of tear gas, water cannons and "harmless" plastic bullets by the police as well as national media censorship. Out of a population of 80 million, an estimated 3.5 million Turkish people actively took part in almost 5000 demonstrations across the country; 11 people were killed and more than 8000 were injured (De Bellaigue, 2013).

According to an online poll by Istanbul Bilgi University, 91.3% of respondents said they became involved in demonstrations because of the prime minister's authoritarianism, with a similar percentage indicating they were protesting police violence. The third reason for the demonstrations was the violation of democratic rights (91.1%) followed by the 'silencing of the media' (84.2%) (Yuksekk, 2014). Mainstream national television channels, both public and private, either refused to cover the demonstrations or under-reported the scale of the events (Yuksekk, 2014).

Out of outrage with the silencing of the mainstream media, new online media platforms emerged that played an important role in providing a more accurate description of events and raising public awareness in real time. In other words, they supplied a significant communication function for the exchange of ideas and the formulation of collective public opinion, enhancing citizens' ability to organize and tell the country and the outside world about the events (Barberá, 2013). In contrast to the 'Arab Spring' uprisings, which garnered huge international interest, social media activity during the Gezi Park protests indicate a clear national focus. For example, only three out of ten tweets relating to events in Egypt were posted by those on the ground, whereas approximately nine out of ten tweets relating to Gezi Park were posted from Turkey, with a similar proportion of tweets being written in Turkish. About half of the tweets were located to Istanbul specifically, further suggesting that the target was a Turkish audience and not globally oriented (Devitt, 2013; Varol et al., 2014).

Participation in the social media campaign was not just confined to Turkey, however. Tweets flooded in from all over the world about the protests, out of which nearly 15% of the tweets were from other countries (Varol et al., 2014; Barberá, 2013). The demonstrations received both support and opposition from members of the Turkish diaspora, with others choosing to remain silent. Many 'offline' activities, such as street demonstrations, took place across the globe in support of the protesters in Turkey. These activities supplemented online activities that intended to increase awareness among the diaspora. Diasporic involvement was notable in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, three countries with a sizeable Turkish minority and characterized by similar shifts in the immigrant-receiving policy. Nearly three million people of Turkish descent reside in Germany (half of them are part of the first generation, and overall they are making up 3.6% of the total German population) (Wolf, 2014). This compares similarly to the Netherlands, where 400,000 people of Turkish descent reside, amounting to 2.5% of the population (Statistics Netherlands, 2014), and Belgium, where there are 218,832 people of Turkish descent or almost 2% of the population (Dukes, 2012).

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