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The state of kurdish language through public policies in Turkey after 1980

1980 SONRASI TÜRKİYE'DE KAMU POLİTİKALARI İLE KÜRT DİLİLINİN DURUMU

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Abstract

Making of public policies is a process through which the state determines relevant topics for the sake of its citizens and implements them. In Turkey, the public policies about Kurdish language after 1980 are outstanding such that the actors of coup d’etat eagerly embraced the former idea of nation state which theoretically requires one common language in the borders of the given country. In parallel with this notion, the soldiers, who are the impeccable followers of Kemalist idea, put much pressure on local languages in Turkey, especially Kurdish language. They made some laws and forbade other languages than Turkish. But later, the conservative governments reigned in Turkey which had different ideas about this topic. As they got the opportunities, they made use of them so as to improve the situation for that language. The conservative governments handled this topic in the realm of freedom and human rights and created different public policies, so the adventure of Kurdish Language followed a much different track under different governments. This is a qualitative study, and the data were compiled from the related literature and evaluated accordingly.

Key Words: Public Policies, Kurdish Language, Soldiers, Conservative Governments.

Özet


Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamu Politikaları, Kürt Dili, Askerler, Muhafazakar Hükümetler.
Introduction

Public policies are a kind of map through which the state tries to find solutions to the problems which emerge among public. But there could be many different circumstances which affect the policies. Accordingly, the outcomes of the policies and the processes are re-assessed, and some modifications or even radical changes are made. The public policies about Kurdish Language in Turkey went through a similar path as it was depicted above.

This study draws attention to the link between language and nationalism by explaining what public policy is, how its processes are and who its actors are. In this context, state policies after 1980 towards Kurdish, the language of the Kurdish minority, as a reflection of nationalism in Turkey, were evaluated. After specifying Turkish as the official language of the state in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, policies were followed that would not allow the development of any other minority language. At this point, the language of the Kurds, the largest minority in Turkey, was banned for a long time, and then these bans were lifted by governments with democratic tendencies. In fact, these prohibitions were not lifted to allow the natural development of Kurdish. In accordance with the conditions of each period, some changes were made in the framework stipulated by the governments. In line with the democratization of Turkey, the processes of lifting the bans on Kurdish and encouraging it at some points by the state are discussed in this article.

Literature Review

Public Policy

Public policy could be defined as a state’s using its authority through the laws which it made itself and implementing them with the hands of an official (Hill & Hupe, 2002). According to a different definition, public policy is something that the state chooses to do or chooses not to do (Dye, 1981). As it is understood from these definitions, if a state intentionally does something or intentionally does not do anything, it could be defined as public policy.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines this term as follows: “government policies that affect the whole population” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2022).

It is not an easy attempt to try to define this term so as to be accepted by everyone. As the nature of the term requires, it is not suitable to come up with a common definition for everybody to come to terms. In general terms, public policies are the goals and actions of the officials who try to change the public service (Akindele & Olaopa, 2004).

These policies are the actions of the governments and the intentions which give way to these actions. So public policy is “an intentional course of action followed by a government institution or official for resolving an issue of public concern (Cochran et al., 2015).”

For an action to be public policy, it should be focused on a pre-determined topic and have an aim. Moreover, the actors should have intentional actions or the state of no actions (Erat, 2014). It is clear from these definitions that a state of not doing anything about a topic needs to be intentional in order to be seen as a public policy.

When the state implements the laws and regulations, there should be the citizens who are affected by these actions. Then it is possible to mention public policies, otherwise they are not suitable to name as that. When the modern state is looked into more deeply, it is clearly seen that it has the authority and the opportunity to intervene in all aspects of social life. By the way of imposing laws and using the authority, the state affects social life, economic situation, environment, family life and many other areas. An important aspect of all of the public policies implemented by the state is that they are originated in the laws and judicial system, so if a state acts in the realm of the given laws and rules and it affects the public, then it is possible to mention public policies there. What is to be underlined here is that the framework of these policies is determined by the current laws (Akdoğan, 2011).

After the industrial revolution, especially with the effect of liberal thoughts, the role of the state was re-determined and it was given a minimal role in public life, which is not more than being a referee in case of disagreements. But in the modern world, the state has been redefined and it has been given many other duties especially because of the reason that the citizens expect many things from the state to take action. As a result of this notion, the role of the state has again been prevalent in modern life and it has been more effective to implement public policies. Therefore, the state has been more inclined to intervene in public life,
which could come up with some positive and negative results (Dollery & Wallis, 1997).

Public Policy Actors

Throughout time, diplomatic communication has played an important role in human society (Yıldız & Dayan, 2022). Although the modern state has many opportunities and much authority to determine public policies, there are many other factors that affect these processes. There are different human groups, clubs, associations, corporations which could intervene in the policies and even have the effect to change the direction or even stop them. In modern terms, the public policies are handled under two different headings:

1) state-focused
2) society focused

When there are state focused policies, the government and the bureaucrats play the crucial role to determine the policies. When they are society-focused, there are other actors than the state and they could be able to put weight on them and direct them. But although there are many different actors, the main actor has always been the state (Paffenholz, 2010).

Public Policy Processes

Throughout these processes, the first step is to define a problem in society. The second step is to come up with different policy offers which are brought together in order to assess them altogether. At this point, especially the problem-related sectors take the major action for their offers for solution. The next step is to bring these offers to the issue. At this point, one of the most crucial actors to determine public policies is the media because it has the effect to present the topic to the public as a problem in order to take action more easily and with the consensus of the majority of public. The media has the role of creating awareness of the problem among the public and they are prepared for next action. The coming step is determining and adopting the policies, which is the most intensive part of the decision-making process. At this stage, all of the alternatives are assessed and the most suitable one is pinpointed to implement. Then the implementation process starts. The authorities take the concrete action to solve the problem. One of the most important steps of the public policies is to evaluate the implemented policies. During this process, the success of the implemented policies is looked through and if there are any unsuccessful outcomes, they are corrected, or necessary changes are made. Therefore, with the help of these outcomes, new plans are made for better results. The points that are not equally handled are determined and policy changes are made during this process. The last of all of these processes is redefining the problem because when the authorities complete the circle of the policy making process, the solutions generally come with next problems. In order to find more effective solutions to the newly emerged problems, this step plays crucial role for future problems and their solutions (Cochran et al, 2015).

Graph 1. The circle of making public policies could be shown like this (Akgül & Kapı, 2010):
Public Policy Analysis

It could be stated that public policy analysis is an effort to get the best result while comparing the analysis of the system in which the policy is made and its position in the professional field it was created (Dror, 1967). While analyzing these policies, paying attention only to the ideas which were created by the politicians will not sufficiently reflect the real situation. Because at this point, the bureaucrats, legislative organs, interest groups, experts and many other actors play very crucial roles. The relation among these actors is very important factor while determining public policies. Moreover, the relation between these actors and the society is also at the core point. For the public policy analysts, all of the actors in this network are of crucial importance and deserve to be focused. While determining these policies, what is more important than the current situation is that the analysis of the process should be done primarily (Sabatier, 1991).

Nationalism And Language

Nationalism refers to being a member of the same nation and sharing some common values. Since this is a subjective definition, it is possible to come up with many others. An objective definition of the term nationalism is almost impossible to offer. The nation could be defined as the people who come together under the same values and common cultural constituents. But this term came to existence in the framework of subjective understanding, so many other different definitions were also offered. Basically, the idea of nationalism stemmed from French Revolution in 1789. Later during the Industrial Revolution, the states perceived it as a must to bring people together under the reign. During this period, the states were in need of educated and literate people and in order to meet this need, they created the nation. Communicating with others, comprehending what is read, and maintaining one's own sanity all depend on one's command of the language (Celik & Yıldız, 2019). Since there were many different lifestyles and cultures in those societies, there was a need for a common thing that everybody in a society would share, which was nothing but language. In the same society, while there were many differences, people all shared one common point; that was the language they were communicating. For that reason, the nationalist ideas gave much importance to language. The main reason pointing to this importance was that there was no other concept that strongly emphasizes their common point. For that reason, the nation states took the language as the first reference for nation building and the importance of language became part of the political processes so much that all of the nation states developed new policies about languages they speak and some of them developed new policies about the local languages which are spoken in the country. One of the pillars of the nationalism is differentiating yourself from others and showing your differences so as to form a unique society and languages served much for this notion (Sadoğlu, 2002).

In addition to these, language had a different aspect from nationalism, which made it more valuable for the next processes. Nationalism was something imagined, in other words, it was an artificial thing to be created in the minds of people and later societies were categorized according to this understanding. Nationalism did not emerge as a universal thing in the normal human life but brought into existence towards the end of the eighteenth century. But for language, it was not a result of these artificial processes and it existed together with the humanity as a natural entity. While nationalism was imagined and it was very difficult for the society to accept it as it was, language was totally different. Since it was
something natural, it was thought to give support to this notion because there was no other thing that could emphasize on communality among people. Even the ideologists of the nationalism in the eighteenth century supported the idea that national units were based on mutual languages. In other words, those who speak the same language could easily be categorized under the same nation (Rocker, 1998).

**Methodology**

This is a comparative analysis of different periods in which the public policies in Turkey about Kurdish language went through various phases. To achieve this aim, the atmosphere of the periods and the political developments were discussed, and how Kurdish language policies changed was revealed under the effect of political developments. This qualitative study compares and contrasts different periods by indicating the paradigm shifts and the effects of them on Kurdish language. The clearest signs of the public policy changes of the state are reflected on the laws that were made in the parliament as a state organ. Since these laws reflected some extreme points in opposition, they also indicate the paradigm shifts clearly. For that reason, the laws made in the process are the main sources used in this study. Later, the implementation of the laws is shown with political developments in Turkey.

**Results and discussion**

**Kurdish Language After 1980 In Turkey**

Many of the nation states developed the strategy to gradually outlaw the local languages in public sphere so as to make the official language more visible. Creating a new nation and assimilating the minorities were two crucial premises to build a nation state, so they perceived applying these strategies as legitimate actions and acted in this way (Sadoğlu, 2002).

In 1980, soldiers came to power with a coup d’état and started to change the state so as to adapt it to the Kemalist ideas once more. When Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, it was formed as a nation state and ideologically it was inclined towards the Western World. As they determined their route like that, they adopted all of the literature about nationalism, which was created in West, the framework of which was shown above. For that reason, they put much importance on Turkish Language and tried to disseminate it to the public with its new form which was freed from Ottoman components. But later, the conservative governments did not own that sort of policy and changed many things about it. When the soldiers came to power in 1980, they tried to turn the state into the form of Kemalist ideas again. In order to achieve this, they firstly made a new constitution and made many new laws. They again put the article in the constitution saying that the official language was Turkish (Law 2709, 1982).

The Army in Turkey was the first institution to westernize in 19th century and after that time it became the representative of Western idea in the country. Especially the Kemalist notion expressed itself with that idea and it was represented by the soldiers. Nation-state in Western terms was not supported by conservative governments and the soldiers generally complained about it. When they came to power in 1980, they started to revitalize that western tradition. In order to make Turkey an impeccable nation state, they started to apply the nationalist heritage to the country once again. Since they had very little time until they leave the power to civilian authorities, they tried to make many laws until the elections in 1983. They also made laws about local languages and tried to strengthen the position of Turkish language. The act number 18199 on 22nd October 1983 was named as "The Act about Broadcast (and publishing) in Other Languages than Turkish."

The first article of this law perfectly reflects the notions which developed in nationalism.

Article 1 is as follows:

“This law regulates the principles and the procedures about the forbidden languages in which thoughts are expressed in order to protect social order, national security, Republic, national sovereignty, the indivisible integrity of the state with its country and nation (Law No. 2932, 1983)."

This article clearly states that if any language other than Turkish is used in public sphere, the security of the whole country will be in danger.

The third article of the same act is as follows:

“Article 3: The mother tongue of the Turkish citizens is Turkish.

a) It is forbidden to attempt to use and disseminate other languages than Turkish.”

It also outlaws broadcasting and publishing in any other languages. The law also determined harsh punishment when the law is violated.

The 2nd article of this law also forbids any second language of the other sovereign countries which
signed some international treaties with Turkey. Only the first official language of those countries is acceptable in Turkey. In fact this article implies the Iraqi constitution that accepts Kurdish language as a second language and Iraq is accepted as a sovereign country by Turkey. As a result of this, Turkey could have been recognizing Kurdish because it already recognized Iraq. In order to remove the ambiguity here, this law outlawed the second language of that country which already recognized it in the constitution; so Turkish authorities clearly state that when they recognize another country, it does not mean that they recognize their second language, namely Kurdish (Kubilay, 2005).

It should be clearly stated here that when Kurdish language was forbidden as a public policy, it was not an instant idea that emerged all of a sudden. It is certainly a reflection of nationalist ideology which developed throughout these two centuries. Since the state has secular nationalist ideology, they gave special importance to mother tongue and assistance to nationalist idea. As a result, they develop that kind of public policy and implemented it in order to strengthen Turkish nationalist approach, which led to many different developments.

On 25th January 1991, that law was abolished by the ruling Motherland Party. At that time the founder of the party, Turgut Ozal, was the President of the country and played important role to abolish this law. After that, all of the local languages had the opportunity to live in public sphere. But the pressure of the soldiers on the system was so strong that Turgut Ozal had to rationalize this step by referring to the international treaties. He did not attempt to show this initiative as a step towards liberty but as a requirement of the international treaties. Turgut Ozal expressed that Helsinki Final Act which was signed in 1975 and the Vienna Convention in 1989 were recognized by Turkey and they should do what they require for the countries. These two documents forced the states to assure to protect and develop local cultures and their languages (Whitman, 1992).

During the soldiers’ rule between 1980 and 1983, many laws were made to redesign the state according to nationalist ideology. It is very hard to say that these policies emerged as a requirement of social sphere or social demands, but the soldiers felt obliged to re-define the ideological position of the state in parallel with nationalist ideas. As for the conservative ruling party in 1991, they did not directly oppose to the soldiers but put forth a different rationale for their change. During 1990s, there were many economic problems, PKK terrorist attacks increased, and the Islamist movements gradually got stronger; so, the politicians had to deal with these problems and did not find any opportunity to handle the Kurdish Language issue.

It was another conservative ruling party that implemented liberal policies about Kurdish and tried to give more freedom. Justice and Development Party (AKP) took some major actions to liberate this language. Turkey went through several coup d’états and military interventions during its history. One of the interventions took place on 12 March 1971 asserting that the current government was not capable enough to stop the anarchy and strife and the state was diverging from the principles of Ataturk. As a result of this memorandum, Demirel government resigned, and a semi-military government formed and started to make reforms as the soldiers wished (Ahmad, 1977).

The new government made a law on 5 May 1972 and hindered giving names in any other languages than Turkish. They made an Act of Demography no 1587 and outlawed the names which were not suitable for national culture. The AKP government changed the article 16 of the act in 2003. Later in 2006, they totally abolished the act. The change in 2003 was as follows:

"The parents give the name to their children. But the names that are against the common ethical rules and that offend people cannot be given to children (Law No. 1587, 1972)."

The first form in 1972 included “against our traditions” which implies the names other than Turkish was taken out of the text, so the names in local languages again made legal in the laws.

Since Kurdish issue was very controversial in Turkey, AKP government was not able to do much about it, especially under the surveillance of the soldiers during the first years of their rule. They went through some clashes in political arena and when it came to the year 2007, there was the general election which ended up with a victory for AKP and the military pressure dwindled after that time. Later on, the government found the opportunity to take major actions. But all of them came gradually. Firstly in 2009, a Kurdish TV channel under the surveillance of the state opened up with the name TRT 6. TRT itself is the official broadcasting company and the channel started to serve with its name (TRT, 2022).
In 2011, another act number 6112 about the foundation and broadcasting services of Radio and Television Supreme Council was issued and private broadcasting companies were allowed to broadcast in other languages. Article 5 of this act says:

"Broadcasting Language

Broadcasting is primarily done in Turkish. But it is also possible to broadcast in other local languages and dialects. It is mandatory to broadcast in the grammatical rules of the given language (Law No. 6112, 2011)."

The agenda formation process started two years earlier than this act because this is a very controversial issue, and it is difficult to prepare the public for such a change. The Prime Minister of that time, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, expressed that this could be handled as a part of democratic initiative program. An authority from the Supreme Council announced that this kind of initiative is something that European Union also endorsed so it should be supported. Moreover, there were other broadcasting companies which broadcast in local languages through satellite. He said that it was not true to totally forbid this kind of initiative and it is also not true to give total freedom, so they should be under state control (Haber 7, 2009).

It seems that the government wanted to base this initiative on some logical assumptions:

1) It is part of the democratization process in the country.
2) European Union also endorsed such a libertarian attempt.
3) Modern technology already gives way to such initiatives and the governments cannot hinder them.

As it was the same with Turgut Ozal, this government also puts forth the outer sources compelling them to act like that. As a result, the agenda formation process continued with convincing the public for such policies and later they determined what to do and how to do drawing the boundaries and taking it under state control. Later on, there emerged many TV channels broadcasting in Kurdish Language (T24 Bağımsız İnternet Gazetesi, 2012).

Although AKP government started radical initiatives, they could not take major action until 2009, which was after 2007 elections in which they came to rule more powerfully. But during 2002-2007 period, AKP government did not use any initiative because of other balancing powers, namely the soldiers who were still very effective over political life in Turkey. Their control over politics could be originated in the 28 February process. As it is seen above, the second initiative after 2009 came in the year 2011 because that year was the year of the coming elections, and the government was still had much public support.

It is clear from these processes that the Kemalist ideology is strictly bound to the nationalist ideas which emerged in West and tried to revitalize this ideology when they had the opportunity free from the conjuncture of the time; so, they incessantly supported the same ideas about language issue in every period after the foundation of Turkish Republic in 1923.

But the template-breaking initiatives came out in conservative world, and they followed such policies about languages that the difference in their ideologies is reflected here very clearly. While Kemalist idea was bound to the premises of nationalism and tried to assimilate the local languages for a stronger nation, the conservative idea continuously supported freedom to local languages.

The policy making processes of these two different ideas could be pinpointed in any period of time during the Republic era. Kemalist idea took the acquis of the western-originated nationalism for granted and determined the policies in this direction and they tried to create a new and powerful nation, but for the conservative wing, they had very different perspective and they were partial to liberal ideas. What puts barriers on the policies of the Kemalist ideas is first of all the international treaties and conventions. Since even Kemalist idea turned its face to the West, the institutions and the rules imposed by European countries were always very effective in Turkey (Oran, 2009). Especially after the World War II, the western heritage rendered liberal ideas and formed their institutions in parallel with democracy, liberal ideas, human rights...etc. For this reason, Kemalist ideology did not feel free to implement their policies. Even the conservative governments used western ideas as their rationale in order to alleviate the pressure coming from Kemalist elites. As it was mentioned above both Motherland Party government in 1991 and Justice and Development Party government in 2009 emphasized on the same topic and showed the western institutions and laws as a source for their attempts. When we look at the conservative governments, they generally felt the pressure coming from soldiers, but when they found an opportunity to act freely, they made radical
changes in the system as it was shown in Kurdish Language issue.

The initiatives of AKP government were not limited to the ones mentioned above. After the democratization process, Kurdish Language started to appear more in public sphere. It started to be used in media, education, local governments and many public places more freely. During this process, people were given the right to support themselves in the courts of law and the local governments were able to give Kurdish names to streets. Kurdish Language courses were allowed to open and later it was expanded to universities which had the right to open Kurdology departments and even use Kurdish as a medium language. It was also freed to give Kurdish names and some letters which do not exist in Turkish alphabet but used in Kurdish were allowed to be used (İnal, 2012).

What is here to be emphasized is that the AKP government felt obliged to take action about this issue because of its ideology, but this was not the pure reason. There were demands about it from the Kurdish community after 2000; especially the Kurdish university students asked for the rights to get education in their native language. Even in 2004, they took this issue to European Court of Human Rights, which caused many debates in Turkey. The soldiers tried to stop these initiatives, but the government tried hard to give freedom at that time. In 2010, Peace and Democracy Party, a political party which asserted that they were trying to get rights for Kurdish people, started a campaign and urged them to take initiatives to pave the way for freedoms in this regard. After 1980, the members of the army, who adopted the Kemalist view, forbade the speaking of other languages in Turkey as a requirement of the nationalist ideology and engaged in an uncompromising behavior in this regard. These policies, on the one hand, created a situation contrary to the agreements put forward by the international community, which brought a different dimension to human rights and continuously developed this understanding, and on the other hand, they were not found correct by conservative governments that adopted liberal and libertarian understanding in Turkey.

From another point of view, it is seen that there are some external reasons forcing governments to adopt all these policies. Especially after 1999, with the process of harmonization with the European Union, many freedoms were tried to be opened and local languages took their share in this regard. Within the framework of this harmonization studies, many issues in the European Union acquis came to the fore and it was tried to harmonize with the European Union with the laws made. In this context, freedoms also were given to local languages (İnal, 2012).

At this point, it should be noted that the policies put into practice by the state regarding the Kurdish language are not in a position to be discussed only in its own context. More generally, within the general framework of some of the rights that are demanded to be granted to all Kurdish citizens, their own language was also included and discussed in this context. Therefore, policies related to Kurdish emerged as a sub-title of policies regarding Kurdish citizens, which can be discussed in a wider context.

**Conclusion**

The situation of Kurdish language, which emerged as a public policy in the state, took shape as a reflection of ideological approaches and took different positions within the state according to the periods when different understandings prevailed. It was seen in this period that each understanding followed consistent policies in its own ideological perspective. However, when this issue was understood differently by various actors, different problems emerged, and different policies were produced within the state in response to this situation. After 1980, the members of the army, who adopted the Kemalist view, forbade the speaking of other languages in Turkey as a requirement of the nationalist ideology and engaged in an uncompromising behavior in this regard. These policies, on the one hand, created a situation contrary to the agreements put forward by the international community, which brought a different dimension to human rights and continuously developed this understanding, and on the other hand, they were not found correct by conservative governments that adopted liberal and libertarian understanding in Turkey.

Within the framework of this understanding, the fact that conservative parties were generally more generous about the rights to be given to the Kurds also affected public policies on Kurdish language and urged them to take initiatives to pave the way for freedoms in this regard.

As a result, it is possible to talk about three main factors affecting the public policies regarding Kurdish language:

1. Turkey's efforts to adapt to the development of the idea of providing freedom to any local language, which is a natural structure within the framework of the understanding of human rights developed by the international community, and the insistence of this idea by international agreements.

2. Conservative governments see this issue as an area of freedom within the framework of a more liberal and libertarian understanding and act accordingly.

3. Demands from citizens of Kurdish origin create pressure.
With the compulsion of these three main motives, libertarian steps were gradually taken in the Kurdish language and some arrangements were made despite traditional statist objections.

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