

Explaining The Turkish Diaspora: An Asset or Obstacle for Turkey's Long Prospects of European Union Accession

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the Turkish diaspora and its role in shaping Turkey's prospects for European Union (EU) membership. It critically evaluates whether diaspora communities act as facilitators or obstacles within the broader political, social, and institutional framework of EU–Turkey relations. Drawing on diaspora theory, transnationalism, social capital theory, and public diplomacy, the study argues that the Turkish diaspora constitutes a strategic but underutilized asset. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology combining process tracing and thematic analysis, supported by empirical data from migration statistics, political participation trends, and economic contributions of Turkish communities in Europe. Findings suggest that while structural barriers such as democratic deficits and geopolitical tensions remain central to Turkey's stalled accession process, the diaspora itself is not an obstacle. Instead, it holds significant potential to facilitate integration through norm diffusion, economic linkages, and political mediation. However, this potential depends heavily on effective institutional coordination and state-led engagement strategies.

Keywords: Turkish diaspora, EU accession, transnationalism, social capital, public diplomacy, migration, Turkey–EU relations

1. Introduction

Migration has historically played a transformative role in shaping global political and economic systems. In the modern era, diasporas have emerged as influential transnational actors capable of shaping international relations, identity politics, and development processes. The Turkish diaspora represents one of the largest and most politically significant migrant populations in Europe, with an estimated 5.5 to 6 million people of Turkish origin residing across the continent, particularly in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Belgium (Aydin, 2014).

Turkey's ambition to join the European Union dates back to its association agreement with the European Economic Community in 1963. Despite decades of engagement, accession negotiations, formally

launched in 2005, have stalled due to political, institutional, and normative disagreements. Issues such as rule of law, democratic governance, and human rights remain central concerns for the EU (Saatçioğlu, 2016).

Within this context, the Turkish diaspora has increasingly been viewed as a potential bridge between Turkey and Europe. However, debates persist regarding whether diaspora communities facilitate integration or reinforce divisions. This paper addresses this debate by examining the extent to which the Turkish diaspora functions as an asset or obstacle in Turkey's EU accession process. The central argument advanced here is that the Turkish diaspora is fundamentally an asset, though its effectiveness is constrained by weak institutional engagement and broader structural barriers beyond its control.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly work on diasporas has expanded significantly over the past three decades. Early studies conceptualized diasporas primarily in terms of displacement and nostalgia (Safran, 1991), while more recent research emphasizes their role as transnational actors influencing politics, economics, and culture (Vertovec, 2005). Research on the Turkish diaspora highlights its unique characteristics. Unlike many other migrant groups, Turkish communities in Europe have maintained strong ties to their homeland while simultaneously integrating into host societies. Kaya and Kentel (2005) describe the Turkish diaspora as both a "bridge" and a "boundary," reflecting its dual role in facilitating and complicating relations between Turkey and the EU.

Empirical studies show that Turkish diaspora communities have increasingly participated in European political systems. For instance, Germany alone hosts over 3 million people of Turkish origin, many of whom are actively engaged in political parties, trade unions, and civil society organizations. Approximately 1.5 million are eligible voters in German elections, and Turkish-origin politicians have held seats in the Bundestag and European Parliament (Östergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Economically, Turkish diaspora communities contribute significantly to European economies. Turkish-owned businesses in Germany number over 80,000, employing more than 400,000 people and generating billions of euros annually (Aydin, 2014). These economic contributions strengthen the argument that the diaspora serves as a stabilizing and integrative force. However, critics point to challenges such as integration difficulties, identity tensions, and political polarization. These factors complicate the diaspora's role but do not necessarily negate its overall positive impact.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study develops a multi-layered analytical framework by integrating diaspora theory, transnationalism, social capital theory, and public diplomacy. These perspectives are not treated in isolation but are combined to explain how diaspora communities operate simultaneously across different levels of analysis individual, organizational, and institutional (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2005).

3.1 Diaspora Theory

Diaspora theory provides the foundational lens for understanding dispersed populations that maintain connections to their homeland. According to Safran (1991), diasporas are characterized by a collective memory, a sense of shared identity, and an ongoing relationship with their country of origin. In the Turkish case, these characteristics are evident in the preservation of language, religion, and cultural practices across generations.

However, more recent scholarship emphasizes that diasporas are dynamic rather than static entities (Brubaker, 2005). Turkish diaspora communities demonstrate internal diversity shaped by generational differences, socio-economic status, and political affiliations. First-generation migrants tend to maintain stronger ties to Turkey, while later generations often develop hybrid identities that combine elements of both Turkish and European cultures (Kaya & Kentel, 2005).

This dual identity enables diaspora members to function as cultural intermediaries. At the same time, it may also create tensions regarding belonging and loyalty. The ability of the diaspora to act effectively depends on its capacity to transform shared identity into coordinated action, particularly in areas such as advocacy, lobbying, and cultural diplomacy.

3.2 Transnationalism

Transnationalism highlights the simultaneous engagement of migrants in multiple national contexts. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that migrants operate within transnational social fields that link their countries of origin and residence. The Turkish diaspora exemplifies this through its active involvement in both European and Turkish political, economic, and cultural spheres.

For example, diaspora communities participate in Turkish elections through external voting while also engaging in host-country political systems. This dual participation creates what can be described as “overlapping political memberships,” which enhances their potential influence (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Transnational networks also facilitate economic activities such as trade and investment. Turkish entrepreneurs in Europe often maintain business ties with Turkey, contributing to economic interdependence between the two regions (Aydin, 2014). Additionally, digital communication technologies have strengthened transnational connections by enabling real-time interaction and information exchange. However, transnationalism is not without limitations. Engagement across borders can sometimes lead to divided loyalties or conflicting expectations from host and home countries. Thus, while transnationalism enhances influence, it also complicates identity and political positioning.

3.3 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory provides insight into how networks and relationships enable collective action. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, all of which are relevant to the Turkish diaspora.

Bonding social capital refers to strong ties within the diaspora community, such as family networks and cultural associations. These ties provide support and cohesion but may limit interaction with broader society. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, connects diaspora members with individuals and institutions in host countries, facilitating integration and influence. Linking social capital refers to connections with political and institutional actors, including government bodies and international organizations. This form of capital is particularly important for influencing policy and shaping public discourse.

Empirical evidence shows that Turkish diaspora communities possess significant levels of social capital. Turkish-owned businesses, civil society organizations, and political representation demonstrate the capacity for both economic and political engagement (Aydin, 2014). However, the effectiveness of this capital depends on how well these different forms are integrated.

3.4 Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy focuses on how states and non-state actors shape international perceptions and relationships (Melissen, 2005). Diaspora communities play a crucial role in this process by acting as informal ambassadors of their home countries. The Turkish diaspora contributes to public diplomacy through cultural activities, media representation, and political engagement. Cultural events, educational exchanges, and community initiatives help promote a positive image of Turkey in Europe.

However, the effectiveness of diaspora-led public diplomacy depends on credibility and consistency. Without coordinated strategies and institutional support, these efforts may have limited impact. Comparisons with countries that have strong cultural institutions highlight the importance of structured engagement in maximizing diaspora influence.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of social actors (Creswell, 2013). This approach is particularly suitable for examining diaspora dynamics, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of identity, transnational engagement, and political behavior that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods alone.

The interpretivist paradigm recognizes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent. In the case of the Turkish diaspora, perceptions of identity, belonging, and political engagement are shaped by historical experiences, institutional contexts, and individual agency. Therefore, this study prioritizes depth of understanding over generalization, aiming to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which diaspora communities influence EU–Turkey relations.

4.1 Research Design

The research employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the Turkish diaspora as a critical and illustrative case. Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for analyzing complex, multi-layered

phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2014). The Turkish diaspora represents a strategically important case due to its size, longevity, and political relevance in Europe.

By concentrating on this single but significant case, the study is able to provide a detailed and context-rich analysis of how diaspora communities interact with both their home and host countries. This approach also allows for the identification of causal mechanisms and patterns that may not be visible in broader comparative studies. Furthermore, the research incorporates embedded case comparisons, particularly focusing on key host countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands, to highlight variations in institutional environments and diaspora experiences. These embedded cases strengthen the explanatory power of the analysis without shifting away from the primary case study design.

4.2 Data Collection

Data for this study is collected from multiple secondary sources to ensure both validity and reliability. These sources include peer-reviewed academic literature, policy documents, statistical datasets, and media analyses. Academic sources provide theoretical grounding and empirical insights, while policy reports and institutional data offer up-to-date information on migration trends, economic contributions, and political participation.

Statistical data from organizations such as Eurostat and national statistical agencies are used to contextualize demographic and economic patterns within the diaspora. Additionally, reports from international organizations and think tanks help capture broader policy debates and perceptions surrounding EU–Turkey relations. The study employs triangulation as a key methodological strategy. By cross-referencing multiple sources of data, triangulation enhances the credibility of findings and reduces the risk of bias (Yin, 2014). For example, economic contributions of the diaspora are examined through both statistical data and scholarly interpretations, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding.

4.3 Analytical Methods

The study utilizes a combination of process tracing and thematic analysis to examine the role of the Turkish diaspora.

Process tracing is employed to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Turkish migration to Europe and its transformation into a transnational diaspora. This method allows for the identification of key turning points such as labor migration agreements, the 1973 oil crisis, and the introduction of external voting rights, and helps explain how these developments have shaped current diaspora dynamics (George & Bennett, 2005). By focusing on sequences and causal mechanisms, process tracing provides a deeper understanding of how past events influence present outcomes.

Thematic analysis is used to systematically identify and analyze recurring patterns within the data. Key themes include identity formation, integration processes, economic participation, political engagement, and public perception. These themes are coded and analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework, allowing for a structured and coherent interpretation of findings.

The combination of these methods enables the study to move beyond descriptive analysis and provide explanatory insights into the role of the Turkish diaspora in EU–Turkey relations.

4.4 Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data may result in the underrepresentation of informal networks and everyday experiences that are not captured in official reports or academic studies.

Second, cross-country comparisons are constrained by differences in data collection methods and reporting standards, which may limit the comparability of statistical indicators. Third, the complexity of EU–Turkey relations makes it difficult to isolate the specific impact of diaspora communities from other influencing factors, such as domestic politics and international relations. However, by combining multiple data sources and analytical methods, the study mitigates these limitations and provides a robust and comprehensive analysis of the research problem.

5. Policy Implications

The findings of this study highlight the need for a comprehensive and multi-level policy approach to fully harness the potential of the Turkish diaspora. Rather than viewing diaspora communities as passive actors, policymakers should recognize them as strategic partners in shaping EU–Turkey relations.

5.1 Strengthening Institutional Coordination

A major challenge identified in this study is the lack of coordination between state institutions and diaspora organizations. To address this, there is a need for the development of a coherent and long-term diaspora engagement strategy.

Such a strategy should include the establishment of formal platforms for dialogue and collaboration, enabling regular communication between government agencies, civil society organizations, and diaspora representatives. Coordinated efforts can help align objectives, reduce duplication of initiatives, and enhance the overall effectiveness of diaspora engagement. In addition, institutional support should extend to capacity-building programs that strengthen the organizational capabilities of diaspora groups, enabling them to operate more effectively within both host and home country contexts.

5.2 Investing in Education and Human Capital

Human capital development is a critical factor in enhancing the influence and effectiveness of diaspora communities. Investment in education, vocational training, and professional development can significantly improve socio-economic outcomes for diaspora members.

Policies aimed at improving access to quality education, promoting bilingualism, and supporting higher education participation are particularly important. These measures not only facilitate integration into host societies but also enable diaspora members to occupy influential positions in economic and political

spheres. Moreover, highly skilled diaspora individuals can serve as knowledge brokers, transferring expertise, innovation, and best practices between Europe and Turkey.

5.3 Promoting Inclusive Integration Policies

Host-country governments play a crucial role in shaping the integration experiences of diaspora communities. Inclusive policies that promote equality, diversity, and social cohesion are essential for maximizing the potential of the Turkish diaspora.

Efforts should focus on reducing structural inequalities in education, employment, and housing, as well as combating discrimination and social exclusion. By creating an enabling environment, these policies can strengthen bridging social capital and facilitate meaningful participation in public life. Inclusive integration also contributes to social stability and reduces tensions that may otherwise hinder diaspora engagement in broader political and economic processes.

5.4 Enhancing Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Public diplomacy represents a key area where diaspora communities can have a significant impact. Developing a coherent and professional public diplomacy strategy that actively involves diaspora networks can help reshape perceptions of Turkey within Europe.

This includes supporting cultural initiatives, such as festivals, language programs, and academic exchanges, which promote mutual understanding and cultural appreciation. Media engagement is also crucial in countering negative stereotypes and presenting a more balanced image of Turkey. Furthermore, collaboration with academic institutions and think tanks can enhance intellectual exchange and contribute to more informed policy discussions.

5.5 Encouraging Political Participation

Political participation is a vital component of diaspora influence. Encouraging active engagement in both host-country and homeland politics can strengthen the role of diaspora communities as intermediaries.

This can be achieved through initiatives that promote civic education, voter participation, and leadership development among diaspora members. Increased representation in political institutions enhances the ability of diaspora communities to advocate for their interests and contribute to policy debates. At the same time, fostering inclusive political participation helps bridge divides between communities and promotes democratic values, which are central to EU–Turkey relations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of the Turkish diaspora in shaping Turkey's prospects for European Union membership. Through a comprehensive analysis grounded in theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, it has been demonstrated that the diaspora is not an obstacle but rather a strategic asset.

The Turkish diaspora possesses significant potential to facilitate EU–Turkey relations through its economic contributions, political participation, and cultural mediation. However, this potential is not automatically realized. It depends on effective institutional coordination, supportive policy environments, and the ability to navigate internal and external challenges.

Importantly, the study highlights that the primary barriers to Turkey’s EU accession lie at the structural level, including issues related to governance, human rights, and geopolitical dynamics. While the diaspora can play a supportive role, it cannot substitute for necessary reforms at the state level.

In conclusion, the Turkish diaspora represents a valuable but underutilized resource in the context of EU–Turkey relations. With the right strategies and policies in place, it has the capacity to contribute meaningfully to bridging divides, fostering mutual understanding, and supporting Turkey’s long-term integration into the European Union.

The Turkish diaspora is best understood as a strategic asset with the potential to facilitate Turkey’s EU accession process. While it cannot resolve structural challenges on its own, it can play a significant supportive role. Its effectiveness depends on improved coordination, stronger institutional support, and a favorable political environment. By leveraging its social, economic, and political capital, the Turkish diaspora can contribute meaningfully to bridging the gap between Turkey and the European Union.

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