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An Analysis of Bülent Ecevit's Policies, Decisions, and Attitudes Towards the European Union Membership Process of Türkiye

Bülent Ecevit'in Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği Üyelik Sürecine Yönelik Politikaları, Kararları ve Tutumlarının Bir Analizi

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Abstract: This study focuses on the analysis of the European Union (EU) membership policy of Bülent Ecevit who was a prominent political leader in Turkish political life and scrutinizes his decisions and attitudes through the lens of continuity and change, seeking to trace the imprints of influential factors and dynamics in the decision-making process. In this way, it contributes to the scholarly literature by not only revealing the influence of leaders on Türkiye's EU accession process but also explaining the effects of Ecevit's ideological orientations on the course of Türkiye-EU relations. After analysis, it is understood that Ecevit's political stance on the EU was shaped by various internal and external factors, such as the Cyprus Crisis, economic crises in the country, the attitudes of EU leaders, and individual factors such as ideological inclinations. In conclusion, it is claimed that considering the membership process, Ecevit's skepticism toward the EU in his approach ultimately did not offer an alternative to the traditional Western-oriented Turkish foreign policy.

Keywords: European Union, Türkiye's Accession Process, Bülent Ecevit, Change and Continuity.

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Öz: Bu makale Türkiye'nin önde gelen liderlerinden Bülent Ecevit'in Avrupa Birliği'ne (AB) üyelik politikasının analizine odaklanmaktadır. Ecevit'in izlediği politikalar değişim ve süreklilik perspektifinden incelenmekte ve alınan kararlarda etkili olan faktör ve dinamiklerin izleri sürülmektedir. Böylelikle hem Türkiye'nin AB'ye üyelik süreci üzerindeki lider faktörü ortaya konulmakta hem de Ecevit'in ideolojik yönelimlerinin Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinin seyri üzerindeki etkileri açıklanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Ecevit'in AB'ye ilişkin tutumunun Kıbrıs Krizi, ülkedeki ekonomik krizler ve AB liderlerinin tutumları gibi çeşitli iç ve dış faktörler ile ideolojik eğilimler gibi bireysel faktörler tarafından şekillendiği anlaşılmaktadır. Sonuçta da Ecevit'in AB'ye yaklaşımındaki şüphesizliğinin, üyelik süreci dikkate alındığında nihai olarak geleneksel Türk dış politikasının Batı-merkezli anlayışına bir alternatif sun(a)madığı iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Türkiye'nin Üyelik Süreci, Bülent Ecevit, Değişim ve Süreklilik.

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, significant changes have occurred in Türkiye-EU relations. However, the membership process has not been finished yet. As already known, the turning point in relations with Europe (then known as the European Economic Community-ECC) occurred in 1959, when Türkiye applied for association shortly after Greece. Another important one was the Ankara Agreement, which came into force in 1964 and outlined three phases for Türkiye's membership. These years coincided with the period in which Bülent Ecevit began to increasingly emerge in Turkish political life and became a highly influential leader within the Republican People's Party (RPP). With this rise within the Party, Ecevit emerged as one of the active actors in both the ruling and opposition factions in Türkiye's EU membership issue and the future of this process, following his assumption of party leadership especially in 1972 and thereafter.

In the light of the literature, these years can be considered as a period when both Ecevit and Türkiye-EU relations were increasingly analyzed in numerous studies. For instance, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU has been extensively examined and debated in the literature by various researchers who have made contributions to the literature in this field such as Paul Kubicek (2007), Meltem Müftüler-Baç (1998), William Hale (2003), Senem Aydın-Düzgit & Nathalie Tocci (2015), and H. Tarik Oğuzlu (2012). Moreover, studies in this field have mostly focused on examining the Türkiye-EU relations and parties' attitudes towards the EU. For instance, Ekrem Yaşar Akçay (2012; 2016) and Filiz Başkan & Selin Bengi Gümrükçü (2012) examined how political parties and leaders evaluated the EU, Uğur Ülger (2017) explored the attitude of the Milli Görüş movement towards the EU, Seçkin Barış Gülmez (2008; 2013; 2020), Ayşe Güneş-Ayata (2003), Mehmet Bardakçı (2010) and Ödül Celep (2011) scrutinized political parties and elites of in Türkiye with regard to Euro-skepticism and Ercüment Tezcan & İlhan Aras (2015) analyzed the Justice and Development Party's EU policies.

Particularly noteworthy is the limitation of such studies when it comes to Bülent Ecevit. Seçil Erdem (2008) is one of the scholars who studied the perspectives of social democrats in Türkiye regarding the EU. Duygu Yayla (2019) has investigated in her thesis whether there is a discernible change in Bülent Ecevit's policies towards the EU, focusing on a direct examination of his political strategies. In other words, Yayla's objective is to explore whether Bülent Ecevit altered his fundamental perspective on the EU throughout his career. Furthermore, Arda Ozansoy's study (2022), which examines Bülent Ecevit's policies towards the EU, specifically focusing on the decision to suspend relations in 1978, serves as another contribution to the limited body of work in this field.

As mentioned above, although there are significant changes and shifts in Bülent Ecevit's policies towards the EU there has been limited study conducted about this issue. For instance, in 1978, during the government of Bulent Ecevit, a significant event took place that marked a turning point in the relationship. Ecevit suspended the association relations outlined in the Ankara Agreement on the grounds of economic and political reasons, becoming the first leader to freeze Türkiye-EU relations in Turkish political history.

On the other hand, Ecevit was also a leader who played a crucial role in Türkiye's membership process with the EU after the mid-1990s. In 1999, when the EU decided to accept Türkiye's candidacy, Ecevit was serving as the prime minister of Türkiye. Even Ecevit's party, the Democratic Left Party (DLP), declared that Türkiye's membership in the EU was a vital foreign policy objective in its election manifestos during this time. To analyze those changes and continuity, the current study consists of four sections, excluding the introduction. The first section aims to explore the formation of Bülent Ecevit's mental map as a politician and the key characteristics of his political thought by examining his career. The second section focuses on the developments that took place during the Ecevit era and the policies he preferred. The third section analyzes and discusses Ecevit's decisions in the perspective of the historical trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations, dynamics of Turkish foreign policy, domestic and international contexts, and ideological tendencies. Finally, the study ends with some concluding remarks. The study first aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of who Ecevit was. Then it examines Ecevit's foreign policy during his political career, with a particular focus on Türkiye-EU relations during his tenure as prime minister. Ultimately, the study seeks to answer the question of what factors influenced Ecevit's decisions regarding Türkiye's long-standing integration process with the EU.

2. Bülent Ecevit's Political Thought's Map: Resources Underlying His Political Program

In order to analyze Bülent Ecevit's political decisions, it would be beneficial to first examine the processes of political mindset formation. This is because the foundation of his political decisions can be traced back to this aspect. Therefore, it is necessary to initially delve into Ecevit's relationship with politics, starting from his initial exposure and tracing its development over time. Subsequently, it becomes crucial to elucidate his understanding of foreign policy within the context of our topic.

Bülent Ecevit, the third leader of the RPP and the Chairperson of DLP was a prominent figure in Turkish politics, particularly after the 1960s. He was born on May 28, 1925, in Istanbul, as the first and only son of Mehmet Fahri Bey, an academic and deputy, and Fatma Nazlı Hanım, a painter. His grandfathers were Mustafa Şükrü Bey, a religious scholar, and Hacı Mehmet Emin Pasha. He began his primary school education in Ankara in 1931. After completing his primary education, Ecevit first attended Ankara Boy's High School in 1936, and then enrolled at Robert College in 1938 (Erdoğan, 2006: 12-17). After graduating, Bülent Ecevit worked at Türkiye's Consulate in London for six years. In 1949, upon his return to Türkiye, he commenced employment as a translator at the newspaper *Ulus* with the assistance of Vice-Prime Minister Nihat Erim (Gezici, 2006: 24-25). It is worth noting that Ecevit's work in the consulate greatly contributed to his understanding of international politics and Türkiye's place in world politics. These experiences are significant as they mark the beginning of Ecevit's political orientation. Because of this, Ecevit initiated his understanding of the Western world at an early age. Additionally, he cultivated his knowledge and skills in various fields, particularly in political matters. This period of personal growth probably coincided with the formative years of his thoughts on Türkiye's relationship with the West.

Before his political endeavors, Ecevit displayed a keen interest in literature, particularly in the art of versification. He often identified himself as an author rather than a politician. Notably, Ecevit's early career involved extensive translation work from Hindi, Bengali, and English. Even at the age of sixteen, during his high school years, he translated Rabindranath Tagore's works, namely *Gitanjali* and *Wanderer Birds*. Additionally, Ecevit translated numerous poets from the English literary canon. Alongside his translations, he also authored several poems. In the 1950s, Ecevit played a significant role as a founding member of the Helicon Society (*Helikon Derneği*), aiming to introduce contemporary art movements to Turkish society (Kurt, 2002: 19; Erdoğan, 2006: 17-18). It is plausible to draw a connection between his literary expertise and his political rhetoric, as his proficiency in language, among other factors, undoubtedly facilitated his path in the political arena.

Between 1954 and 1957, Ecevit's schedule was notably hectic. He joined the youth branches of the Republican People's Party in Ankara in 1954. However, the pivotal moment in his life occurred when he became a candidate on the RPP's list before the general elections of 1957 (Çetin, 2006: 52-53). It is crucial to note that 1957 was not when Ecevit first encountered politics. His father, Fahri Bey, had previously served as a deputy for the RPP. Moreover, Ecevit himself had gained experience working for both national and international newspapers, focusing on political issues. When taken as a whole, those experiences and the atmosphere he was surrounded by might be seen as determining factors that paved the way for his engagement in politics.

The year 1957 marked a pivotal juncture in Bülent Ecevit's trajectory, as it witnessed his inaugural election as a member of parliament. During this period, Ecevit made a decisive choice to relinquish his scholarship at Harvard University and return to his home country (Harris, 2011: 203). Under the authority of the National Unity Committee, which assumed control of the junta regime, a constituent assembly was established to reshape the Turkish political landscape and draft a fresh constitution. Ecevit played an active and influential role within this assembly. Subsequently, Ecevit assumed the post of Minister of Labor in the VIII, IX, and X İnönü Governments from 1961 to 1965 (Kurt, 2002: 42-44). Approximately four years after his parliamentary duties, Ecevit became a minister within a coalition government. It is worth emphasizing that this ministerial role wielded considerable influence in shaping Ecevit's future within the

RPP. His burgeoning reputation during this period served as a catalyst for his emergence as a prominent and influential political figure. Furthermore, as someone with no prior experience in statesmanship, Ecevit acquired a greater understanding of state-related matters during this process. His knowledge and influence began to resonate within the societal framework.

Another significant event in Ecevit's political life occurred after March 12, 1971, The Memorandum, which contained warnings issued by the military to the government. Firstly, the government tendered its resignation following the dissolution of Süleyman Demirel's administration. Subsequently, Nihat Erim formed a new government with the support of the military. When İnönü declared his alignment with the new government and Erim, Ecevit submitted his resignation to the party, relinquishing his role as the Secretary General of the RPP (Ahmad, 2010: 328). Ecevit viewed the Memorandum as an anti-democratic act that regressed Türkiye's democratic progress. In an article published in the German journal *Der Spiegel*, he further asserted that the March 12 Memorandum was the initial attempt to obstruct the growing influence of the democratic left ideology led by the RPP in Turkish political life. However, Ecevit's resignation cannot be solely attributed to his criticism of the Memorandum. In this regard, the intervention can be seen as the culmination of Ecevit's opposition within intra-party relations. The origins of this opposition can be traced back to 1965, the year when the RPP officially adopted a "left-of-center" ideology. The party became divided into factions based on their support or lack thereof for the left-of-center approach. On one side, there were individuals like Turhan Feyzioğlu, Kemal Satır, and Nihat Erim who deemed the left-of-center ideology unsuitable for the RPP. On the other side, Bülent Ecevit emerged as the main advocate for the left-of-center ideology (Günel, 2009: 245-247).

In 1972, an important change took place in the history of the Republican People's Party. İsmet İnönü, the longtime leader of the party, was defeated at the RPP's party congress and Bülent Ecevit assumed leadership of the party. In the 1973 general election, Ecevit's RPP secured approximately 33.3 percent of the valid votes, emerging as the leading party. The election results indicated that no single party could form a government without the support of others. Then, Ecevit's RPP entered into a coalition with Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party. The coalition partners held contrasting political ideologies, making the formation of a coalition between Ecevit and his ideological opposite a noteworthy aspect for those examining his political stance. Apart from considerations of political power, as highlighted by Eric J. Zürcher (2015: 377) the coalition heavily relied on the shared anti-American and anti-European sentiments held by both Ecevit and Erbakan. This aspect adds further significance and provides insight into Ecevit's political views. Ecevit's formation of a coalition government with Erbakan, known for his anti-Western stance, indicates his ability to exhibit flexibility or rigidity in their policies as required by the circumstances.

Ecevit's period, which can be described as a kind of 'political second spring,' coincided with the post-1980 era in politics. Following the military coup in 1980, Bülent Ecevit resigned from his position, as chairperson of the RPP. Then he faced a political ban from 1980 to 1987, enforced by the military regime. During this period, Ecevit also received legal convictions in 1980 and 1982. Consequently, Raşan Ecevit, his wife, took the initiative to establish the Democratic Left Party on November 14, 1985, in the absence of her husband, assuming the role of party leader. The DLP comprised a diverse coalition of peasants, workers, tradesmen, and retired civil servants. However, in 1987, when a referendum was held to abolish political bans, Ecevit returned to the political scene and assumed leadership of the DLP (Heper, 2011: 185). On October 20, 1991, Ecevit once again took his place in parliament as a deputy, having been elected based on the election results. Eight years later, in 1999, he formed a minority government shortly before the subsequent election. Following the outcome of the election held on April 18, 1999, Ecevit's DLP emerged as the leading party, securing approximately 21.7 percent of the votes. Subsequently, on May 28, 1999, he assumed the position of Prime Minister in a coalition government formed with the National Action Party (NAP) and the Motherland Party (MP). This tripartite coalition government remained in power until the 2002 general elections (Kurt, 2002: 183-184).

The period spanning from 1999 to 2002, during which he held office, witnessed significant political developments. Noteworthy events during his tenure include the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, terrorist organization PKK; Türkiye's attainment of candidate status for EU

membership; and a profound economic and political crisis. The fundamental qualities that Bülent Ecevit contributed to his political thought during his political career have been to some extent elucidated. Taking into account the aforementioned career, it becomes apparent that he was one of the significant actors in Türkiye's relations with the EU. In fact, his final government formation took pivotal steps in the relations between the parties. Therefore, based on these premises, it is now appropriate to delve into Ecevit's understanding of foreign policy, programs, and priorities.

3. Ecevit's Understanding of Foreign Policy: The Synthesis of Career, Ideology and Conjunction

Bülent Ecevit's approach to foreign policy, like many world leaders, encompassed both ideological and pragmatic strategies. His foreign policy was also influenced by his social democratic identity and the changing dynamics of international politics. Therefore, for a comprehensive understanding, it is necessary to consider not only his political career but also Ecevit's political ideology and the conjunction of the period.

The relationship between his political career and political thought has been discussed above. Now, the analysis of his political ideology can be initiated as a starting point. Thus, it would be more appropriate to associate ideology with his foreign policy, as it constitutes another factor that shapes Ecevit's decision-making processes. Ecevit's political ideology was primarily rooted in the concept of social democracy, which he defined as "left-of-center" and later as "democratic left" from 1970 onwards. To gain insights into Ecevit's ideology, his books "Left-of-Center" (2009) and "Democratic Left" (2008) serve as significant sources. These works summarize the left of center or democratic left as following fundamental principles (Ecevit, 2008; 2009):

- The center-left encompasses a significant majority of humanists. It centers on the human being.
- The center-left aims to address social inequalities in both opportunities and wealth.
- A social justice perspective is embraced by the center-left as it opposes the concentration of wealth in the hands of a specific group and seeks to promote equality for those oppressed by injustice.
- The center-left is characterized by its progressive and reformist stance, prioritizing the timely improvement of the welfare of the population and implementing necessary reforms promptly.
- The center-left adopts a statist approach, perceiving the state as a vehicle to serve the public interest and promote collective well-being. However, this form of statism is primarily focused on regulating public services for the betterment of society and implementing principles of social justice. It entails state intervention and control over production to benefit society, with limitations imposed on private enterprise when it conflicts with the public interest.
- While private property is acknowledged alongside state and social property, its scope is subject to constraints imposed by principles of social justice and the promotion of public welfare.
- The center-left actively pursues the necessary measures to achieve these objectives, rather than relying solely on natural processes or laissez-faire approaches.
- Moreover, the center-left firmly believes that democracy is the most effective system for attaining these goals.

In light of these principles, it is possible to say that Ecevit emphasized the importance of the necessity of having meaningful connections with society as opposed to the traditional RPP. He aimed to address the expectations of peasants and workers in both economic and political realms. Ecevit advocated for an interventionist state model, envisioning a welfare state that would organize social and economic life based on principles of social justice, social security, and economic development (Ahmad, 2010: 319-328). Taking a comprehensive look at Ecevit's foreign policy views, some insights can be drawn from his writings. Firstly, Ecevit's foreign policy approach was fundamentally rooted in a general sense of skepticism towards foreign powers. He believed that safeguarding Türkiye's national independence, security, and honor should be the cornerstone of its foreign policy strategy. According to Ecevit, any relationships with foreign powers should not impose restrictions on Türkiye's sovereignty. Security considerations were also paramount for him, leading him to advocate for the closure of foreign military bases not under Turkish

military control (Ecevit, 2009: 121-122). His foreign policy, secondly, embraced the principles set forth by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, particularly the notion of "peace at home, peace in the world." Within this framework, Ecevit aimed to establish peace primarily in Türkiye's regional context and then extend it to the global stage (Ecevit, 2009: 124). According to his understanding, Türkiye needed to address its internal political challenges as a prerequisite for assuming the role of a regional power. Ecevit thought that Türkiye could only aspire to play a significant role in the area by resolving domestic problems (Çayhan, 2013: 84). Thirdly, Bülent Ecevit's foreign policies exhibited a more comprehensive approach, encompassing a wide range of international issues. The cornerstone of his foreign policy was a region-centered strategy, driven by national interests. In addition to maintaining strategic relations with the United States, EU, and Asian countries, Ecevit emphasized the importance of establishing strong ties with neighboring nations (DLP's Election Manifesto, 1995: 89). These principles provide a certain degree of explanation regarding the fundamental framework of Ecevit's foreign policy and the strategy he would pursue. Therefore, Ecevit's policies regarding the EU can also be analyzed within this context.

Lastly, when explaining the conjectural factor that influenced Ecevit's understanding of foreign policy, a prominent example can be provided in this regard. During the 1950s, a prominent focus of Ecevit's foreign policy was establishing close ties with the West, particularly the United States and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In his article titled "*Revolutions and Foreign Politics*" published in the Pazar Postası in 1951, Ecevit advocated for Türkiye's membership in NATO. He portrayed NATO not merely as a military alliance but also as a means to bridge the cultural and civilizational differences between Türkiye and the West (Ecevit, 1951: 2). However, Ecevit's stance toward the West underwent a shift when the Cyprus issue emerged in the 1950s. He adopted a position contrary to the West regarding the Cyprus dispute. Ecevit ordered the Operation in 1974 despite warnings from the US and England not to invade Cyprus, marking a shift from his former pro-Western attitude. These instances highlight the nuanced and fluctuating nature of Ecevit's foreign policy, which included periods of alignment with the West, particularly in the 1950s when he emphasized the cultural convergence between Türkiye and the West through NATO membership. Yet, in later years, he displayed a more independent and assertive approach, as evidenced by his decision to intervene in Cyprus despite objections from Western powers.

Therefore, Ecevit's foreign policy objectives can be summarized as follows: safeguarding national independence, enhancing Türkiye's regional influence, and countering threats to the country's security and economy. Recognizing the importance of both regional stability and engagement with global actors, Ecevit aimed to promote peace and maintain a delicate balance in relations between Western countries, neighboring states, and Türkiye. While embracing a region-centric approach to foreign policy, Ecevit also prioritized Türkiye's national interests due to his left-wing or socialist-oriented ideology exhibited anti-imperialist and anti-American tendencies. These principles were aligned with his broader ideological framework and influenced his foreign policy perspectives.

4. Highlights of the Türkiye-European Union Relations During Ecevit's Era

Bülent Ecevit emerged as a prominent political figure in Turkish politics during the 1960s, a period when Türkiye's relations with the EU were first established. However, the purpose of this study is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire historical context. Instead, this section focuses primarily on Türkiye-EU relations during the governments led by Ecevit, which occurred five times throughout various periods (in 1974, 1977, 1978-79, 1999, and 1999-2002). However, to summarize briefly, the formalization of relations took place with the signing of the Ankara Agreement on September 12, 1963. However, Türkiye's application was not solely driven by the desire to align with Western states' foreign policy objectives. It was also a strategic response to Greece's application. Türkiye argued that if Greece were to become a member of the Single Market, Türkiye's interests would be negatively affected (Aybey, 2004: 22). The Agreement served as a guarantee that Türkiye would become a member of the European Community (EC) upon fulfilling its responsibilities in a sophisticated manner. It outlined a three-stage process consisting of preparation, transition, and the final phase, culminating in Türkiye's entry into the Customs Union in 1996 (Ankara Agreement, 12.09.1963: Article 3-4).

Türkiye-EU relations continued intermittently from 1972 to 1978 and Ecevit's influence on these relations became increasingly apparent during his two governments. Particularly, the events in 1974 led to an escalation of tension between the parties. The 1974 Cyprus Operation was one of the main catalysts for this tension. When Türkiye initiated the operation, many EU member states condemned Türkiye, and the process continued with mutual diplomatic notes exchanged between the parties. In addition, Greece's application for full membership, challenges related to the free movement of Turkish workers, and the imposition of import quotas on Turkish products by certain European states further negatively affected the relations during this period (Akçay, 2012: 33-36). Eventually, during his second government in 1978, Ecevit decided to suspend the association relations with the EU, despite the EU's offer to commence membership negotiations. Süleyman Demirel, who came to power after Ecevit, tried to take steps to improve the relations; however, on September 12, 1980, the coup d'état took place and the EU also suspended its association relations with Türkiye for a period of five years, from 1982 to 1987 (Karabulut, 2011: 74; T.C. Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2023).

In 1987, Turgut Özal's government submitted an application to the EEC to become a full member of the Community. However, approximately three years after Türkiye's application, the EU made the decision not to initiate the membership process. Many reasons underlying this decision were articulated in the disclosed report. However, fundamentally, it was stated that the EU itself was in a state of flux and not ready to commence a new membership process. Additionally, economic, social, demographic, political, and cultural issues pertaining to Türkiye were put forward (Commission of the European Communities, 1989). Additionally, government officials in EU countries, such as the social democrat Helmut Schmidt, asserted that Türkiye was not a European country and highlighted the significant cultural differences between Türkiye and Europe. Schmidt further argued that Türkiye's membership was implausible due to its adherence to Islamic culture, which was perceived as incompatible with Christianity (Duner & Deverell, 2001: 8).

The year 1997 marked a turning point for Türkiye's aspirations for EU membership, as the country experienced disappointment following the Luxembourg Summit. While most of the other applicant countries were granted the status of candidate countries, Türkiye's membership negotiation was pushed back by the EU. The decision was primarily influenced by concerns over Türkiye's human rights record and the Cyprus issue, as explicitly stated by the EU (Duner & Deverell, 2001: 9).

After the 1999 general election, a reconfiguration of the political landscape occurred, resulting in the formation of a new coalition government following a brief period of Ecevit's administration. The election results did not provide any single political party with the authority to form a government on its own. Instead, a coalition was formed comprising the DLP, the NAP, and the MP, which governed the country from 1999 to 2002. Bülent Ecevit, as the leader of the coalition, served as the prime minister, while Devlet Bahçeli from the NAP and Mesut Yılmaz from the MP held the positions of deputy prime ministers. The issue of EU membership became a subject of controversy within the coalition partners. The NAP and the DLP adopted a cautious approach towards Türkiye's integration process with the EU. Their political programs, which prioritized nationalism, reflected their inclination to protect the country's independence and national unity. As a result, these parties displayed reluctance to implement the reforms necessary for EU membership (Yılmaz, 2011: 192-193).

Nevertheless, following the 1999 general elections, Prime Minister Ecevit emphasized the importance of promptly implementing the Copenhagen Criteria through the collective efforts of all parties. In his view, the resolution of democracy and human rights issues in Türkiye depended on the successful execution of these reforms (Taniyıcı, 2010: 186). Subsequently, at the Helsinki Summit on 10 December 1999, the EU officially accepted Türkiye as a candidate country (T.C. Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2023). This decision marked the beginning of significant changes in Türkiye, aimed at aligning its legal, social, economic, and political aspects with the EU acquis. The 1982 Constitution underwent amendments, introducing thirty-six new articles that brought about substantial changes in areas such as human rights, democracy, separation

of powers, and economics. The government initiated the implementation of EU harmonization packages (Öniş, 2003: 13).

5. Assessment of Ecevit's Policies, Decisions, and Attitudes Towards the European Union

As the prime minister to suspend relations between Türkiye and the EC since 1959 Ecevit played a significant role in Türkiye-EU relations, and his decisions deserve careful consideration. From this point of view, an examination of Ecevit's era regarding Türkiye-EU relations highlights specific instances where Ecevit emerged as a key decision-maker and exerted notable influence. First of all, the escalation of tension between the parties particularly concerning the Cyprus Issue, and the subsequent freezing of relations are significant points of focus. Additionally, Ecevit's stance during the 1990s assumes significance in this regard. During this period, Ecevit portrayed himself as a supporter of EU membership, which was reflected in his policies. Consequently, Türkiye, under the leadership of Ecevit, attained the status of a candidate country, marking a substantial step in its candidacy process.

In this context, to assess Ecevit's policies, decisions, and attitudes towards the EU, first and foremost, it is essential to address the question of why Ecevit decided to halt relations and examine the significant reasons behind this decision. Before going forward with this study, it is necessary to mention that Ecevit's decision was highly criticized by a number of circles. For instance, one of those criticisms was that Ecevit's decision to suspend relations would adversely affect the future of the ongoing membership process and due to that decision Türkiye missed a big chance (Ozansoy, 2022: 103). The other was the foreign affairs bureaucracy of the period, namely the ambassadors. They emphasized the necessity of applying for full EU membership. Turkish businesspeople were also of the opinion that EU membership would be beneficial for Türkiye. Despite these demands, Ecevit still made the decision to suspend relations (Kabaalioglu, 2023). On the other hand, some of the scholars argued that attributing the decision to suspend relations in 1978 solely to Ecevit would be erroneous in their writings published in newspapers. According to this kind of view, the rising anti-Western sentiment in Türkiye's political and social life during the 1970s also played a role in Ecevit's decisions (Pekiner, 2004). In a statement made years later, Ecevit also explained that during the relevant period, the society was also anti-European, and he took the suspension decision due to the unfair practices of the EEC towards Türkiye (Hürriyet, 2004).

The first reason underlying Ecevit's decision is related to Türkiye's domestic politics. The 1970s were a critical period for Turkish politics and its main political parties. It was marked by significant instability in the politics of Türkiye. Moreover, political stability was elusive, with more than ten coalition governments formed between 1970 and 1980. Rising political violence among student groups and terrorist organizations further exacerbated social insecurity (Zürcher, 2015: 379). In such a political environment, it is highly likely that Ecevit, instead of addressing foreign policy issues, shifted his focus toward domestic politics. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Ecevit's understanding of foreign policy was linked to the success of his domestic politics, aiming for Türkiye to emerge as a regional actor.

Another significant factor that influenced Ecevit's decision was the emergence of economic problems both within and outside the country. In 1973, the world witnessed the Oil Crisis, triggered by the decision of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to raise petroleum prices. The sharp increase in crude oil prices disrupted the global economic balance and tripled Türkiye's foreign trade deficit. This, along with a rapid rise in the balance of payments deficit, led to a foreign exchange shortage in Türkiye. Consequently, Türkiye faced a significant budget deficit. To mitigate the effects of the economic crises, Türkiye sought assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). However, these institutions rejected providing economic aid to Türkiye. These responses further deepened Türkiye's sense of insecurity regarding the West and its institutions (Çayhan & Ateşoğlu Güney, 1996: 99-101; Zürcher, 2015: 386; Öztürk, & Saygın, 2017: 6-7). Türkiye faced economic crises that could not be resolved without foreign aid, yet the West and Europe showed reluctance in extending support to Türkiye during that time. This response from Western countries may have created a sense of suspicion in Ecevit's mind regarding their trustworthiness and deepened his Euro-Skepticism (Güneş-Ayata, 2003: 213).

Moreover, of greater significance is the mounting tension between Türkiye and the West since the 1974 Cyprus Operation, which has brought bilateral relations to the brink of rupture. Western countries, including European actors, strategically chose to isolate Türkiye on the international stage and implemented a series of embargoes from 1974 to 1978 (Kaya, 2018: 187). This concerted effort to marginalize Türkiye prompted a shift in the country's multidimensional foreign policy, which had been evolving since the Johnson Letter of 1964. Given these facts, it is possible to assert that the attitudes of European governments played a role in the decision of Ecevit.

The positions of both Türkiye and European political leaders could have had a negative impact on Ecevit's stance towards the EU. European politicians were opposing Türkiye's EU membership for the following reasons (Aydın & Açıkmeşe, 2004: 117-118):

- The institutional structure of the EU would change to Türkiye's advantage.
- Türkiye would gain more influence in the decision-making process, particularly through its relationship with Germany.
- Türkiye's geographic location, situated at the intersection of the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, would pose security problems for the EU.

Such statements caused frustration among both Turkish society and political leaders. Ecevit's attitude also can be read as the reflection of historical sentiments of animosity associated with these views. In addition, the fact that England, France, Italy, and Germany indicated that their assistance in resolving Türkiye's economic crisis in the 1970s would be limited, and Germany's announcement that it would not make any improvements in the socio-economic situation of Turkish workers, also influenced Ecevit's decisions (Ozansoy, 2022: 107-108). On the other hand, there were also groups in Türkiye that opposed European Union membership. These segments were mainly composed of Marxists who rejected Europe as a capitalist union and Nationalists who argued that Türkiye had a distinct identity from Europe (Canbolat, 2004: 161). For instance, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party at that time, Alparslan Türkeş, was against Türkiye's entry into the Common Market (now known as the European Union), arguing that it would be economically disadvantageous for Türkiye (Alpay, 2023). Marxists were in the same way as nationalist regarding their views on Europe. The Turkey Workers Party, a socialist/Marxist party in Turkish politics, defined the Common Market as an organization where imperialism and capitalism united and opposed Türkiye's membership (Akçay, 2012: 41). Furthermore, Islamic groups in Türkiye had a negative stance on the Common Market as well. Necmettin Erbakan, a prominent Islamic leader at that time, opposed Türkiye's entry into the Common Market mainly for cultural and economic reasons. According to Erbakan, Europe had not abandoned its colonialist mindset, and if Türkiye joined the Common Market, it would become a colony of the West (Erbakan, 1971: 19-20).

There are also several reasons that can be identified as ideological factors behind Ecevit's decision. As mentioned above, Ecevit's foreign policy approach was fundamentally rooted in a general sense of skepticism towards Europe and the US because of his social democrat identity. He believed that safeguarding Türkiye's national independence, security, and honor should be the cornerstone of its foreign policy strategy. Therefore, Ecevit who was already inclined towards Euro-skepticism, is highly likely to have increased the level of this skepticism due to the influence of the conjuncture (Yılmaz, 2011: 191). In other terms, Ecevit's decision to suspend relations may have stemmed from the ideological movements of the 1970s. Leftism and socialism were prevailing ideologies both in Europe and Asia since the 1960s, and they began to gain a political base in Türkiye as well (Belge, 2008: 38). As a social democrat, Ecevit had already demonstrated his ideological tendency when he abolished the ban on hash farming, which had been imposed during the Nihat Erim government under pressure from the United States. The widespread adoption of left-wing ideologies among the Turkish population, particularly among students and intellectuals, would have undoubtedly influenced the decisions of the Ecevit government.

The second dimension of assessing Ecevit's position regarding the EU is intricately tied to the subsequent developments that transpired in the 1990s and beyond. First of all, it is fair to say that Türkiye-EU relations in the 1990s undoubtedly differ from those in the 1970s. Although significant crises occurred between the

parties in both periods, the 1990s marked a phase in which Türkiye's accession process to the EU was debated within the context of structural changes (Gözen, 2006: 118). Then Ecevit's attitude towards the EU also changed by the 1990s. In most respects, it diverged from the skepticism of the 1970s and signaled a green light towards the EU. However, it cannot be claimed yet that Ecevit was entirely favorable towards EU membership. Indeed, it is known that Ecevit maintained his Euro-skeptical stance during the 1990s as well (Yılmaz, 2011: 192-193). Nevertheless, some factors influenced Ecevit's shift from strict skepticism towards lighting the green light to EU membership in the 1990s such as the election of social democrats to office in Germany, the belief that pursuing a policy aligned with the EU would be beneficial for the country following political and economic crises, the support from the United States, and the increase in sympathy towards EU countries due to their aids during the 1999 Gölcük Earthquake (Park, 2000: 33; Gözen, 2006: 123-124) It would be reasonable to define these factors as both ideological and conjectural.

Firstly, the change in the EU's politician's attitudes led to a change in Ecevit's attitudes towards the EU. Because some European leaders, unlike their predecessors, had begun to make statements indicating that Türkiye would join the EU in the near future. For instance, France's State Minister responsible for the EU, Pierre Moscovici said (ReliefWeb, 1999):

There are efforts being made concerning Turkey's becoming a member of the EU in Helsinki...Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ismail Cem, met the French President, Jacques Chirac, and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in Paris a short while ago. We want these sensitive issues to improve. We hope the new climate between Greece and Turkey will solve the problem easier. We feel the presence of an opportunity in the Helsinki Summit; the approach is positive. In three months, a decision will be made.

Additionally, European political leaders who were opposed to Türkiye's membership were replaced by new leaders who supported Türkiye's membership by the end of the 1990s. For instance, in Germany, a coalition government was formed by the Social Democratic Party and the Green Movement in 1998. This coalition had a positive impact on the EU's willingness to accept Türkiye's appeal during the Helsinki Summit (Park, 2000: 36; Demirkıran et al., 2010: 39). The harmony and mutual support between the German politician Gerhard Schröder and Bülent Ecevit played a significant role in Türkiye being recognized as a candidate country for the EU (Akçay & Turan, 2020: 1943). During Germany's presidency in the European Council, Schröder took a series of steps in support of Türkiye's EU membership (Aybey, 2004: 30). During this period, media organizations and newspapers in Türkiye made news that supported EU membership. Positive statements by European leaders about Türkiye were frequently covered in the Turkish press (Bek, 2001: 128). However, there were also negative opinions about Türkiye among the members of the top-level institutions of the EU. For example, Nicole Fontaine, the President of the European Parliament, expressed at the Helsinki Summit that there could never be cultural compatibility between Türkiye and the EU (European Parliament, 1999).

Because of this, Ecevit also approached the EU with a degree of skepticism when the EU membership status gained in the late 1990s. The Cyprus Issue, which was one of the important issues of the time, had not yet been resolved between Türkiye and the EU, and most Turkish leaders had pushed EU membership aside in light of the Cyprus Issue. Therefore, the Cyprus Issue, also seen as a security threat, continued to influence Ecevit's stance towards Europe in the 1990s (Gülmez & Buhari-Gülmez, 2008: 21). Therefore, the EU's acceptance of Türkiye as a candidate country should also be considered as a requirement of the conjuncture.

The increasing pressure exerted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on political authorities since the late 1980s can be identified as another one of these factors. Scholars in the field of international relations have long acknowledged the influence of NGOs in global politics, tracing back to the mid-20th century (Arı, 2010: 69). From the 1980s to last years of 1990, trade unions such as the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Türkiye, and the HAK-İŞ Trade Unions Confederation, as well as chambers of commerce and industry such as the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce and the Istanbul Chamber of Industry, and associations like the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges, the Young Businessmen Association of Türkiye, the Turkish Industry and Business Association, and the Independent Industrialist's and Businessmen's Association have consistently tried to

persuade political decision-makers to act in their best interests on membership process (Ünalp Çepel, 2015: 275-278). Business circles and civil society organizations, as Ziya Öniş (2003: 19) noted, showed more enthusiasm than political parties when it came to EU membership. They believed that EU membership would create crucial opportunities for the Turkish economy and society. The activities of these non-governmental organizations in favor of EU membership also contributed to Türkiye paying greater attention to the issue of membership (Eylemer & Taş, 2007: 565-567). Therefore, various NGOs such as trade unions, labor unions, civil society organizations, interest groups, and pressure groups, could have played a significant role in shaping Ecevit's decision-making process regarding foreign policy.

Another factor contributing to Ecevit's shift towards supporting EU membership in the 1990s can be attributed to the emergence of a new world order following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations were substantially shaped by the transforming global order and the strategic decisions made by both parties during the 1990s. The EU's approval of Türkiye's appeal in 1999 was largely related to the EU's strategies regarding Türkiye's position in the post-Cold War era. The EU actually wanted to see Türkiye as its ally during those years because Türkiye was the only country capable of preventing Russia's expansion in the Middle East region, where European powers sought to maximize their economic and political interests (Soytürk, 2015: 393). The dichotomy of the world characterized by the division into East and West during the Cold War era experienced a profound transformation with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the principal representative of the Eastern bloc. Due to this radical change, the Western world has become increasingly important in Türkiye's foreign policy. Accordingly, the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower increased Türkiye's independence in foreign policy decision-making both regionally and internationally. Consequently, Türkiye became more inclined to be a strong ally of the West, especially Europe (Sayarı, 2000: 170).

Furthermore, the waves of democratization that permeated Türkiye during this period exerted a noteworthy influence on the evolving dynamics of relations, particularly in the 1990s. Therefore, the government had to respond to domestic and international changes that raised people's expectations for a higher level of democracy, guarantees of human rights, and the freedom of civil society. The EU, as a representative of these values, started to gain more popularity among Turkish society. The growing trends in society may have also influenced Ecevit's attitudes.

In contrast to the conjectural and ideological factors that influenced Ecevit's decision to suspend relations, the fundamental principles and values of Turkish foreign policy must also be taken into consideration to better understand Ecevit's attitudes towards the EU. In this regard, especially after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the founding fathers of the country made significant efforts to transform Turkish political, social, and cultural life in line with Western values. However, the state's foreign policy was not entirely shaped by those values. The new foreign policy of Türkiye aimed at the survival of the state, with its main characteristics being independence, support for the status quo, and realism (Sinkaya, 2011: 80-81). Because of this, Türkiye decided to ally itself with sovereign powers in the international system during the early years of the Republic. These powers were the United States, England, and France, which belonged to the Western bloc. The foreign policy strategy of aligning with Western states continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s (Duran, 2015: 35, 47-48). Due to its political and economic alignment with the West following the reordering of Europe and Western countries after World War II, Türkiye became a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1948, the European Council in 1949, and the NATO in 1952 (Lauren & Müftüler-Baç, 2003: 197). When Ecevit decided to suspend relations with the EU, the EU was not viewed as the sole or vital ally by Türkiye. Türkiye, due to its closer alignment with the United States, was being considered as an alternative by the EU in Turkish foreign policy. The significance to be derived from this is that Ecevit's decision in 1978 did not conflict with the main goals of the country's foreign policy. However, it should also be noted that within the European context, it symbolizes change rather than continuity in foreign policy.

6. Conclusion

This study has analyzed Bülent Ecevit's policies, decisions, and attitudes towards the EU membership policy of Türkiye. The influential factors and dynamics in Bülent Ecevit's decision-making process were also taken into consideration. The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study.

Ecevit's decisions towards the EU have not remained consistent throughout his career. But his attitudes were consistent with Euro-skepticism. During the early years of his government in 1973 and 1978, Ecevit held more Eurosceptic views due to various conjectural and ideological reasons. As a fundamental aspect of his foreign policy, the preservation of national sovereignty and the economic and political independence of the country played a critical role in shaping his stance on the EU initially. Accordingly, when he believed that the EU's demands in the process of membership were incompatible with Türkiye's economic interests, he suspended the relations. Additionally, his political ideology as a democratic leftist, characterized by anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism, further contributed to his negative attitudes towards the EU. In general, therefore, it seems that Ecevit's decision to suspend relations in the 1970s and his support for the initiation of the membership process in the 1990s were shaped more around ideological and conjectural factors.

Firstly, the realization that Western states were not always the supporters of Türkiye during the economic crises of the 1970s influenced Ecevit's decision to suspend the mutual relations. The instability in domestic politics and the economic crisis were also influential factors in Ecevit's decision. Moreover, it is highly likely that the Eurosceptic attitudes of national actors played a role in Ecevit's decision to suspend relations. Finally, the European Union's criticisms, especially those related to ideological and cultural sources, also shaped Ecevit's decisions.

On the other hand, it can be argued that Ecevit's policy shift in the 1990s can be interpreted as a result of conjuncture. As mentioned above the coming to power of politicians in Germany who support Türkiye's accession to the EU, increased the belief that pursuing a policy aligned with the EU would be beneficial for the country following political and economic crises among the people and the United States' initiatives were the main dynamics behind the Ecevit's positive attitudes. Various NGOs such as trade unions, labor unions, civil society organizations, interest groups, and pressure groups have played in shaping Ecevit's decision positively. Ecevit's decision to approve EU membership in the 1990s can also be related to the establishment of a new global order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, it is essential to consider the big picture by taking into account the core principles of Turkish foreign policy and the impact of situational factors, in addition to the influence of ideological orientations within political parties in Türkiye. Historically, Turkish foreign policy was primarily designed to safeguard national unity, security, and borders, particularly during the period of One Party Rule. During the Cold War era, Türkiye's foreign policy leaned towards alignment with United States foreign policies, similarly observed in the early years of the Republic. As a result, the EU was not perceived as an alternative ally to the United States by Türkiye for a significant period after the Second World War. This approach persisted until the end of the Cold War, which marked the collapse of the bipolar world order and brought about a transformation in the structure of international politics and the roles of nation-states and international organizations. Türkiye's foreign policy began to adapt to the new world order, embracing more versatile, visionary, and proactive approaches. Consequently, the sources of Ecevit's decision to suspend relations can be traced back to the strategies of Türkiye's foreign policy at the time.

It is evident that Türkiye, in the aftermath of the reconfiguration of Europe and Western countries following World War II, strategically aligned itself with the Western bloc, exhibiting a convergence of interests in both the political and economic domains. During the period when the suspension decision was made, Türkiye's main objective in its foreign policy was to align itself with the United States and NATO rather than Europe. Thus, the EU did not hold an inherent ally status in the minds of Turkish decision-makers. Therefore, Ecevit's policies can be calculated as a stance in line with Türkiye's national interests. Given the transformative nature of the post-Cold War era, Türkiye's alignment with the Western bloc, consistent with its long-standing foreign policy orientation, could be perceived as a pragmatic choice that best served its strategic objectives and overarching national priorities. Therefore, it is important to evaluate Ecevit's

decisions in 1978 and his efforts for membership in 1999 within the conditions of those respective periods. It should be noted that, as per the theory in international relations, decision-makers in foreign policy behave rationally and choose the best option available based on their analysis of the prevailing circumstances. As such, evaluating Ecevit's decisions solely based on today's conditions may lead to inaccuracies and neglecting the contextual factors that influenced his decisions.

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