

Does Corruption Matter? Impact of 2013 Corruption Scandal on Political Trust in Turkey

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Introduction

Political corruption is not a brand new concept for democracies. Despite of the centuries long fight against corruption; many political systems have failed to build a totally corruption-free systems. The aftermath of corruption is not limited with financial matters. Political corruption is listed among the significant threats to public trust in government and political institutions. Corruption is the end result of the politics of privilege, rent seeking and clientelism (Hutchcroft, 1997). Moreover, as Bardhan (1997) stated the accountability process of the governments towards their citizens is eroded in case of misuse and manipulation of entrusted public power for private gain by elected government officials.

Trust in political institutions is also, “an important indicator of a healthy civic and democratic political culture” (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003, 92). The literature abounds with efforts to understand and measure its magnitude and impacts. The relationship between corruption and political trust has been investigated by generous number of researchers (e.g., Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Chang and Chu, 2006; Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012). When corruption breaks as a scandal, the impact changes and scandals not only leads to lower levels of trust towards for individual politicians and government leaders (e.g., Clarke et al., 1998; Lanoue and Headrick, 1994) but also brings along electoral aftermath (e.g., Cowley, 2002; McAllister, 2000).

Turkey has been ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2002. The AKP has also achieved landslide victories in the local elections of 2004, 2009 and 2014. On November 1 2015, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) achieved its fourth consecutive victory by getting almost half of the votes, despite the corruption scandals, rising authoritarianism, decrease in civil liberties, intimidation of the free press and so on. The durability of the electoral success is a fact but also subject to question on national and international political agendas. The loyalty of the AKP voters is taken granted for many cases; the reasoning and the fragility of this uninterrupted success have not met satisfying scientific answers yet. This study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating the notable case of Turkey and how the December 2013 scandal affected citizen's trust in AKP government. Therefore, this paper will investigate the impact of the sudden discovery of corruption scandal in December 2013 on public's trust in government and its institutes and will also consider the political dominance of AKP in the city in order to estimate the political support and the standing of the individuals in that community. Moreover we will also control for the Internet usage of the individuals as the social media was the main source for objective news and developments regarding the scandal, when mainstream media (pro-government TV channels and newspapers) reflected the scandal as a conspiracy.

Why study "17-25 December" Corruption Scandal?

Under the rule of the AKP, the ubiquity of corruption became widely known through spectacular scandals. Among many corruption scandals, in particular on December 17, 2013 a wide-ranging corruption inquiry launched by Istanbul district prosecutors. This scandal has become one of the not only national but also international challenges of Erdogan's 11-year solely rule.

The content of the inquiry was built on different investigations involving the construction business, public financing of real estate projects, and an elaborate money-laundering scheme through Halkbank. The inquiry and raids took place during 8 days thus the scandal is named

after as “17-25 December Scandal”. Just on the same day of investigation, the records of the phone calls between the former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, his family members and the ministers were anonymously uploaded on YouTube. The content of the phone records clearly confirms huge amount of cash stocks hidden and were trying to be “got rid of” in the houses of Erdoğan’s and ministers families, who were involved in laundering of this money.

Police searched for, and the evidences collected during raids included photos, video clips, phone conversations, and records of payments, and stacks of cash stuffed in shoeboxes, safes, and money counters were founded during the searches at the houses of the suspects. One of the significant names was Reza Zarrab, an Iranian descent businessman with close ties to the government. The primary investigation was based on allegations of bribes paid to Turkish officials by what police describe as a criminal gang helping Iran to exploit a loophole in the West's sanctions regime against the Islamic republic. This loophole was to enable Iran to purchase gold with oil and gas revenues. Mr. Zarrabis suspected of laundering \$120 billion from Iran through various firms in Turkey between 2009 and 2012. The prosecutors documented collaboration between Mr. Zarrab and the sons of ministers, the minister of EU affairs, and the Halkbank executive with solid evidences. In the course of the investigation the police seized around \$17.5 million in cash, money allegedly used for bribery. \$4.5 million was found at the residence of Suleyman Aslan, the director of state-owned Halkbank. According to evidence from a police investigation into corruption, Halkbank received \$35 million in bribes in return for helping Iran to launder billions of dollars to evade sanctions. Moreover, the banner of corruption scandal was “shoebox” as \$750,000 was confiscated in a shoebox at the home of Baris Guler, son of the former minister of the interior.

On the 17th of December, the day of scandal, Erdoğan was in a diplomatic visit in Pakistan and he preserved his silence until he arrives back to Turkey. He denounces all these charges directed to the AKP and the ruling government as bogus. Erdoğan government portrayed the investigation as plots aiming to overthrow Erdoğan and the AKP. Erdoğan has manifested the corruption investigations as part of an attempted "judicial coup" by U.S.-based Islamic cleric

Fethullah Gülen and his followers – the Gülen Movement, a former ally who employed extensively in the judiciary and in the police. "They can use whatever ugly methods they like or turn to dirty alliances, but we will not bow to any threats," Erdoğan said. "Neither the nation nor we will give permission to those who seek to settle their scores outside the ballot box. Turkey is not a banana republic." His claims went beyond the Gülen movement, he also alleged the United States, Israel, the CIA, and the Mossad. The pro-government media launched a concerted attack against the Gülen movement and other international abovementioned actors. For instance, US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone was mentioned in Turkish pro-AKP media as the "sheikh" of anti-AKP conspiracies, but the claim was retreated after an unusually strong reaction from Washington.

On the day of 17 December, almost 50 individuals including politically connected businessmen, sons of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, cabinet ministers of interior, economy, and housing were detained. Immediate acts of AKP were brutal: Thousands of police officers and prosecutors were fired or relocated across the country due to their alleged link with Gülen movement and conspiring against the government; several journalists were fired for speaking out; Internet regulation law was amended and websites like Twitter were blocked by officials without court orders, etc.

As a second step of the corruption investigation, on December 25, 2013, Tayyip Erdogan and his son became suspects and they were called to testify. Three members of his cabinet also quitted. The sum and substance of it is that AKP government managed to close the file. The closure of one of the two main cases in the scandal is a further sign of Erdogan reasserting his authority ahead of a presidential election in August 2014. Nevertheless, the aftermath of this crisis following the uncovering of the government's corruption is not investigated and analysed deeply.

Political Trust and Corruption

The concept of “trust” is not a recently developed notion however its popularity perpetuates in the contemporary world as well. “Trust” has numerous meanings both in daily language and scientific world where the concept is in the core of substantial attention (e.g., Putnam, 1993, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995; Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Hagan, Merkens, and Boehnke, 1995; Seligman 1997; Boeckmann and Tyler, 2002; Hardin 2002, Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

Political trust definitions are not any fewer in the literature. Political trust is defined as generalized attitudes towards the system as a whole (Almond and Verba, 1965); common support to political authorities or regime (Easton, 1975), summary of the opinions as to that political system is sensitive to demands of the citizens, and that the system will do the right thing even if it is not under constant supervision (Miller and Listhaug, 1990); basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations (Hetherington, 1998); a judgment made by an individual with regard to a specific political actor or institution such as governments, parties and administrations (Levi and Stoker, 2000). In this study we follow the lead of most empirically minded scholars in defining political trust as the ratio of people’s evaluation of government performance relative to their normative expectations of how government ought to perform (Stokes, 1962; Miller, 1974; Coleman 1990; Hetherington, 2005).

According to Anderson and Tverdova, the trust in political institutions is also, “an important indicator of a healthy civic and democratic political culture” (2003, 92). Principally, political trust leans on legitimacy of actions and decisions of political, hence the phenomenon of trust in political institutions shapes how citizens behave in ways that affect the health of democratic governance and also is one of the criteria of political, social and economical stability existing in a country (Uslaner, 2003; Choudhury, 2008).

All over the globe political corruption is considered as one of the major threats to public trust in government and political institutions. Corruption can be defines as misuse public office for their

private gain (Rose-Ackermann, 1999; Sandholtz and Koetzle, 2000). In corrupted political systems, the manipulation and abuse of entrusted public power for private gain by elected government officials erodes the accountability process of the governments towards their citizens (Bardhan, 1997). As Pardo argues (2004), higher-level corruption is powerful enough to create “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1992, 46) which leads into a questioning of the state and distrust to the legitimacy of the government and the political institutions in general.

A substantial body of evidence from numerous studies confirms a large and statistically significant negative effect of corruption on trust in government and public institutions (e.g., Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Linde and Erlingston, 2003; Chang and Chu, 2006; Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012). Miller and Listhaug (1999) emphasizes that corruption erodes trust in institutional fairness and also institutional fairness, which constitute major indicators of support for the overall political system. Moreover when the corruption story comes out as a scandal, researchers suggest that scandals not only lower regard for individual politicians and government leaders (e.g., Clarke et al., 1998; Lanoue and Headrick, 1994) but also brings along electoral aftermath (e.g., Cowley, 2002; McAllister, 2000). Literature explored the consequences of political scandals on trust reveals that corruption has an impact on how the public’s attitudes about government, political institutions, and incumbent politicians are built (Peters and Welch, 1980; Pharr, 2000; Bowler and Karp, 2004; and Chang and Chu, 2006).

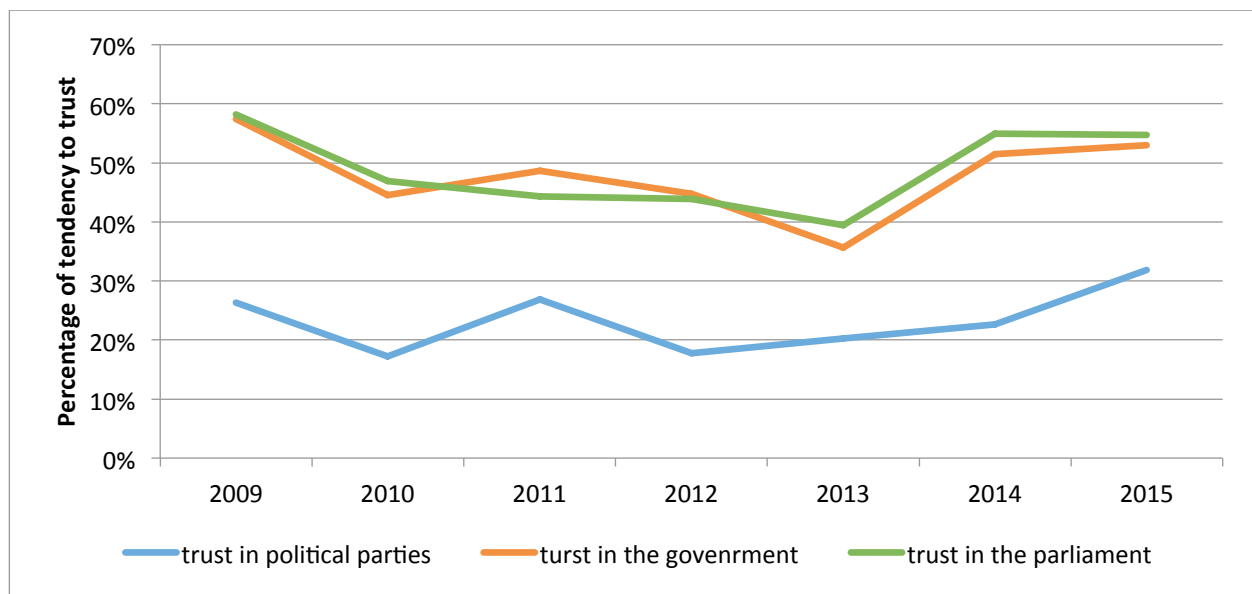
Data and Methodology

In line with the objectives of this study, we aim to answer the following research question: Does the “2013 corruption scandal” have any impact on political trust attitudes of people living in Turkey? The hypotheses to be tested are as follows:

- 2013 corruption scandal has no impact on individuals’ trust in cities dominated by AKP in the 2009 election
- Individuals who use Internet frequently tend to lose their trust in government and governmental institutions after 2013 corruption scandal.

In order to test the hypothesis above, the Eurobarometer Survey data for the years 2009-2015 are used. As defined by EC, Eurobarometer is (since 1973) a series of multitopic, pan-European surveys on attitudes towards European integration, institutions, policies, social conditions, health, culture, the economy, citizenship, security, information technology, the environment and other topics. The evolution of political trust in Turkey is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Percentage of tendency to trust political institutions in Turkey between 2009 and 2015



Source: Eurobarometer Surveys 2009-2015

One important point to make from Figure 1 is that trust in political parties in Turkey on average is way below when compared to political trust in government and the parliament. Only around 25% of respondents tend to trust Turkish political parties. Whereas trust in government and parliament is almost identical and doubles the average of trust in political parties with 52% on average tendency to trust.

In June 2011, the AKP won its third consecutive electoral victory with nearly 50 percent of the vote. The country's global stature also reached new heights. 2011 is an important year as since the creation of the modern state in 1923, a political party - the AKP- consolidated its supremacy

over the military. On July 29, 2011, the military's chief of staff resigned after a disagreement with Erdoğan about staff promotion and the heads of the army, navy, and air force requested early retirement. The supremacy actions continued and by early 2012, half of all Turkish admirals and one out of ten active-duty generals were in jail for plotting against the government. Although AKP domination was a paradigm shift for a country that had experienced three military coups and constant military meddling for almost a century, there were serious conjectures and distrust in how military is treated. Furthermore, the AKP experiences severe democratic shortcomings. Being in power for a decade since 2002 and the cumulated promises that were failed to operationalized, the AKP and Erdoğan constrained media as a defense to fundamental critics on non-fulfilled promises of a new constitution and reforms that would address the solution process (çözüm süreci) and Kurdish question, human rights, and freedom of expression. Hence, the decline in political trust in 2013 can be interpreted as the reflection of public doubts and distrust about the circumstances above.

Independent variables:

People tend to trust Political trust in our study is referring to trust in the governing institutions and is measured through the individuals' direct trust in the country's government. Against mainstream, Norris (1999, 2000, 2004) argues that deepening distrust towards politicians and regime institutions have not undermined the support for regime principles and the fundamental political community. Furthermore given the strong linkage between corruption and the historically-grown clientelist structures (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Sajo, 1998), corruption can also act as stabilizing factor for the electoral success. Therefore, in order to test the impact of the electoral dominance of AKP, we included a variable if the city that the respondent live in is governed by AKP or not.

Another determinant of the link between corruption and political trust is the media. Some studies which examined the impact of watch-dog journalism when covering scandals,

malfeasance, and corruption in public life, irrespective of which media conveys such news state that such a tone of media and manipulated commentaries on corrupted events fosters public mistrust of government, dissatisfaction with regime institutions, and thus contributes towards civic disengagement (Robinson, 1976; Garment, 1991; Patterson, 1993; Orren, 1997Moy and Pfau, 2000; Patterson, 2002; Grossman, 2003). On the other hand, people who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns, are consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory (Norris, 2000). Following existing literature, we introduced Internet use in order to test for the impact of immediate and objective exposure to the news.

In order to avoid any bogus conclusions, we also control for relevant variables that have been demonstrated as significant factors of political trust such as gender, age, education level of the respondent, and if the respondent is satisfied with the economic situation of the country at that time point positively. The summary statistics of the variables are as follows:

Table 1. Summary statistics

	Number of Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age	7,127	36.13	15.188	15	90
Trust in national government		(3,355 out of 7,127)	47.1%		
Gender: Male		(3,722 out of 7,127)	52.2%		
Education level: High school or lower		(5,200 out of 7,127)	73%		
Social Class: Middle Lower or Lower		(3,413 out of 7,127)	47.9%		
Residing in an urban setting		(3,722 out of 7,127)	52.2%		
Satisfied with economic situation		(2,532 out of 7,127)	35.5%		
Frequent Internet user		(1,367 out of 7,127)	19.2%		

As the goal is estimating the causal effects of the scandal in 2013, difference-in-difference (Diff-in-Diff) estimation, which is one of the most important identification strategies in applied economics (Meyer, 1995; Athey and Imbens, 2006; Bertrand, Duflo and Mullainathan, 2004; Angrist and Pischke, 2009; Blundell and Costa Dias, 2009; Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009), will be adopted as the research design. Diff-in-Diff modelling will allow us to compare the trust levels before and after the corruption scandal.

Analysis and Results

We have two separate models to explain this dependent variable: a logistic regression model and a difference-in-differences (DD) model. The logit model is generically specified as follows:

$$F(x'\beta) = \frac{\exp(x'\beta)}{1 + \exp(x'\beta)}$$

The goodness of fit measure is calculated as Pseudo R-squared (McFadden R-squared): $R - \text{squared} = 1 - L_{\text{ur}}/L_r$ where L_{ur} : Unrestricted log-likelihood and L_r : Restricted log-likelihood. R-squared will be zero if the independent variables have no explanatory power and thus there will be no difference between the restricted and unrestricted model.

As we raised in the previous sections, in late 2013 a bribery and corruption scandal (17-25 December) has plunged Turkey into crisis. Despite of the significance of the evidences and confirming informants, the ongoing crisis in Turkey was portrayed by the media as a power struggle between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen rather than a corruption scandal and its ethical concerns.

Especially for investigating the impact of this specific corruption scandal we set a difference-in-differences (DD) model for investigating the effect of this outbreak on political trust attitudes in Turkey. This approach enables us to remove biases in second period comparisons between the frequent Internet users and other people, as well as biases from comparisons over time in the frequent Internet users that could be the result of trends. DD model specifications are as follows:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 d_{freq\ net\ user} + \delta_0 d_{2013} + \delta_1 d_{2013} \cdot d_{freq\ net\ user} + x'\beta + \varepsilon$$

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 d_{AKP\ gov\ city} + \delta_0 d_{2013} + \delta_1 d_{2013} \cdot d_{AKP\ gov\ city} + x'\beta + \varepsilon$$

In the equation, d_{2013} is a dummy variable for the second time period (after 2013). The dummy variable $d_{freq\ net\ user}$ captures possible differences between the frequent Internet users and others prior to the corruption scandal. The variable $d_{AKP\ gov\ city}$ stands for the differences between people living in AKP governed cities and other cities. The time period dummy, d_{2013} , captures aggregate factors that would cause changes in political trust even in the absence of the 17-25 December corruption scandal. The coefficient δ_1 's are our interest as being the multiplier of the interaction terms, $d_{2013} \cdot d_{freq\ net\ user}$ and $d_{2013} \cdot d_{AKP\ gov\ city}$ which represents frequent internet users after 2013 and people living in AKP ruled cities after 2013. Hence the difference-in-differences estimates are calculated as

$$\hat{\delta}_1 = (\bar{y}_{freq\ net\ users, 2013} - \bar{y}_{freq\ net\ users, before\ 2013}) - (\bar{y}_{other, 2013} - \bar{y}_{other, before\ 2013}).$$

$$\hat{\delta}_1 = (\bar{y}_{AKP\ gov\ city, 2013} - \bar{y}_{KAP\ gov\ city, before\ 2013}) - (\bar{y}_{other, 2013} - \bar{y}_{other, before\ 2013}).$$

Table 2. Explaining the Political trust by Logit Model and Diff-in-Diff Models

Political Trust	Model 1 Logit Reg. Coeff. (Std. Err.)	Model 1 Logit Reg.Coeff. Exp(B)	Model 2 DD Coeff. (Std. Err.)	Model 2 D Exp(B)	Model 3 DD Coeff. (Std. Err.)	Model 3 DD Exp(B)
Age	0.001 (0.002)		0.001 (0.002)		-0.001 (0.002)	
Gender: Female	0.011 (0.069)		0.001 (0.070)		0.023 (0.070)	
Education level: High school or lower	0.116 (0.089)		0.078 (0.090)		0.063 (0.090)	
Social Class: Middle Lower or Lower	-0.270** (0.075)	0.763	-0.212** (0.077)	0.809	-0.140* (0.077)	0.869
Residing in an urban setting	0.071 (0.069)		0.095 (0.070)		0.052 (0.070)	
Satisfied with economic situation	1.548** (0.074)	4.700	1.568** (0.074)	4.799	1.583** (0.074)	4.867
AKP governed city	0.457** (0.088)	1.579	0.488** (0.089)	1.629	0.221** (0.098)	1.629
Frequent Internet user	-1.002** (0.091)	0.367	-1.038** (0.111)	0.354	0.898** (0.093)	0.407
After 2013 corruption scandal			-0.301** (0.099)	0.740	-1.649** (0.259)	0.192
Frequent Internet user * After 2013 corruption scandal			0.180 (0.178)			
AKP governed city * After 2013 corruption scandal			0.180 (0.178)		1.569*** (0.269)	4.804
Constant	-0.460** (0.152)	0.631	-0.750** (0.168)	0.472	-0.553** (0.171)	0.575

Nagelkerke R-square = 20%

*Indicates significance at the 5% level. **Indicates significance at the 1% level

The results of logit model reveal no significant effect of age, gender and the education status. Nevertheless, an interesting finding points out people who identify themselves as from a lower or middle-lower class tend to trust national government less. For lower or middle lower class people, the probability of tendency to trust the government is almost 25% less than others. Most significant determinant of political trust appears to be the satisfaction with economic situation. More satisfied with economic situation, more trust people have in government. The probability increases by more than three times for people who are satisfied with economic stability and the operations of the AKP rule.

As anticipated, frequent Internet users have lower tendency for political trust. Moreover, if the respondent lives in a city that is governed by AKP, which means AKS was the major party in the elections most recent to that relevant year; the tendency of trusting in national government is almost 60% higher.

In Table 2, first DD coefficient ($\hat{\delta}_1$) in Model 1 shows the change in difference in political trust for frequent Internet users after 2013 corruption scandal versus before 2013 and other for the same time juncture. As shown in the Table 2, after the 2013 corruption scandal, political trust tendency are generally lower. Political trust decreased by 6 percent for people who frequently (at least couple of times a week) use Internet. Contradictory to our expectations however, we see no impact of the 17-25 December corruption scandal on the political trust tendency of the frequent Internet users who we assume to have access to more detailed and objective information. Second DD model coefficient ($\widehat{\delta}_1$) explains the difference in political trust among people who live in AKP dominated cities and others before and after “17-25 December” corruption scandal. The significance proves that trust in national government is even increased in the AKP ruled cities. People living on those cities tend to trust the government almost 5 times more after the corruption breakout in 2013.

Conclusion

Although the matter of trust in institutions was a polemical matter, the findings affirm previous results and indicate that trust of citizens in both institutions and administrative process had been decreasing in Turkey (Adaman, et al. 2004, 2009). We could illustrate the decrease in political trust in Turkey between years 2009 and 2013. However for the period 2013 and 2015 political trust in Turkish political institutes is following a slight increase.

Norris states (1999, 27): “too much blind trust by citizens and misplaced confidence in leaders, for good or ill, can be as problematic for democracy as too little. The consequences of declining support for government institutions therefore remain open to debate”. Confirming Norris (1999, 2000, 2004) results, we fail to find a significant effect of “17-25 December” corruption scandal on political trust in Turkish case. The durability of electoral success of AKP is usually explained by the loyalty of the voters and the economic progress, which is portrayed as being secured by AKP dominance. As our focus was on the Internet usage frequency and access to more information, we hypothesized that people who spend more time on Internet following the corruption scandal would have able to reach more diverse resources and hear and learn more about the corruption and the investigation. Therefore, we would expect those to have fewer tendencies to trust in the national government. However, we could not find any significant difference. For people who are not using Internet frequently heard about the investigation only from the pro-government media channels such as TV broadcast and written press. Consequently, those people believe that behind the corruption scandal is a power clash between two former political allies: the Islamist movement of preacher Fethullah Gülen and Erdoğan's AKP.

As Pardo argues (2004), higher-level corruption is powerful enough to create “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1992, 46) which leads into a questioning of the state and distrust to the legitimacy of the government and the political institutions in general. However, this power does not manifest itself in Turkey due to the AKP's construction of an extensive anger against the

Gülen Movement, which is a religious movement in the state cadres and uncovered the corruption scandal.

One point not to miss is how the corruption is perceived in Turkey. According to Transparency International, corruption perception of Turkish people is worsening, as on the Corruption Perceptions Index Turkey was ranking 65th in 2002, the country climbed to 53rd place in 2013 before plunging to 66th place in 2015.

The consequences of 2013 corruption scandal cannot be considered as a short-term matter. Due to the international dimension of the scandal, there has been an ongoing investigation by U.S.A against Turkish government, as a result of which Reza Zarrab was detained and he arrested immediately on the 19th of March 2016 for defrauding the United States, violating the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, committing bank fraud and laundering millions of dollars, almost three years after the first break-out of the corruption scandal. The appointed prosecutor Mr Bharara has earned a name for himself as someone willing to tackle the big beasts of Wall Street, as well as corrupt politicians.

We shall not expect the case to be off the radar any time soon. This corruption case is a multidimensional and multinational. The Gezi events and the “17-25 December” corruption scandal have reinforced the AKP leadership’s historic sense of victimhood and its fear of another coup. December 17-25 incidents are mostly read as a continuity of the authoritarian character of the AKP and Erdogan’s attempt to restructure the judiciary alongside its ideology through a series of purges undertaken after the corruption scandal (Belge, 2015).

Although all of the scandal and the following defensive but bold acts of AKP has led to a profound crisis of confidence in the Erdoğan government and, chillingly, the future of Turkey’s democracy on international level; AKP supporters still have faith in Erdoğan and his party fellows. Therefore investigating the impacts of the corruption scandal will also raise questions if

the public recognizes such a serious corruption scandal's implications for the future of Turkish Democracy.

Many further research questions arise from these findings. Future studies can focus on the question of whether such an extensive corruption scandal has resulted in delegitimization of the state. More importantly, if such a questioning of the state has ever existed for the Turkish case is a worth thorough investigation.

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