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## Understanding Kokorec through Gastro-Nationalism and Securitization during EU-Turkey Membership Negotiations

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### Abstract

Turkey's European Union (EU) membership process began in 1963 with the partnership agreement sign with the European Economic Community. Turkey's application for full membership in 1987 speed the process to achieve EU standards. The negotiations include comprehensive policy changes in many areas, from financial standardization to intellectual property rights. These policies are collected under 35 chapters in which each of these chapters has many significant conditions. Chapter 12 is about food safety, veterinary, and phytosanitary policies. This article examines one of the subjects that is an issue of the first part of the chapter, food safety. *Kokorec*, a Turkish street food made of animal intestines, has been popularized in EU-Turkey negotiations as it is one of the most critical issues among 35 chapters. *Kokorec* was presented as it is an essential obstacle for Turkish membership, and if Turkey abandoned this century-old food, it would join the Union. This popularization has been made via media and other platforms such as TV series, articles, songs, and news and debate programs. This article studies this phenomenon under two concepts, securitization and gastro-nationalism. This article suggests that the *kokorec* has been popularized as one of the most critical issues and subjected to successful securitization. The debate regarding hygiene, authentic cuisine, the national food industry, and other debates are only tools of the securitization for the public view. This study used the social and traditional means of media and suggested that Turkey's public opinion (especially until 2010) regards to EU membership was manipulated through these means. The securitization of *kokorec* prevents a real discussion about Chapter 12 (and even the 35 chapters) and its content related to food safety, veterinary, and phytosanitary policies. The *kokorec* also played a significant role in national Turkish cuisine which is an ideal case for gastro-nationalism.

**Keywords:** securitization, *kokorec*, food safety, Turkey-EU negotiations, gastro-nationalism

## Introduction

The idea of the European Union (EU) has evolved drastically since its foundation. While it was a mere economic union between its members focusing on coal and steel industries in 1951, it evolved into a union that could interfere in member states' constitutions and institutions (Dedman, 1996). With its current state, the Union was established as a result of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. The Union, with the exit of the UK, has 27 member states. The EU, except for Brexit –UK's exit, has always enlarged and included new members. The enlargement process includes many steps in which 35 chapters are asked to the candidate state to meet to be offered full membership. These 35 chapters comprise significant policies that can transfer some sovereignty from the member state to the EU institution. This article studies one of the cases of chapter 12, food safety, with a specific case, *Kokorec* —a local dish popular in street vendors, — in Turkey's membership to the EU. Chapter 12 includes issues such as food hygiene, combatting animal diseases, and control of harmful microorganisms.

Regardless the 35 chapters are met or not; public opinion is a vital (invisible) condition that has to be considered both for the candidate state and the current states. This article studies how the *kokorec* played a (significant) role in public opinion to the degree that has taken place in many TV series, comics, and public debates (Sağlam, 2018). *Kokorec* has been an issue between the EU and Turkey due to its concerns about its food safety conditions. *Kokorec* is a dish that is prepared from lamb or goat intestines wrapped around seasoned offal. Due to its preparation (mostly sold in street vendors) and its content (possibility of spreading mad cow diseases), the *kokorec* has been securitized to the degree that the public has considered it as a vital condition for the membership to the Union as it was a more important issue to consider among the 35 chapters which include significant topics such as the movement of goods, human, and capital.

This article studies how the *kokorec* has been securitized in the EU-Turkey membership to the degree that the entire Chapter 12 considered about banning, regulating, or freeing the *kokorec*. The issue was popularized to the degree that Dexter Filkins (2003) analyzed the issue for the New York Times in 2003. Filkins interviewed many people including the consumer and sellers in Turkey and attempted to situate the debate in wider Turkey-EU negotiations. The discussion, according to Filkins, arose from the EU's order to Greece to ban a similar food, *kokoresti* after the mad cow outbreak in 1990s (Filkins, 2003). Filkins (2003) piece was important to show how the public reacted to the case even with writing a song (as will be explained in this study as well).

This study argues that the *kokorec* was overvalued in Turkey's bid in EU membership, partly because to divert the discussion of long processed food safety issue to a popular topic. The overvalue of the *kokorec* by the traditional and social media securitized the *kokorec* which can be considered as an example of national culinary. Thus, by using national culinary and gastro-nationalism in the process, the

topic became a matter of identity, not a food security issue anymore. In order to show that the issue of *kokorec* is a more securitized issue, which means it is a more discursive issue that was addressed to the public, this article is divided into four parts. In the first part, the concept of securitization will be explained along with the research methodology. The second part explores Chapter 12, which includes topics related to food safety. The third part goes into *kokorec* and food safety relations. The last part will analyze how the issue of *kokorec* is overrated in Turkey-EU membership. The last part will also discuss the findings of how the *kokorec* has been brought to the public agenda through social and traditional media.

### **1. Theories, Concepts, and Methodology**

This article conceptualizes the discourse of "local" or "traditional" food (*kokorec* can be considered an example for gastro-nationalism even though its consumption is not restricted to Turkey) against the wider regional entity, EU membership. The conceptual discussion fundamentally evolves around whether pan-European identity is possible in every aspect of life. DeSoucey (2010) concept of gastro-nationalism is an essential invention in that sense. DeSoucey's concept is useful in the sense of understanding the tension between national boundaries supporters and integrationists. Her analyses of French *foie gras* (fatted liver of a duck or goose, which is considered incompatible with EU regulations due to its "immoral" and "cruel" behaviors to the animal) sheds light on the discussion to *kokorec* as well.

Gastro-nationalism, in essence, is not desired in the EU integrationist mind because of the highlight of the country of the origin of the product on the expense of EU single market. The encouragement of the labeling the country of origin of the product can be considered as gastro-nationalism. For instance, it was reported that Belgium milk export to France decreased due to the mandatory label "Made in France" in France (Wanat & Vela, 2019).

Gastro-nationalism is concept that challenge the global integration occurred as a result of fast globalization. Gastro-nationalism is a protection mechanism to keep the national boundaries alive in people's mind (Ichijo, 2020). DeSoucey analyses of *foie gras* is the example of successful attempt by French government. To avoid the ban of *foie gras* and secure its future, France applied for EU Protected Geographical Identification label (DeSoucey, 2010; Ichijo, 2020). Even though France is a member of the EU and does not have fundamental disagreements on the EU's values and regulations, the production and consumption of *foie gras* have not been ceased in France due to multilevel reasons, including industry exceeding \$2 billion cultural protectionism (DeSoucey, 2010). France achieved to show the *foie gras* as a national symbol, but the symbol was secured via EU policy, EU Protected Geographical Identification label. The example shows how EU integration can be flexible in many cases as ban of *foie gras* would harm French industry and may trigger Euroscepticism, the common ground was founded.

*Kokorec* has a similar complexity. Even though no official data about the *kokorec* industry exists, it is not a sector that can be neglected easily by Turkish policy makers and public. Also, cultural preservation and national protectionism are important issues that have to be considered. In a possible Turkey membership, Turkey could also find a similar way.

This article studies the case of *kokorec* with the concepts of gastro-nationalism and securitization. The concept of securitization is originally an international security concept popularized by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan from Copenhagen School in 1993 (Waever et al., 1993). This new approach of security considers security as subjective, which requires a specific process. According to this security school, Copenhagen School, the role of language and words are much significant than any other tool in securitizing any issue or de-securitizing it (Williams, 2003). Copenhagen School does not deal with whether the issue is a real threat or not but rather deals with whether the issue has been socially constructed as a threat.

This article does not deal with *kokorec* as a national threat or does not propose that the *kokorec* has been used as a speech act to consider the EU as a threat by Turkey but aims to show how a similar process has been followed. *Kokorec* may have (and indeed have) safety issues that may harm the consumers and then the public in general, but the popularization of the topic is no more than the Copenhagen School's speech act. Like French *foie gras*, Turkish *kokorec* is just one of the small points that can be neglected easily in EU-Turkey negotiations. Because this article is based on public and media views, the securitization here means exaggerating the issue in people's (public) view by using speech acts and thus embedding more significant meaning to *kokorec* and *kokorec* like cases in Turkey-EU membership.

This article's findings are derived from sources that will demonstrate the public view, including the intellectuals and general public. These materials include but are not limited to traditional and social media (both national and international), academic conference proceedings, comics, websites, and informative publishing. Turkey specific social media (or collaborative hypertext dictionary websites) will be significant in this study. Eksi Sozluk, Uludag Sozluk, Inci Sozluk and Kizlar Soruyor are four most popular websites in their kind in Turkey. These dictionaries are informal places where users, mostly anonymous, share their experiences and thoughts about everyday political and social issues. In this regard, the information they share are more subjective and may not be factual true, but they can be considered as good places to understand the discussion regarding specific topic.

## **2. Chapter 12 in EU Membership Negotiations (Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy),**

One of the 35 chapters of the EU negotiations is the chapter that includes food safety, veterinary, and phytosanitary policy, Chapter 12, (*European Union Common Position Chapter 12: Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy - EU Monitor*). Demirel and Cak (2016) have studied food safety,

plant, and animal welfare applications in Turkey in the light of EU requests and concluded that Turkey still needs considerable improvements in order to meet EU standards.

Explanatory screening for Chapter 12 was made in March 2006 and followed a more comprehensive screening meeting on 24-28 April 2006. As a result of the approval of the report, six opening benchmarks were introduced in July 2007. In June 2010, the 9<sup>th</sup> Turkey-EU Accession Conference in Brussels opened this chapter for the negotiations (*Chapter 12: Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy*, 2017). On the progress report, it was noted that significant further efforts are needed in animal by-products, animal welfare, identification and registration of animals, and control of their movements. The fact that the report is absent of significant mentions of risks that can be derived from *kokorec* shows the *kokorec* and *kokorec* related issues do not possess a significant part in EU-Turkey negotiations (Aytur, 2018).

Food Safety Issues in chapter 12 include regulations for consumer protection, informing hygiene and presentation rules, mechanisms for ensuring food safety and controls. The report asks for stricter hygiene for food processing and its introduction into the market (especially for animal products) (*Chapter 12: Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy*, 2017). When the report is taken as a whole, in order to close the chapter, Turkey needs to fulfill several legal, technical, financial, and administrative arrangements rather than basic ban or standardize *kokorec*.

In 2021 European Commission Key Findings of the 2021 Report on Turkey, European Commission states that Turkey improvements were not enough in terms of food safety. The statement from the report below clearly indicates that Turkish food industry has not met EU standards yet.

On the cluster covering resources, agriculture and cohesion, Turkey reached some level of preparation in the area of agriculture and rural development. However, there was backsliding over the reporting period, as its agricultural policy diverged from the main principles of the EU common agricultural policy. Turkey is a major exporter of food products to the EU, and made limited progress in the area of food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy. Turkey needs to make further progress on meeting EU standards, particularly on pesticide residues. It made good progress on fisheries in implementing the fisheries law, resources and fleet management, and inspection and control (*Key Findings of the 2021 Report on Turkey*, 2021).

Despite the critique, Chapter 12 is one of the chapters that Turkey has made significant progress. It is one of the opened 16 chapters and has secured significant progress. About 250 secondary legislation was published in order to meet this chapter requirements (*Chapter 12: Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy*, 2020).

### **3. Evaluation of *Kokorec* in terms of Food Safety**

Factors threatening food safety are physical, chemical, and biological (World Health Organization & Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006). Microbiological risks are considered to be the most common biological risks that threaten food safety (Tent, 1999; Wilcock et al., 2004).

Animal products are more sensitive than plant products in terms of microbiological risks (Erkmen, 2010).

Besides being of animal origin, *kokorec* is obtained from the dense place of the animal's microflora (lamb's or sheep's intestines are a product obtained around mesenteric fat), which increases the risk level (Kara et al., 2013). So much so that most of the academic studies in the *kokorec* field are about microbiological risks. Academic studies about *kokorec* focus on the place of its production (vendors and restaurants), processing process, and the impact of spices and other additives on its microbiological criteria (Bilgin et al., 2008, 2016; Kara et al., 2013; Kiliç, 2016; Temelli et al., 2002). Total Aerop Mesophilic Bacteria (TAMB), Total Aerop Psychrophilic Bacteria (TAPB), Enterobacteriaceae, Coliform, *Escherichia coli*, *Enterococcus* spp., *Lactobacillus* spp., *Staphylococcus/Micrococcus*, Mildew/Yeast were determined as threats in the *kokorec* (Kara et al., 2013).

By reviewing the literature, it can be said that the *kokorec* may contain high risk when it is raw and not cooked well. In addition, post-slaughter conditions and time, processing method, location, heat treatment level, and additives were determined as factors affecting the microbial load. If general hygiene rules are not followed, this potential reaches levels that can seriously threaten health. However, as in other animal products, it has been reported that sufficient (temperature and time) and appropriate heat treatment (to reach the midpoint of the product in the cooking process) and then optional spices (due to their natural antimicrobial properties) significantly reduce the danger and minimize the risk.

Arzu Cagri Mehmetoglu (2018) studies several traditional Turkish foods in regard to their safety challenges. Her study examines *kokorec* as a food that potentially contain many safety issues (Cagri-Mehmetoglu, 2018). Some of the issues are related to the environment they are sold while some of them are about the ingredient such as spices. The work condition and storage of the *kokorec* are also challenges that affect the safety.

Even though Turkey passed a regulation in 2005 to avoid such problems regarding microbiological problems, Cagri-Mehmetoglu (2018) suggests that increased demand to *kokorec* in cities makes it harder to implement the policy strictly.

#### **4. Findings: Securitization of the *kokorec* in EU membership Turkey's public**

Turkey's negotiations for EU membership have been long discussed. Supporters and opponents to the membership exist both in the public of the EU members and Turkey. This article mainly focuses on one of the public perceptions of these two sides, Turkey. Whether Turkey should be (or can be or will be) a member of the EU has been debated in Turkey's public to a degree it takes part from election rallies to tv series. This article studies how the *kokorec* (minor issue) had shaped public perception, especially in years when Turkey's negotiations were vivid (1999-2009). This part will show how the public, with the help of media, was restricted to topics that would not help the negotiations rather trivialize them.

*Kokorec*, which has been consumed for centuries, became a dispute with Turkey's EU membership bid. This part will illustrate how the public has been directed towards the (unnecessary) importance of the *kokorec*. The public has been directed for several reasons and motivations. Some were for sarcastic reasons to show that the exaggeration of the *kokorec* issue is no more than a securitized issue. Some were informative statements to examine whether the *kokorec* inherently threaten the food safety of the public. Some were securitizing the *kokorec* as if *kokorec* is an integral part of Turkish society and culture, making it an issue of gastro-nationalism.

A basic media analysis shows that *kokorec* is an attractive issue for social media and national and even international media such as DW and the BBC (Dundar, 2004; *Turks Troubled By Possibility of Tripe Ban*, 2003). This part is divided into two parts, the first part shows the traditional print media analyses, while the second part is more derive from non-traditional media such as songs, comedies, and Turkey specific websites.

#### 4.1. Traditional News Platforms

Milliyet, one of the most circulated newspaper, reported that EU will not give green light to the *kokorec* and will ban it due to the incompatibility of the food to the EU food standards. In the news, the newspaper interviewed some of the *kokorec* sellers and showed their defending. The newspaper also mentioned the similar ban in Greece due to mad calf disease ('Elveda Kokoreç', 1999). The same newspaper brought the *kokorec* into the agenda after several months. In the news in January 2000, Milliyet went with "Kokorec Revolt" referring to the protests happened in Greece. In this piece, Milliyet shows how the Greek newspapers have presented the issue. Some of the Greek newspapers headlines mentioned in Milliyet's piece are "What to Europeans want from our appetizers," "Kokorec is in danger one more time," and "This ban will not surround us" ('Kokoreç Isyanı', 2000). Milliyet sarcastically showed how hard and far is the Turkish membership to the EU in another piece in 2001. In an interview with one of the most famous *kokorec* brand, Milliyet went with the headline of "Let the diplomats and politicians deals with it, the *kokorec* sellers announce it 'Turkey still has a long way to go'" ('Diplomatlar, Siyasetçiler Uğraşadursun Kokoreççiler Oktayı Koydu "Türkiye AB'ye Girmek İçin Daha Çok Bekler"', 2001).

Other mainstream newspapers frequently published news regarding *kokorec* and the EU membership. Sabah, Hurriyet, Yeni Safak had many headlines regarding issues in different times. "Don't worry, no ban to *kokorec*," "we never give up [on *kokorec*]," "*kokorec* will be saved," and "we reached to the EU standards in *kokorec*" are some of the headlines among many (*AB ile Dolmuşa Kemer Geliyor!*, 2005; *Asla vazgeçemiyoruz*, 2014; *Kokoreç kurtuluyor*, 2003; *Kokoreçte AB standartlarını yakaladık!*, 2005).

Songs were written about the *kokorec* and became the topic for the most popular stand-up comedians like Yılmaz Erdoğan (2002). Erdoğan sarcastically show the *kokorec* as the one of the two remaining criteria for Turkey's membership to the EU.

Mirkelam (Fergan Mirkelam), a famous singer, has written a song about *kokorec* and its nostalgia that will arise if banned due to the EU Food Regulations (Mirkelam, 2001). It was brought to the serious debate program's agenda, such as "Team A" of Savas Ay. The popularity of such a minor topic cannot (per the thesis of this article) explain with anything other than the securitization of *kokorec* and the concept of gastro-nationalism.

An academic meeting in Bogazici University in 2013 shows that the debate regarding the Turkey-EU negotiations used to base on topics such as *kokorec*. The report states that the public is informed now and does not consider the *kokorec* as a vital topic as was once considered (*Üniversite Gençliği Avrupa Birliği'ni Tartışıyor: Türkiye - AB İlişkilerinde Yakın Gelecek*, 2013). The fact that the *kokorec* has lost its importance can be explained with a more informed public and never-ending EU-Turkey negotiations. DW and BBC Turkish have also joined the debate and show the complexity of the issue from whether the *kokorec* is an exaggerated issue (Dundar, 2004; *Turks Troubled By Possibility of Tripe Ban*, 2003).

#### 4.2. New Media Platforms

Even though Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have millions of users in Turkey, examining a social issue (how Turkey's public reacts to a specific issue) needs to be analyzed through Turkey's specific platforms such as Eksi Sozluk, Kizlar Soruyor, Uludag Sozluk, and Inci Sozluk (Gürel & Yakın, 2007). These platforms are collaborative hypertext dictionaries in which current debates are discussed, mostly unanimously. Those platforms are viral and politicized and can be considered an excellent source to see the day's debates. Examining those Turkey's special platforms about *kokorec*, one can see the diverse thoughts about *kokorec* and its impact on EU-Turkey membership. Eksi Sozluk, the most popular platform of its kind (Alexa Country, Turkey, rank 18), has more than ten titles about EU-*kokorec* relations and hundreds of entries about the issue.

Parallel to this article's thesis, the entries have diverse reasons from hygiene such as "*not the kokorec, but the unhygienic status of the kokorec prevent us from joining the EU*" to exaggeration such as "*Or the years that we had believed (at least I used to believe when I was a kid). In the late 90s and the early 2000s, media gave the impression that the only obstacle to being a member of the EU is the kokorec. Questions such as 'what will happen to the kokorec if we join the EU? will kokorec be in the EU? is it possible to join EU when eating kokorec? will we join the EU if we stop eating kokorec tomorrow?' were considered to be most important issues to answer in evening prime news*" (*Kokoreçin AB'ye Girmeye Engel Olduğu Yıllar - Ekşi Sözlük*).

An entry from Eksi Sozluk will elaborate more on how the issue was securitized with news and debate platforms. The following is important not only because it considers the EU's stance on *kokorec* as hypocrisy (another thought from the public about the EU), but because it shows how debate programs and news (presumably the two most serious broadcasts) were involved in the securitization process.

Throughout the 90s, whether the *kokorec* will be banned according to the European Union rules was highly heated. This was broadcasted every week in news bulletins and discussion programs and was widely discussed. Street interviews were conducted, and citizens were asked, "kokorec or the European Union?". The revolt of *kokorec* was spreading in waves throughout the country. High school students do not remember those days, but it was the most important issue. Anyway, I have been to Madrid for a trip and what shall I see when we go to a buffet for a snack in the evening! Lamb intestines on a stick. I screamed, "This is the *kokorec*, you know!" It only lacks a little sliced tomato pepper and spices!

For a short time, I was caught in a wind of thought for which I did not know the reason, and I remembered the people crying at the Savas Ay's microphone in the A team program [one of the most prestigious debate programs of the time]. I was sad what hypocrisy that was [of the EU]. What a double standard that was. While our entire decade had passed by discussing an absurdity, where did the torpedo of these Spaniards come from? The Spanish name for those who want to go to Madrid and try is *zarajo*" (*Kokorecin AB'ye Girmeye Engel Oldugu Yillar - Ekşi Sözlük*)

Kizlar Soruyor (Alexa Country, Turkey, rank 22), Uludag Sozluk (436), and Inci Sozluk (1166) have similar debates about the impact of *kokorec* in EU-Turkey negotiations. (*AB neden kokoreci yasaklamış olabilir?; Avrupa Birliği vs kokoreç; Avrupa Birliğine kokoreç yüzünden girmedik*) The entries in these platforms also vary from the hygienic status of *kokorec* to the exaggeration of the issue. All these entries can be considered as a process of securitization.

### Conclusion

Due to the nature of *kokorec*, enteric microorganisms can be contaminated. If general and special hygienic rules are not followed while cleaning the intestines and their preparation, it may pose serious microbial risks. Because of the place it is obtained and sold by street vendors, some consumers stay away from it at the level of phobia. Thus, it is easy to bring it to the public agenda and discuss it by its hygienic standards and national food. Due to its abundant existence in media and the use of humor and entertainment, the *kokorec* issue has been manipulated instead of debating general food safety requirements, etc. The *kokorec* has been exaggerated to the degree that print and online media published articles asking, "EU or *kokorec*?" This situation was considered to be an exemplary concept of securitization defined by the Copenhagen School. With this securitization, *kokorec* occupied an overrated place in EU-Turkey relations and prevented a healthy discussion about food safety, chapter 12, and all other 35 chapters.

*Kokorec* as a good example of traditional Turkish food can be considered under the concept of gastro-nationalism. Even though the *kokorec* was in symbolic importance, the popularization of it in EU-Turkey membership can be considered as parallel to securitization. Because a gastro-nationalism is used it has a national protective aspect against supranational organization.

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