Mapping Sub-identities of ‘EU-ising’ Kurdish Politics: The Social Construction of ‘Many Kurdishnesses’ in Turkey

Abstract
Political identity is a central issue in Kurdish rights demands in Turkey. However, Kurdish political identity is not formed in a homogeneous context and has become a ground for a hegemonic struggle between internal groups such as Kurdish leftist/secularists, Kurdish Islamist/conservatives and Kurdish pragmatist/opportunists (‘white Kurds’). The study critically analyses the scope of mainstream Kurdishness and its different sub-identities as the representatives of these subaltern groups seek to deepen Kurdish democratisation and widen public space in a new agonistic articulation. This paper addresses the emergence of a new political identity in the restoration of Kurdishness and radical pluralism by employing a poststructuralist methodology. Moreover, it suggests a new collective will, the ‘EU-ising of Kurdi(sh)ness’, socially constructed by ‘many Kurds’ through the development of a new political grammar and discursive practice. The new superstructure as a nodal point entails the radical plural democratisation of contemporary Kurdish society in terms of the principles of liberty and equality.

Key words: Kurdish ethnicity, sub-identities, social constructivism, hegemony, radical pluralism, Turkey

Introduction
Developments in political identity and its articulation have shaped the nature of Kurdish rights demands in Turkey and beyond in the Middle East. An examination of the on-going construction of Kurdish political identity demonstrates that Kurdishness is not formed in a homogeneous context and has become a ground for a hegemonic struggle between internal groups. In helping to understand such a negotiation and renegotiation process, this paper highlights how Kurdish political identity is not fixed but represents a dynamic process permeated by particular various internal and external factors in the hegemonic articulation of
numerous stakeholders. Therefore, it focuses on the emergence of a new Kurdish political identity that has been socially constructed through an agonistic domestic debate since the late 1990s. This radical restoration has also been consolidated by Turkey’s democratisation in its desire to join the European Union (EU). Moreover, as a political project the ‘EU-ising’ of Kurdi(sh)ness(453,649),(526,665) has a new discursive logic resulting from the process of internal radical democratisation in contemporary Kurdish politics. The rhetoric that has emerged is well-described in terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) concept of the ‘nodal point’ and ‘empty signifier’, that is a signifier without a signified, and refers to the idea of a new Kurdishness as a collective will. The re-emergence of various counter-hegemonic actors within the Kurdish political realm has arisen out of the availability of new internal and external opportunity spaces. These actors have expanded the borders of Kurdish political identity in a broad and comprehensive sense of belonging and consequently this social construction of identity has become the main dynamic in the identity formation process resulting from the implicit postmodern and radical pluralist developments in Kurdish society. These developments have led to what can be described as ‘many Kurdishnesses’ as a representation of the current social realities of contemporary Kurdish social structure.

This article critically analyses hegemonic Kurdish political identity in terms of (re)emerging sub-identities and their representatives as a new hegemonic articulation in an agonistic adversarial relation (Mouffe, 2013). Furthermore, it addresses the appearance of a new political identity that can be considered a restoration of Kurdishness constituted by diversity and heterogeneity. It also takes into account the intensified Kurdish democratisation process (particularly up to 2013) and the neoliberal economic order of the conservative democratic Justice and Development Party (AKP) which, with the preparation for EU accession, has also provided an external opportunity for the appearance of these sub-identities, alongside the conflict resolution and so-called peace building process that was
taking place between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish state, at least until June 2015, in the ‘new Turkey’. These external developments coupled with internal Kurdish liberalisation have led to a deepening and widening definition of Kurdish identity in the public space. Finally, the article argues that this bottom-up process has expanded the political frontiers of mainstream Kurdishness via self-emancipation rather than the reconstruction of a novel Kurdish identity. The discussion is conducted through an analysis of the characteristic of the major types of sub-identities within the ‘many Kurdishnesses’ by way of categorising their competing rhetoric within a discursive struggle.

As a result the article identifies three main identities because of their domination in Kurdish public space. However, this is not to claim that these are the only sub-identities nor that this three-fold categorisation has a fixed meaning; rather these sub-identities are contingent on the political, economic and social context and are dynamic and interactive. The groups representing these sub-identities can move horizontally and vertically in accordance with their strategies (be they offensive, defensive or pragmatist) and in relation to the state. For instance, Muslim Kurdish groups can engage with Western-based Turkish Nurcu groups in the region or can cooperate with Islamic-oriented political parties such as Welfare (RF) or the AKP as a regional partner (or even occasionally in the Turkish metropolises) and on occasions link with the pragmatist/opportunists. The main point here is that the link between these internal groups builds on Kurdish cultural identity (including tribal kinship, language and locality) as a nodal point in a multi-diverse Kurdish society, while the differences between them lies in their differing abilities to exploit the opportunity spaces provided by Turkish civil organisations and state institutions. Further, with regard to these identities different discourses may be employed by the Turkish state/society than from within the Kurdish political struggle with the former using the language of ‘good Kurds’ (disciplined,
assimilated, integrated, etc.) and ‘bad Kurds’ (separatists, terrorists, non-Sunni Muslims, Western agents, etc.).

The formation of Kurdishness in its historical context

Kurds are one of the ancient residents of the Middle East and the largest ethnic group without a nation state in the contemporary world. Approximately twenty million Kurds, out of a total of some thirty five million, live in Turkey where it is estimated they constitute twenty to twenty-five per cent of the population. They live predominantly in the east and southeast of the country (McDowall, 2000; Yildiz, 2005) although there has been mass migration of Kurds to Turkey’s western metropolises such as Ankara and Izmir and where Istanbul is now known as one of the largest Kurdish cities in the world (Saracoglu, 2011). Whilst the majority of Kurds follow the Sunni-Shafi school of Islam, there are also considerable numbers of Alevi and other minority religions such as Yezidis. The Kurds have had a long relationship with the Turks from the eleventh-century Seljuk dynasty through to the period of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic. At the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 (Article 62-64) provided autonomy for the Kurds; however the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 revoked this political privilege with the recognition of the new Republic of Turkey (Gunter, 1990). With the nation building process undertaken by Mustafa Kemal (the founder of the Republic and also known as Atatürk) this shared history became the subject of a nationalist battle between the Turkish state and the Kurds as the Kurds rejected the Kemalist vision of a single imagined community that united Turks and Kurds under a common ‘Turkishness’. The Kurdish leadership challenged the dominance of the young Kemalist state through a series of rebellions such as that of Sheik Said in 1925 and the Agri and Dersim rebellions of 1926-32 and 1938 (Aydin and Emrence, 2015). The insurgencies were brutally suppressed along with the leaders and for some time afterwards the Kurds were leaderless remaining largely quiescent until the PKK started their
armed struggle in 1984. This brought the issue of Kurdish nationalism and collective rights to the fore increasing political tension and simultaneously influencing the perception of Kurdishness within Kurdish society.

The so-called ‘Kurdish Question’, or ‘Kurdish issue’ (Berkey and Fuller, 1998; Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015; Stanfield and Shareef, 2017) or ‘ethno-political problem’ (Saracoglu, 2009) led to the appearance in various ways and at various levels of different participants in the Kurdish national struggle and created a new type of hegemonic power relations. At the same time it also granted an opportunity for those holding a distinctive identity to enlarge the borders of hegemonic Kurdish identity. This mainstream Kurdi(sh)ness was not however new and had already been forming in various ways, culturally, politically, economically and socially, from the post-60s until the early 1990s. Indeed, what we might term an advanced-modern Kurdish identity was itself established on the heritage of the modern Kurdish identity of the 1950s and 60s which was constructed by Kurdish cultural and moral intellectuals such as members of the Kurdistan Democrat Party of Turkey (KDPT) and the members of the intelligentsia who judged in the 40s case. This was an important step after the sustained attempts at assimilation of Kurdish culture and politics by the Turkish state during the so-called ‘silent years’ between 1938 and 1950 which included banning the use of the Kurdish language, the recasting of Kurdish place names into Turkish, forbidding Kurdish names for new-borns, and the prohibition on any political activity under the banner of Kurdishness (Bozarslan, 2004). This resurgent modern Kurdishness was further developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Kurdish leftist revolutionary organisations along the lines of international socialist principles such as the Revolutionary Eastern Culture Association (DDKO), the Kurdistan National Liberation (KUK), Kawa, Rizgari, and the Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK) (Romano, 2006; Orhan, 2016) who all played an important role in the construction of the advanced-modern identity. Most importantly, this change was accomplished and
promulgated by the PKK from 1980 onwards through the process of (trans)nationalisation (that is an appeal to Kurds as a nation across national borders) and *newrozification*\(^9\) (Demirer, 2012). This counter-Kurdishness, in the sense that it was against the Turkish state’s official definition of Kurdish identity, was particularly encouraged after the PKK’s Diyarbakır Prison resistance and the 1980 *coup d’État* that ended in an armed struggle with the Turkish security forces beginning in 1984 (Yegen, 1999; White, 2015). It is estimated that this conflict has resulted to date in around forty thousand deaths including civilians and approximately three million people forced into internal displacement (IDMC, 2013).\(^{10}\)

The experience of the 1990s was a turning point in the Kurdish political struggle. The state’s oppressive policies and the casting of demands for human rights as a security issue, alongside the violence between the security forces and the PKK, fostered the Kurdish national consciousness and request for self-determination (White, 2000). Kurds articulated their collective identity through such demands as education in the Kurdish language, which was a crucial issue in the conflict (Opengin, 2012), and a democratic appeal to organisations such as NGOs, political parties, and the EU’s Court of Human Rights. Indeed, Turkey’s desire to join the EU and the EU’s subsequent influence provided an opportunity for Kurdish civil society to have a voice and its legal political parties to have a presence in the public space. This mobilisation was particularly evident in the western parts of the country as a result of the mass migration of Kurds to the western metropolises of Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Antalya, Mersin, Adana, and Bursa (Saracoglu, 2009) and the consequent economic and political problems resulting from this internal displacement. As a result, this new form of Kurdishness gained wider acceptance and at the same time became the hegemonic culture of an imagined Kurdish community (Saeed, 2016). As a matter of fact, at some level, the Turkish government also acknowledged this self-made identity even though it associated it with terrorism and had criminalised and demonised it.
Internal and external factors continued to shape the formation of this hegemonic Kurdish identity, particularly, in the post-1999 period. Internally there was the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and leader of the PKK, his new idea of a ‘democratic republic’ and the PKK’s new institutional structuring with the formation of the Kurdistan People’s Congress/Kongra-gel and the Union of Communities in Kurdistan/KCK), whilst externally there was Turkey’s new candidate status to join the EU as well as the election of the AKP government in 2002 and its pursuit of neoliberal economic and conservative democratic politics (at least until the recent violence in 2015). The latest development in Kurdish identity has seen the historical continuity of narratives and the notion of ‘many Kurds’ constructed within a radical pluralism that has emerged in the new post-modern Kurdi(sh) society. This has recently been fostered (at least until the attempted coup and the resulting political fallout) by the Kurdish-led, left-leaning populist People’s Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP’s discourse goes beyond an essentialist ethnic Kurdishness by using a ‘progressive Kurdish nationalism’ and populism in a leftist discourse.

Within the historical context outlined above, this paper’s focal point is the analysis of the impact and role of the various sub-identities on hegemonic Kurdish political identity as currently shaped within the logic of a discourse of EU-isation. For this purpose, the internal Kurdish groups are classified into three predominant groups in terms of their identity and discourse: the advanced-modern Kurdi(sh) secular-leftist identity, the traditional-tribal Kurdi(sh) Islamic identity and the pragmatist-opportunist Kurdish hybrid identity. To this end, a social constructivist theory is used as a theoretical frame in order to conceptualise the formation and process of this new emerging Kurdish political project as a supra-identity or historical bloc.
Methodology: the social construction of reality in discursive practices

Social constructivism is the main theoretical perspective used in exploring how Kurdish political identity has been shaped. At its core is an understanding that the construction of social values that underlies a group’s identity and its transformation into a new political identity is defined by the experiences of that social group and the discourses that constitute its social reality. Social constructivists argue that the concept of identity, social reality and knowledge are the products of social actors and the articulation of political practices which reflect their social, political and economic interests, in terms of their socially constructed perceptions, opinions, and understandings (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Longhurst, 1989).

In the Kurdish case, an understanding of current developments and the role of the new (re)emerging sub-identities, organisations and institutions that are involved in the social construction of political identity can be located within post-modern Kurdi(sh) society which in recent decades has been constituted by complex social interactions. The complex pluralism and relationship between these various sub-identities, their differences and similarities, has so far gained little attention from researchers in the field. Whilst some scholars (e.g. Cicek, 2017; Yavuz and Ozcan 2006) provide a similar categorisation of sub-identities to my own, they do so without discussing their historical development, ideological differentiation, cultural similarities and differences, discourses and strategies. By contrast this article critically analyses the construction of these sub-identities and their representative groups and employs an alternative theoretical perspective to challenge the dominant homogenised understanding of Kurdish society and nationalism, focusing instead on the multi-diversity of Kurdish politics through offering a new language for understanding Kurdish political identity.

Both the internal and external context have provided opportunity spaces in the political, legal, economic and social spheres for Kurdish socio-political agents to develop a Kurdish
identity in the public space beyond the private realm. The new political, economic, social and legal possibilities have also allowed for the creation of different sub-identities (but still within an understanding of ‘Kurdishness’) and play an important role in allowing the renegotiation of the scope of a Kurdish collective identity. This renegotiation implies that any identity can be deconstructed and reconstructed as a result of changing power structures and that agents who have the power can influence the definition of reality as the knowledge about society results from the production and objectivation of social reality that is publicly realised (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Searle, 1995).

Important in understanding the construction of Kurdish political identity is the role of the EU as an external soft power that has influenced and intervened in the domestic affairs of Turkey so as to provide the opportunity for various ideational sub-groups within the Kurdish political community to appear. Equally, EU institutional politics in Turkey has also impacted on the liberalisation of Kurdish political culture allowing different Kurdish actors and their identities to re-appear. These actors have been able to advocate democratic and liberal values with a strong emphasis on human rights, albeit radically interpreted, in a process that has seen the dominant Kurdish political agents (until the post-June 2015 violence in the Kurdish region) engage with the country’s democratisation process rather than withdrawing from existing democratic institutions. As such Kurdish politics has recently developed new strategies for the social construction of a collective will in terms of an agonistic pluralism derived from the discourse of radical democracy as outlined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

The emerging agonistic debate on the Kurdish political spectrum

The social constructivist approach argues that social reality is understood in different ways and that individuals and groups newly entering a situation attempt to define it or negotiate it according to the actors’ own perceptions and preferences. From the second half of the last
century changes in Kurdish social reality and political knowledge have encouraged different internal groups to publicly display their identity, which although different from each other all make claim to the historical experience of Kurdish society. This identity of ‘Kurdishness’ can be seen as a nodal point which is given substance by reference to such things as language, geography and political demands; but as a supra-identity it must be regarded as an empty signifier in Laclau’s (1996) terminology whose meaning is only temporarily fixed and which is constantly contested within a hegemonic struggle. More recently, under the process of EU- isation, a new signifier has emerged that has created the possibility for the development of an agonistic plural space in Kurdish society, exemplified by the rise of the HDP, where past internal antagonistic enemy relations can be transformed into agonistic adversarial ones in a type of co-existence (Mouffe, 2013).

This ‘free floating’ Kurdishness does not mean that various groups cease to articulate their own identities and seek hegemonic influence. The difficulty occurs when one particular group claims its own definition is the only one as has happened in the past. In much of the twentieth century the articulation of different Kurdish identities was supressed by the Turkish state. The early Turkish Republic engaged in a political project to build an imaginary nation without gaining the consent of Kurdish society and, furthermore, designated an official identity for Kurds based on the concept of Kemalist Turkishness and aggressive secularism (laiklik). However, Kurdish political agents reacted against this political project with counter-hegemonic uprisings between 1925-1938 challenging this given identity (McDowall, 2000; Somer, 2005). Later a reactive protectionism emerged, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, with the involvement of Kurdish intellectuals, such as Musa Anter, at a time when Turkish political culture was undergoing a transformation as it moved towards a multi-party system. Many of these Kurdish intellectuals had been educated in universities in Istanbul, Ankara, and Europe, and they had begun to build a modern Kurdish identity by developing a counter-
hegemonic culture in the printed media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, bulletins), universities, student dormitories, political parties, and organisations, after the state suppression of Kurdish society between 1938 and 1950, a period referred to as the ‘silent years’. Subsequently, this modern identity was developed by the 1960s generation in terms of a radical outlook informed by socialist and secular values, later to be developed within a nationalist consciousness and disseminated as an ideological objective by the PKK until the early 1990s (Yegen, 2017; McDowall, 2000). However, such a monopolistic and hegemonic definition of Kurdish reality and identity inhibited social change and also weakened the opportunity for an agonistic dialogue and communication, thus restricting the further formation and horizontal expansion of Kurdish identity.

This situation, however, changed with the political evolution of the Kurdish political movement via internal liberalisation, alongside Turkey’s application for accession to the EU which provided the opportunity for the EU-ising of Kurdish political identity. The political discourse of EU-isation has heavily influenced Kurdish initiatives in Turkey since the 1990s, placing them within the framework of current radical plural democratic discourse, such as liberty and equality for all. During the 1990s, when the notion of universal human rights became embedded both in substance and instrumentally in Kurdish political discourse with regard to the nature of Kurdishness, it was assumed that the EU accession process would stop armed conflict, open the communication channels possibly leading to an agonistic debate, and establish a peaceful resolution ensuring democratic freedoms, such as the freedom of thought, freedom of expression, minority and cultural rights, and social justice and equality (Cengiz and Hoffmann, 2013; Kaliber, 2013). Therefore, the EU accession was seen by the Kurds, as well as by the wider Turkish counter elite, as both a means of achieving the liberalisation and democratisation of society and as a way to describe it (Yildiz, 2005). Despite the positive instrumental and substantive impact of this pro-EU politics, it is
important to understand that the new Kurdishness which developed was led and socially constructed by Kurdish political actors rather than by the EU which sought only to support the Copenhagen Criteria as part of its enlargement policy. Therefore, EU-isation emerged as a symbolic common ground in Kurdish politics that attempted to hegemonise the national narrative by constructing Kurdishness as a master signifier which embraced all other discourses. Thus, it provided an opportunity to discuss and negotiate the political borders of Kurdishness, which as a currently empty signifier could be made significant by reference to particular nodal points such as geographical Kurdistan, the Kurdish language, culture and history, Kurdish social-tribal kinships, and political demands.

Since the early 2000s, this new concept of Kurdishness, and the political discourses associated with it, developed through a hegemonic power struggle connected with the postmodernisation of Kurdish society and politics. These changes in society led to challenges to the existing advanced-modern Kurdish identity from the emerging sub-identities. The emergence of these new ways of defining Kurdish identity and new types of activism helped to bring Kurdishness onto the national and international agenda (McDonald and O’Leary, 2007).

As the discussion so far indicates, the internal debate amongst Kurdish agents resulted in enlarging the boundaries of Kurdishness with the development of definitions offered by the PKK and counter-definitions offered by other groups who opposed or did not agree with the PKK. These definitions drew on different cultures, discourses and political behaviour, whilst at the same time they were all part of a wider counter-hegemonic struggle against Turkish state coercion. The challenge offered by other groups to the Kurdishness promulgated by the hegemonic PKK created the possibility of transformation from an antagonistic hegemonically articulated adversarial relationship between these Kurdish groups (for example, the Islamic-oriented Zehra, the state-funded Kurdish paramilitary village guards and the secular and
socialist Rights and Freedom Party/HAK-PAR) to an agonistic adversarial one, which eventually provided the ideological foundation for the type of new radical vocabulary used by the HDP (particularly during the June 2015 election). In this way Kurdishness came to be signified by the idea of ‘many Kurds’ made up of groups holding to different political ideologies and using different discourse and strategies.

In understanding the different Kurdish identities that have emerged, a number of factors can be considered. As can be seen in Table 1, which maps different identities, each group’s political identity can be analysed in terms of their strategies and discourses. Three strategies and three main identities are indicated: pro-active militant, active accommodative and defensive accommodative strategies; and ‘Kurdi(sh)-secular/leftist’, ‘Kurdi(sh) Islamic’, and ‘Kurdish opportunist/pragmatist (white Kurd)’ identities. This produces a typology containing nine Kurdish groups with their distinctive identities and agents. In understanding the differences between the various clusters of Kurdish identity, we can examine the discourses and tactics that are used by these groups to define them in relation to their political strategies, media pronouncements, publications, speeches, human capital and their socio-political behaviour. It must be understood, however, that there is some fluidity between these categories. As we have already mentioned identity is not fixed and accordingly these sub-identities are in a dynamic relationship with each other and members may also be capable of being categorised under other sub-identities. For example, an Islamic or secular group (or individuals within these groups) may also fit into the pragmatist/opportunist category along certain dimensions and under certain conditions. The crucial point is that these different identities are all embedded in Kurdish and Kurdistani values whilst their political ideologies and social and religious practices along with the political strategies they adopt became a point of rupture distinguishing one from the other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities Strategies</th>
<th>Kurdi(sh)-Secular Identity</th>
<th>Kurdi(sh)-Islamic Identity</th>
<th>Kurdish Opportunist-Pragmatist Identity (white Kurds)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-active Militant</td>
<td>PKK (organised)</td>
<td>Hizbullah (organised)</td>
<td>Village Guards; Tribes e.g. Bucak, Jirki (organised)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Accommodative</td>
<td>Based on the same human capital and ideology as the PKK. The pro-Kurdish political parties: HEP, DEP, ÖZDEP, HADEP, DEHAP, DTP, BDP, DBP (organised)¹³ Societal/civil institutions such as DTK, IHD, TAYAD, Saturday Mothers (organised)¹⁴</td>
<td>Pro-Kurdish Nurcus (Zehra etc.) Hüda-Par (Pro-Hizbullah), or Azadi movement (organised) Traditionalist Naqshibendi, Qadiri tariqs, madrasas and mullahs (group)</td>
<td>NGOs, for instance KAMER,¹⁵ DİTAM,¹⁶ or GÜNSİAD¹⁷ (organised) Individual Kurdish politicians, bureaucrats, and artists in the Turkish public space (individual) Other Islamic groups (regional partners of the Turkish Nurcu organisations and Islamist/conservative political parties) (group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive Accommodative</td>
<td>Non-PKK buttressed or PKK-sceptic Kurdish parties: PSK, HAK-PAR, KADEP, T-KDP (organised)¹⁸ Intellectuals, such as Ümit Fırat, Muhsin Kızılkaya, Orhan Miroğlu (individual)</td>
<td>Istanbul based Islamic groups in the region, such as Nurcus (including Gülen and Süleymançı) movement (organised)</td>
<td>Urbanised or assimilated ‘White Kurds’ (individual) Turkified local Kurdish tribes (group)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most prominent political identity is that linked to the hegemonic definition of Kurdishness provided by secular, nationalist and leftist groups, such as the PKK, who have used a pro-active military strategy to become the most politicised members of Kurdish society after the launch of their first serious armed struggle against the Turkish security forces (Romano, 2006; White, 2015; Yegen, 2017). However, not all those with this identity have pursued a direct revolutionary strategy (a war of manoeuvre in the Gramscian sense) as some agents with this identity, like the Human Rights Association (IHD), Peace and
Democracy Party (BDP) and Democratic Society Congress (DTK) have adopted an active accommodative tactic (war of position) by making use of the legal system (around human rights, for example), the political realm (such as parliament, local councils, political parties, and EU institutions), and civil society (including the media and business organisations). Among such groups, some representatives such as the HAK-PAR and some intellectuals have opted for a defensive accommodative position due to their limited political power and social support amongst the Kurds, although these groups and individuals have found some opportunity spaces as they are accepted by the Turkish state as competitors to the PKK.

Alongside the category of secular and leftist Kurdish groups there are pragmatist/opportunists who emerged during Turkey’s changing socio-political life as a result of the economic liberalisation of the 1980s. Seen as ‘decent Kurds’, they are involved, integrated or assimilated into the political economy and socio-cultural structure of the country in the form of regional business organisations, NGOs, artists and civil servants. The third category consists of those who identify themselves within the Kurdi(sh) Islamic context (for example, tariqas/madrasas, the Azadi movement or Hizbullah) and who have strongly influenced the conception of their own Kurdish identity. Their Islamic identity differs from the state’s interpretation of Islam as overseen by the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and also distinguishes them from the Kurdish secular/left (Yavuz and Ozcan, 2006; Cicek, 2016).

In further understanding the plurality of groups in Table 1, three different types of strategies can be applied to create sub-groups within an overall identity. In this respect creating the map helps us to investigate the different strategies and identities of the main Kurdish political groups, one that acknowledges the plurality of Kurdish society and the fact that there is no single definition of Kurdi(sh)ness. In the following sections we critically discuss each of the groups in turn.
1. The advanced-modern and dominant (leftist and secular) Kurdi(sh) identity

The move towards a secular and national Kurdish identity emerged as a result of an historical transition in Kurdish identity informed by what can be called the values of an advanced-modern society and until recently dominated Kurdish society as a result of the strong cultural, intellectual and moral leadership of the political agents who were able to gain mass support. This advanced-modern Kurdi(sh) identity, as already discussed, began to emerge in the 1960s and arose out of what can be termed the modern Kurdish identity of the late 1940s and early 1950s that had developed during the Turkish state’s oppressive and assimilative policies towards the Kurds. This identity resulted from a dual struggle: on the one hand, against the coercive political culture and armed power of the Turkish state, as well as a response to capitalism, colonialism and Turkish nationalism; and on the other, as a rejection of conventional Kurdish society that was shaped by established Islamic, tribal and patriarchal values. Therefore, these Kurdish leftist political actors in the 1970s (the DDKO, KUK, KAWA, Rizgari, PSK, and PKK) sought to deconstruct the dominant definition of Kurdishness in an attempt to define a new all-encompassing Kurdish identity with a different set of values and cultural structure that was largely based on socialist and secular values. Later these became linked to ‘liberal socialist’ values such as equity, justice, liberty, and human rights based on an ideological interpretation and critique of oppression and persecution and a demand for political and social change.

In the period from 1960 to 1990 this identity building process was mainly led by pro-Kurdi(sh) leftist groups who claimed that this new identity could in fact be traced back thousands of years to Kurds who had lived in the Caucasus, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. This revised identity emerged in order to lead society according to leftist, secular and
nationalist principles by making reference to pre-Islamic history, myths and heroes of the Kurds, as exemplified in the idea of ‘newrozification’. In terms of a symbol of a new political strategy and language of resistance, it was also connected to the rebellion that had largely started at the beginning of the twentieth century and made claim to a shared Kurdish legacy and heritage of national identity. The agents of this new identity recognised the fragmented structure of Kurdish society that was divided by religion, language and territory and despite being heavily secular themselves granted equal public space, and hence in their own movements, to a plurality of religions with equal recognition given to Zoroastrianism, Yezidism, Judaism and eastern Christianity alongside Alevism and Sunnism. Their support for a plural public space was also aimed at providing equality for the various Kurdish dialects such as Zazaki, Sorani, and Kurmanji that were spoken across Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, and some of the former Soviet states like Armenia and Azerbaijan, along with the recognition of geographical differences. Importantly, their promotion of gender equality can be considered essential to the emergence of a large number of women fighters and politicians in their midst.

This advanced-modern identity claimed to herald a different type of society from the existing traditional Kurdish one which was feudal, tribal (eshiri), religious (Sunni/Shafi), and exclusively Kurmanji in terms of language. Rather it was one shaped through discourses of the left and of gender equality (Gunter, 1990). It represented a new ideology infused by anti-colonial, anti-feudal, Marxist/Leninist and transnational discourses, all under the umbrella of a ‘free Kurdistan’ articulated in particular in relation to the hegemony of the Turkish state (Caha, 2011; Somer, 2005). For the organic intellectuals who espoused this identity, Kurdish identity was to be different from the traditional, conservative, tribal and male-dominated regional Kurdishness which was still heavily influenced by Turkish hegemonic culture. Thus the old conventional identity was seen as an obstacle to Kurdish unification and nationalism.
Accordingly, the ideal Kurd was defined and formulated in terms of the new culture of emerging Kurdish leftist actors.

In this new identity formulation as defined by the PKK, the ideal Kurd was expected to embrace all other secular and leftist Kurdish groups (despite the power struggle with other leftist groups, for example Kawa and the PSK). To this end the PKK recruited its members from all the Kurdish regions of Turkey and the Middle East, as well as the diaspora (particularly Europe), while rejecting the imposed confines of the existing nation states in which the Kurds lived. This new strategy rejected treating the Kurds as though they were different groups of Kurds in different countries. Consequently, this separate and independent new Kurdi(sh)ness became a dominant and mainstream identity among Kurdish society in Turkey from the 1960s.

As Yavuz and Ozcan point out this new identity was mainly ‘secular, anti-traditional and usually supported by newly urbanised and university educated Kurds, who do not have deep tribal ties’ (2006: 106) and was developed as an alternative to the officially defined, assimilated version of Kurdishness aimed at re-conceptualising the identity of Kurds in modern Turkey that had its origins in the Kemalist thesis that Kurds were simply ‘mountain Turks’. In opposition to this the new Kurdish identity made reference in particular to historical images, myths, and heroes linking it to an ancient Kurdish heritage, in particular to the Median Empire. These symbols were used as historic legacies and memories of Kurdish society to politicise and create an alternative culture and identity that could be set against the status quo (Grabolle-Celiker, 2007). These organic intellectuals constructed a new counter-hegemonic philosophy through a cultural and moral leadership of Kurdish society implemented through party politics in the context of an on-going power struggle. Eventually this radicalised identity became a social reality for the majority of Kurds and continues for many to the present day.
2. The traditional (conservative and Islamic) Kurdi(sh) alternative identity

Islamic values and morals have remained embedded in Kurdish society ever since the Kurds’ conversion to Islam in the seventh century (Taspinar, 2005; Houston, 2001). Since then an Islamic value system, along with the institutions of the tariqa (an order of Islamic-Sufism) and madrasa (an Islamic seminary) have traditionally played a crucial role in Kurdish social structure. Equally Kurds have played an important role in Islamic history producing many religious scholars. As part of their loyalty to Islam as a religion, and also as a social formation, the concept of *ummah* (that is being part of the universal community of Muslims and a key element of the Islamic social fabric) is embedded in the culture of the Kurdish population (Kreyenbroek and Allison, 1996; Cicek, 2016) and since becoming Muslims the Kurds have always embraced the idea of the *ummah*. Kurds had always fought alongside their Turkish Muslim fellows, from the early Ottoman times up to the 1920 ‘War of Independence’, an era which witnessed the creation of new states based on ideas of pan-Turkish, pan-Arab or Persian nationalism. The rise of nationalism in the latter part of the empire and the desire amongst its Ottoman subjects for their own nation states was not shared by the majority of Kurds, including some of the leading Kurdish scholars and intellectuals such as Said-i Kurdi who rejected the concept of the nation state. They believed that this model, which was Western and modernist in origin, was a threat to the unity of the *ummah*. Consequently, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed they continued to acknowledge the Islamic ties to their fellow Turks during the creation of the post-Ottoman state in Anatolia.

The emergence of the new Turkish Republic, however, created a dilemma for the Kurds as Islam was embedded in everyday life and Kurdish society was infused with an Islamic social value system. Moreover, religion was key in constructing the everyday social reality of Kurdish society for as Berger argues religion ‘serves to maintain the reality of that socially
constructed world within which men exist in their everyday lives’ (1967: 42). The Republic’s policy of removing Islam from the public sphere with its declaration of a secularised modern society was problematic for the Kurds whose identity was bound up with Islam. This was to remain an issue until the modern development of a multi-political landscape.

Despite the historical centrality of Islam some Kurdish political agents had much earlier subscribed to a program of secularisation during the Ottoman period and later with the Republic. This meant that already some members of society and their culture had been ‘removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols’ (Berger, 1967: 106), in this case mainly among certain elite sectors of Kurdish society. For these Kurdishness became separated from religion, just as was happening at the institutional level in Turkey and beyond. With the hegemonising power of secularism growing in the country at large, religion was for them no longer a legitimate force within society, nor could it be the main signifier of identity because secularisation defines a life away from religion. However, against this emerging secularism in Kurdish society, there were religious groups who sought to maintain their particular religious identity and to compete with both internal and external opponents.

In explaining the impact of secularism as propounded by Kemalism in the formation of the Turkish state, McDowall argues that ‘observant Sunni Kurds felt drawn into the wider orbit of Sunni Islam in Turkey and had responded to the liberalisation introduced by parties of the Right’ (2000: 431). This applied equally to the Kurds as to the Turks. Religious ties and networks were two of the main reasons for Kurds to continue relations with Turkish society, but this created a crucial obstacle to Kurdish nationalists who were seeking to create national unity. Indeed, even today it is commonly argued, both for opportunistic reasons and also by way of an apology by Turkish politicians and religious leaders, that Islam is the only common tie between Kurds and Turks and that the current conflict between them could easily be solved within an Islamic framework with regard to ethnic and national rights, including
Kurdish rights. This approach was recently tried again by the AKP government but was challenged by the HDP’s radical democratic political project interrupted by the resumption of armed conflict between the PKK and state security forces in June 2015 (Tekdemir, 2016).

As in the case of secular Kurds, Kurdi(sh) Islamists also emerged as a counter-hegemonic identity against Turkish nationalism and sovereignty. As the recent debate in Turkey indicates, devout Kurdish Muslims argue that while Turkish society has moved towards Islam under the AKP, Turkish society in general and Turkish Islamists in particular have failed to address Kurdish demands, as their notions of Islam and Islamic fellowship centre on their Turkishness. Therefore, pious Kurdish Muslims accuse Turkish Muslims of being arrogant towards the Kurds and ignorant of their demands for basic human rights, such as linguistic and cultural freedom. Consequently, the identity of these Kurdi(sh) Islamists has a dual aspect: on the one hand they are against the aggressive secular and oppressive modernist policies of the Kemalist republic or the Turkish state’s later Turkish-Islamic synthesis; while on the other hand they reject the discourse of the Marxist/Leninist Kurds. However, in recent years due to their emerging distance from the Turkish Islamic position, an understanding has developed between Islamically-oriented Kurds and mainstream Kurdish groups with devout Muslim Kurds defining Kurdi(sh)ness within a socio-cultural Islamic discourse rather than within political Islam. They have also constructed a non-aggressive Kurdish nationalism whilst at the same time searching for a way to bring their Kurdi(sh) Islamic identity into the public space with the objective of spreading it through Kurdish society. Yavuz and Ozcan describe these ‘Muslim-Kurds as those who stress Islamic values and normally identify with religion rather than ethnicity but also feel Kurdish when confronted with the choice of Turkish identity’ (2006: 107). However, as argued by Houston the ‘Kurdish Islamic discourse finds no objection in Islam, or in Islamic law, to their realisation through a federation, or by autonomy, or in the independent state for Kurds’ (2008: 177). Hence, it is not only about a
non-aggressive Kurdishness in opposition to Turkish identity, but also an aim at an
unidentified and hesitantly constructed meaning of Kurdishness within their attachment to
Islam. Such feelings have emerged more strongly in recent years in the face of the AKP’s
failures to incorporate Kurdishness and Kurdish demands into the construction of the ‘new
Turkey’. In the post-June 2015 election period, Islamist Kurds have felt further alienation in
the face of the AKP’s security oriented heavy-handed responses to Kurdish demands and the
Syrian Kurdish struggle against the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS) in Kobane.

This has created splits in the discourse of fellowship between Turkish and Kurdish
Muslims, one that can trace its origins to the persecution of the Kurds by the Kemalist state
for being Muslim (and thus not secular) and for being Kurd (and thus different from their
Turkish religious counterparts). This constitutes an ambivalent situation for Islamically-
oriented Kurds whilst also fostering a complex relationship with secular Kurds that
encourages them to construct a Kurdish Islamic discourse that distinguishes them from both
Kurdish leftists and Turkish Islamists as well as from Kemalist secularism. This is a
complicated process that requires complex negotiation and renegotiation. Thus, the Kurdish
Islamic groups have shaped a new type of sub-identity, perhaps helping to re-activate Islamic
values in the Kurdish political and social arena through re-embedding Islam in their social
construction of a new Kurdish identity. The new perspective also expresses differences
between the intellectually constructed formal Kurdî(sh)ness offered by secular leftist Kurds
and the everyday Kurdî(sh)ness informed by traditional codes and practiced by conservative
Kurds representing a re-emergence and re-embedding of Islam. Houston argues that ‘it would
be wrong to assume that Kurdish Islamists are necessarily anti-PKK because of its avowed
anti-religiosity’ (2008: 184). As a result, Kurdish Islamists have created their own unique
identity by locating themselves within the Kurdish-Islamic heritage. They do this by making
reference, for instance, to the legacy of the Kurdish mîr (emirate), Selahaddin Eyyubi, who
remains one of the most respected and iconic images of Islam. Likewise references to Sheikh Said, the leader of 1925 rebellion, alongside other rebellious Kurdish sheiks, are other decisive contributors shaping this new identity (in this case, the Azadi movement) as Sheikh Said is famous for having issued a *fatwa* or Islamic injunction against the secular Kemalist Turkish state. Sheikh Said in his *fatwa* argued that since Islam was the only tie between the Turks and Kurds, and since the Kemalist revolution had removed Islam from the public space, the implicit social contract between the Turks and Kurds had been made null and void and this therefore justified ‘Kurdish independence’. This remains an essential *raison d’être* for Islamist Kurdish movements. Equally, despite the different interpretations of his identity by his Turkish followers, the teachings and learning-oriented ‘faith’ based Islamic identity of Said-i Kurdi, or as he is generally known Nursi, remain an important heritage that justifies the importance of Islam within some Kurdish circles and in defining a new Kurdish Islamic identity. For example, while Zehra has legitimised its engagement with Kurdish identity through the writings of Said-i Kurdi, they have also re-defined Said-i Kurdi in terms of his Kurdish identity and position on Kurds during the Ottoman period, thus aiming at rescuing Said from his imposed Turkish identity by replacing it with a determined and non-hesitant Kurdish one.

Legitimated by an Islamic belief system this identity is contained within its own discourse signified by an Islamic Kurdish heritage marked by a symbolic use of language through words such as *ummah, tawhid, jihad, mustadafin, sharia, falah,* and *ukhuwah.*¹⁹ In particular, for Kurdish Islamists *mustadafin* (the oppressed) is an essential concept which carries an important message for the rest of Kurdish society, but also particularly in relation to Turkey and its oppression of the Kurds, and is an important linguistic tool and political signifier in justifying their Kurdishness in relation to an Islamic discourse. Intellectuals play an important role in forming and sustaining this sub-identity as they act as a mechanism of transmission to
formulate and arrange a system of beliefs that can be transmitted to Kurdish society in terms of the responsibility of being a pious Muslim. They legitimate this identity in relation to an opposing one and strongly argue that there is no need to be secularised in order to have a national Kurdish identity.

It should be noted that Kurdish Islamists explore the Kurdish problem through a pro-
Kurdi\(\text{(sh)}\) approach within an Islamic blueprint whilst at the same time compete with other secular Kurdi\(\text{(sh)}\) groups and Turkish Islamic groups over the definition of Kurdish identity, and this has sometimes resulted in clashes and violence. The Kurdish Islamic groups also employ different strategies — aggressive, non-aggressive, or militaristic — and it would be a serious mistake to consider these Islamic groups as homogenous. For instance Hizbullah\(^{20}\) is a militaristic group which differentiates them from other Islamic-oriented groups while others, for example Azadi, became part of the HDP’s radical plural democracy bloc.

3.’Quasi Kurdishness’: opportunist, pragmatist identity or Turkified, urbanised ‘white Kurds’

The Kemalists designed and offered an official identity for post-Ottoman society in general, and for the Kurds in particular, in an attempt to engineer an imagined society based on Turkishness. This resulted in the removal of all signs of Kurdi\(\text{(sh)}\) as well as Islamic identity from the public space and the regime put the Kurds under the strict control of the state as part of its ‘civilising’ process for the region. This nation building attempted to incorporate Kurds into socio-political life as Turks by means of political assimilation, deportation, forced migration and displacement (Loizides, 2010; Somer, 2005; Yegen, 1999). The society was engineered, regulated and planned according to Kemalist philosophy and this new hegemonic power replaced most traditional institutions with its own by cleansing civil society to its foundations and installing a single official political party, the Republican Peoples Party
(CHP). In this new political culture, identity was formulated and recognised through the interpretation of Turkishness and the integration of Kemalist cultural products into the everyday life of society and the personal practice of individuals. In the Kemalist order the political, cultural and social realms were narrowly defined which made it harder to participate in these spaces as anyone who did not conform was excluded from them. Under such a regime, the knowledge of what it was to be ‘Kurdish’ in relation to identity came to invalidate ‘Kurdishness’ and with the Turkification of Kurdish identity came the further institutionalisation of Kemalism. With Kurdishness no longer being learnt by a new generation as part of public life, it became limited and came to be defined as something that was only practiced and legitimated in the individual or private sphere. Thus ethnic and religious identity (Kurdish and Islamic) could only exist in private and were forbidden in the public space (Taspinar, 2005). Ultimately, Kurdishness ceased to exist publicly and continued only in private, where individuals who were willing to sustain ‘the cost of not forgetting’ their Kurdishness had to bear the possibility of being caught by the Kemalist state and punished. This even included the speaking of Kurdish which was subject to fines and imprisonment.

However, things began to change with the democratic opening of the country during the first multi-party elections in 1946. Multi-party politics and a neoliberal economy created further opportunities for different religious and ethnic identities to become part of the dominant system and benefit from its political, cultural, educational and economic rewards, but still only by embracing an identity of Turkishness. Whether it was a project of ‘Turkification in secularisation’ (citizenship) or ‘Turkification in Islamisation’ (ummah) they created opportunities in the social, political and economic space for Kurdish individuals and groups to exist in forms allowed by the state. The Kurds could now ‘enjoy basic freedoms and benefit from the principle of equal treatment as long as they deny their ethnic identity’
Until recently, Kurds had always, alongside their Islamic contemporaries, been unable to participate in the public space with their ethnic and religious identities, as those who could enter the public space were clearly limited by the state. For the Kurds, this meant that they could only participate as pretend Turks even though their accent would immediately indicate their Kurdishness. This obliged some Kurds to adopt pragmatic strategies. Yavuz and Ozcan describe these ‘group of Kurds, — known as “occasional Kurds” as very much assimilated within Turkey and prefer to be active among center-right and center-left parties’ (2006: 106), while Aydinli and Ozcan (2011) describe them as ‘integrated Kurds’. Such Kurds, for example, bureaucrats, artists, or NGOs such as KAMER and GÜNSİAD (see Table 1) had a chance to find a place in the public sphere through integration or assimilation which meant that they could have access to the social, political and economic advantages offered by the state that strictly controlled such access.

Nevertheless, this hybrid identity became very fragmented due to the different routes taken by individuals in reaching their public positions because of their different backgrounds in education, location and their willingness to comply. Their proximity to the establishment is reflected in the level of Kurdishness they feel within a Turkishness already defined by the state. It raises the question of how does a person define themselves in terms of identity. It also is relevant in understanding the degree of assimilation, integration and exploitation for this internal group. Therefore, this complex identity emerged in different ways of being involved with Turkishness as a hidden Kurd which was shaped in terms of an individual’s conscious, the constraints acting upon the individual, their interests, and the opportunities open to them.

Within Kemalism, any type of articulation of ethnic and cultural difference was, and still is, perceived as a threat to cultural and national unity and the territorial integrity of the country, and hence was strictly prohibited and any expression of Kurdish identity was forbidden and
persecuted until the mid-2000s. As members of the Turkish nation, the Kurds have equal rights in all aspects as long as they are not related to their ethnic, cultural and language rights. Thus, a Kurd who accepts Turkishness and the political order is treated as a ‘good Kurd’ and can attain some certain social, political and economic advantages within the public space.

This amalgamated identity is not usually articulated within an organised group because of its individual, situational and opportunistic character. Therefore, there is no intellectual stratum that represents this identity or its members, even though there does exist intellectuals who can be defined or perceived as belonging to this group. The traditional role of Foucault’s ‘specific intellectuals’ may be ascribed to this type of Kurdish intellectual since, to quote Foucault, they are ‘working not in the modality of the “universal”, the “exemplary”, the “just-and-true-for-all”, but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them’ (Smart, 2004: 67). As a consequence, knowledge is reinterpreted and redistributed by the state via these intellectuals to individuals who mostly live together with Turks in metropolitan areas. The language, history and identity of these relocated Kurds is blocked, prohibited and devalued through a system of power that uses these ‘specific intellectuals’ as the principal agents of this process. In this sense, they may also be understood in terms of Gramsci’s (2005) ‘traditional intellectuals’, for whom Mehmet Ziya (1876-1924), a Kurdish intellectual, can be given as an example. Under the pseudonym Ziya Gökalp he was one of the main founders and theoreticians of Turkish nationalism and created the principles of Turkism based on the idea of ‘Turanism’ (the pan-Turkish land that stretched from Anatolia to the Chinese steppes), which provided the ideological base for Kemalist nationalism. Gökalp was influenced by Durkheimian sociology which provided the foundation for his sociology of knowledge or ülkü (the theory of the ideal). He also opposed the concept of the ummah and the millet system (the Ottoman legal pluralism that was based on self-governing religious communities), preferring to define identity within a modern
nationalist sense (Heyd, 1950). In Kemalist Turkey, Gökalp’s brand of nationalism did not allow plural identities to be expressed, thus it constrained individual choice in creating an imagined society. It was possible for individuals to express their different identities by taking up the struggle at the lowest level through the expression of their opinion, right up to the highest level through armed struggle, but they would have to face the consequences. Or they could accept the imposed definition and survive within the system by not revealing their true colours, which is their identity. As long as the person did not claim a separate non-Turkish identity, life could temporarily offer opportunities to that individual. This could even stretch as far as membership of the current Islamic-oriented governing party (the AKP) which enjoyed the highest number of Kurdish MPs elected and nearly three times more than a pro-Kurdish party like the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP, recently succeeded by the Democratic Regions Party, DBP).

This only changed with the historical election victory of the largely Kurdish HDP who in the June 2015 general election passed the ten per cent threshold (13.1 per cent) for the first time and gained eighty seats in the Turkish parliament (Goksel and Tekdemir, 2017). This was repeated in the snap election in November 2015 when despite escalating violence, crackdown and renewed armed struggle, the HDP still managed to exceed the threshold (10.8 per cent) with fifty-nine MPs. The success of this new emerging Kurdishness was in large part a consequence of the Gezi square protest which brought together a number of different disadvantaged groups (both long-standing and newly formed) on a common ground (Acar and Ulug, 2016) against the AKP’s authoritarianism and majoritarianism.

Conclusion

This paper has critically analysed the role of different types of Kurdish sub-identities and their subaltern groups in the transformation of hegemonic Kurdish political identity. It has
also considered how the indirect involvement of the EU as an external dynamic, particularly its soft-power, has influenced the trajectory of the Kurdish political movement and the social construction of a new Kurdish political identity by expanding and renewing, moreover deepening and widening, hegemonic Kurdishness. The new radical political grammar that has recently emerged has resulted in what can be termed an ‘EU-ing of Kurdi(sh)’ identity which has provided an ideological foundation for the HDP’s radical plural democracy project, while still continuing the hegemonic struggle against the Turkish state. In a macro sense, the Kurdish movement aims to radicalise the country’s neoliberal oriented democratic institutions in order to radically transform the existing system through a neutralisation of hegemony (a passive revolution) with other democratic groups in a chain of equivalence. Hence, the renewal of Kurdish political identity within an inclusive agonistic approach can be seen as the new politics of postmodern Kurdish society. It is the formation of a radical pluralist democratic ground where identification is not reducible to an essentialist identity under a monolithic definition such as an Islamic, Alevi, leftist, urbanised or LGBT. However, events since the general election in June 2015 in Turkey and the outbreak of hostilities between the Turkish government and the Kurds in the Kurdish region of Turkey have threatened once again to change the political ground.

These various Kurdi(sh) sub-identities rearticulate the demand for identity by constructing a collective will in an internal hegemonic articulation that questions the nature of Kurdish identity and leads to its re-invention since identity is never permanently fixed. Recently these groups have endeavoured to transform their antagonistic enemy relations into an agonistic adversary one that offers equality and liberty to all, and to build a symbolic democratic public space based on Kurdishness (a nodal point in a Laclauian sense). They have embraced their differences by developing a Mouffeian ‘conflictual consensus’ among Kurds and at the same time have engaged in a peace building process with the Turkish state (although after July
2015 this has broken down with the resumption of armed conflict between the state security forces and the PKK). This is not to say that political differences no longer exist between these groups, there is still conflict, but the differences are part of the dynamics of Kurdish political identity construction. Moreover, there is not a complete rational consensus in a liberal political sense between all these adversaries, rather conflict still lies at the centre of relations between this hotchpotch of groups. The agonistic relation between Kurdish sub-identities can be conceptualised in terms of ‘many Kurdishnesses’ as a signifier that represents a new postmodern identity and a progressive nationalism (like the Scottish National Party in the UK) which has been able to help form the HDP’s radical democratic bloc. The oxymoron of a ‘conflictual consensus’ between Kurdish adversaries has created a political community through signifying ‘the People’ and recognising the HDP’s new discourse of ‘we’re’, ‘great humanity’, ‘Turkeyfication’, and ‘new life’, although these critical discourses have become fragile after the recent violence in the region following the June 2015 general election and require further study in the light of these most recent developments.

The conflicts between various Kurdish identities indicate the difficulty faced in holding to liberal values based on a radical democracy, as is indicated in the case of the violent clashes between Islamist state-oriented Kurds and PKK partisans as well as the implicit disagreement between the HDP alliance and PKK that could be observed in the days leading up to the November 2015 snap election. Thus, various factors and actors, including the EU and in particular the religiously-oriented AKP government, have all been active in defining Kurdishness in particular ways that relate to their own expectations. The current operations against the HDP, its co-leaders and a significant number of MPs with almost all of its nearly one hundred mayors arrested has created an organic crisis in politics. The AKP’s leaders’ authoritarian, majoritarian and Turkish-Islamic tendencies and aggressive policies towards the inclusive populism of the HDP illustrates how the AKP has depoliticised Kurdish issues
turning them into matters of security and criminal activity. Further the AKP has attempted to eliminate Kurdish democratic demands by recourse to the discourse of a ‘Muslim fellowship’ by promoting certain Kurdish Islamists such as Hür-Par to be the main interlocutors in the conflict resolution. We wait to see how Kurdish society and the various Kurdish identities outlined in this paper will evolve alongside Turkey’s own democracy and its current autocratic leadership.

Notes

1 The EU-ising process (a term coined by the author) refers to a political project and makes no claim that Kurdish society is culturally and socially Europeanising. EU-ising is not about constructing a social European identity for Kurdish society, rather it represents the radicalising of EU liberal democratic values in Kurdish political space. Ultimately, it is about establishing a political identity by various socio-political groups.

2 Kurdi(ş) is a Kurdish term and is derived from Kurdisim which addresses Kurdish nationalism in relation to Kurds, Kurdistan(i), culture and tradition. Kurdish nationalists are also known as Kurdistans and Pan-Kurdism refers to a united and independent Kurdistan.

3 The term ‘empty signifier’ addresses how Kurdishness means many things for many different members of society. In a Lacanian way: when they say ‘Kurd’ it means just what they choose it to mean.

4 Collective will signifies the ambitions of the Kurdish political movement to construct a collective identity as a fuse for creating alliances.

5 ‘Many Kurdishnesses’ is a term offered by the author in order draw attention to the differences and multiplicity of Kurdish sub-identities. It also denotes the fragmentation of Kurdish politics and subaltern socio-political groups in the radical plural postmodern structure of Kurdish society.

6 The AKP’s liberalisation in line with EU laws allowed Kurdish politics to be recognised in the public sphere in the late 2000s. For instance, in 2009, the ‘Kurdish initiative/opening’ project introduced as part of the democratisation of the country’s politics the first national Kurdish language TV channel, TRT 6 (Kurdi). Moreover, the historical success of the Kurdish-led HDP in the June 2015 general election became a turning point for Kurdish identity. It is created a broad line of communication between the Turkish and Kurdish societies. However, after the November 2015 snap election, the fragile peace building process came to end and the armed struggle between the state and PKK was renewed.

7 The article prefers the Mouffeian term of ‘public space’ instead of the Habermasian ‘public sphere’.

8 Fifty Kurdish intellectuals were accused with pro-Kurdish nationalism leading to their imprisonment, in 1961.

9 Newroz is the Kurdish New Year. It has come to denote more than a cultural event and now represents a political symbol of Kurdishness that makes reference to an historical heritage of the Kurdish national struggle.


11 Based on Islamic spiritual religious values and socio-cultural tribal codes.

12 The term ‘white Kurds’ here refers to a particular social group and class of Kurdish society. It addresses the Kurdish urban elites and educated people (including the politicians, civil servants, white-collar workers, artisans, sportspersons and academics) and regional bourgeoisie who are middle and upper-middle class and assimilated or integrated into Turkish culture or who have no problem in engaging with Turkish society and its state institutions. They are ‘good or disciplined Kurds’ because they have not politicised their Kurdishness and ‘voluntarily accepted Turkishness (not refer to an ethnic Turk)’, can have greater opportunities in the macro
public sphere, such as the national media, military and high-grade bureaucracy. For a relevant discussion, see, Demiralp (2012).

13 They are all pro-Kurdish parties: People’s Labour Party (HEP); People’s Democracy Party (HADEP); Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP); Democratic Society Party (DTP); Peace and Democracy Party (DBP); Democratic Regions Party (DBP).

14 The following are accused of being a legal offshoot of the PKK by the state: Democratic Society Congress (DTK), Human Rights Association (IHD), Association of Solidarity with Prisoners and Convicts and their Families (TAYAD); Mothers of victims of armed force disappearances and political murders (Saturday Mothers).

15 Women’s Centre (KAMER).

16 Tigris Social Research Centre (DİTAM).

17 Southeastern Industrialist and Businessmen Association (GÜNSIAD).

18 These are also pro-Kurdish political parties with some of them suggesting more ‘radical’ solutions (e.g. federal system, independency) to the ‘Kurdish issue’ than the PKK. However because they are not involved with armed struggle and are rivals to the PKK the state affords them a place in the public sphere. These parties are the Rights and Freedom Party (HAK-PAR), Participatory Democracy Party (KADEP), and Turkey’s Kurdistan Democrat Party (T-KDP).

19 *Ummah*: the idea of a pan-Muslim community; *tawhid*: Islam’s most fundamental concept that attributes Oneness to Allah (God); *jihad*: struggling or striving; *mustadafin*: the oppressed or weak; *sharia*: Islamic canonical law; *falah*: salvation; *ukhuwah*: brotherhood.

20 The Kurdish-led Hizbullah is seen as a paramilitary organisation from the Turkish viewpoint. However, the group could not find adequate social support to mobilise the mass of Kurds and was accused of being part of the Turkish state’s political project against the Kurdish national struggle.

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