



Extended Abstract

Creating Dependency Instead of Prosperity: A Critique of Information Society Policies in Turkey

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Introduction

In this study, unproductive consequences of neoliberal policies of information society will be explored by focusing on Turkey. These policies were concluded with failures and played an important role in losing Turkey's potential in ICTs, though they were aiming for the foundation of a prosperous society in which wealth creation by means of information processing with ICTs is essential.

In this respect, the latest information society policy paper of Turkey, entitled as *2015-2018 Information Society Strategy and Action Plan*, will be analyzed critically. The document is important from several perspectives. Firstly, it displays both a maturity and obsolescence in Turkish policy circles regarding to information society. Secondly, it offers a clear vision of the failures of neoliberal policies. Thirdly, it alleges a 'success' in developing e-government in Turkey that must be elaborated cautiously. Fourthly, it shows a break in Turkish stance given that a stress on local production capacity is gradually taking the upper hand over the free-market oriented neoliberal policies.

Theoretical connections between capitalism and information society will not be investigated because there is abundance of works in the literature. For further studies it is necessary to explore them but this study has a limited scope. To repeat them would narrow the space for the study that aims to present the consequences of information society policies in Turkey. Lastly, 'dependency', for some people, may seem to be a relic of the 20th century academia but it is still the best concept available to define an enduring injustice.

Contradiction of positions

Over the years, there have been two positions in Turkey. The one that is related with neoliberalism has become hegemonic and the other that is emphasizing local production has become marginalized. It

must be stressed that Turkey, in the 1990s, was the regional leader in founding information society due to its production and exportation capacity of digital telecommunication equipments [5].

The first policy paper related to Turkish information society was published by the World Bank in 1993. It was suggesting nothing concrete for the protection of local technology, instead underscoring privatization, deregulation and the ‘advantages’ of importation [14]. Against neoliberalism, Turkish experts, under the auspices of TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey), published two different policy papers in 1999 and 2004 [12-11]. However, their call for local technology went unanswered given that the official strategy paper accepted by the government in 2006 was prepared by a foreign firm and mentioned just some vague words on local production [3].

The latest document was prepared by Turkish officials in the Ministry of Development with the contribution of the related institutions, though they also bought the services of a foreign firm in the early preparation stages [8]. It is a comprehensive document with its insight on the consequences of previous policies. Accordingly, in spite of partial improvements, Turkey has failed to accomplish almost all its goals for information society but exceptionally has had a ‘success’ in e-government [7].

The document can also be considered as an indication of the vanishing importance of information society for Turkish policy makers. The strategy document for the period between 2010 and 2014 has never been published and there is any public explication for that. Furthermore, the document for the period between 2014 and 2018 was made public in May 2014 as a draft copy but the final copy was approved with an important delay and came into force only after March 2015 [15].

Failures of neoliberal policies

While underscoring eight axes in order to establish information society, the latest document elaborates Turkey’s progress and problems for each. These problems are essential and can be summarized as below;

- 1) **Information Technologies Sector:** *i)* Small market with insufficient spending; *ii)* Concentration on imported hardware; *iii)* Local production limited with assembling capacity; *iv)* Low market share of software and IT services; *v)* Insufficient added-value and employment.
- 2) **Broadband Infrastructure and Sector Competition:** *i)* Fixed broadband access concentrated on DSL due to low share of fiber and cable; *ii)* Lack of competition in DSL and cable access; *iii)* Rapidly increasing (but very small) share of fiber due to competition; *iv)* Domination of mobile technologies in broadband access; *v)* Expensive cost of access due to high taxation and lack of competition in fixed broadband; *vi)* Geographical differences in the quality of access.
- 3) **Qualified Human Resources and Employment:** *i)* Steady share of ICTs employment; *ii)* Quality gap between labor offer and demand.
- 4) **Penetration of ICTs into the Society:** *i)* Low diffusion and usage of ICTs; *ii)* Insufficient Turkish digital content; *iii)* Expensive prices of access and devices due to taxation; *iv)* Low ICTs awareness and skills among the people; *v)* Digital gap in terms of gender, age, handicap, income, education and residence.
- 5) **Information Security and User Confidence:** *i)* Incomplete legal regulations; *ii)* Increasing cyber crime; *iii)* Lack of coordination.

- 6) **ICTs Supported Innovative Solutions:** *ii*) Lack of guidance and standards for smart city applications; *ii*) Limited practice of smart city and smart building applications; *iii*) Low diffusion and regulation problems of telemedicine; *iv*) Limited big data applications.
- 7) **Internet Entrepreneurship and e-Commerce:** *i*) Insufficient demand for the Internet and e-commerce; *ii*) Insufficient start-up capital; *iii*) Difficulties of getting state support; *iv*) Lack of orientation and education; *v*) Obstacles in founding and closing company; *v*) Security and privacy concerns.
- 8) **User Centered and Effective Public Services:** *i*) Insufficient integration and cooperation of institutions; *ii*) Problems of service quality and participation; *iii*) Poor working conditions of ICTs experts; *iv*) Problems for sharing public data for the creation of added-value.

Alternatively the document strongly indicates, as a success, the increase in public ICTs investments, raising number of online public services and users, together with high percentage of user satisfaction.

A comparison with the strategy document of 2006, entitled as *Information Society Strategy (2006-2010)*, can be enlightening because it can be considered as the culmination of neoliberal policies. The document prioritizes seven areas, namely; *i*) Social transformation (through effective usage of ICTs by citizens); *ii*) ICTs adoption by business (especially SMEs); *iii*) Citizen-focused service transformation (through effective online public services); *iv*) Modernization in public administration (through effective e-government); *v*) A globally competitive IT sector; *vi*) Competitive, widespread and affordable telecommunications infrastructure and services; *vii*) Improvement of R&D and innovation.

Accordingly, the document of 2006 envisages an information society based on widespread diffusion and usage of ICTs by individuals and companies, creating economic and social benefits. This becomes possible by low access prices of the competitive market and the increasing awareness and education of the people. In this sense, online public services and e-government applications are considered as an effective way of mobilizing people and companies to start using ICTs. Simultaneously, as an end result, it is expected that a competitive IT industry would flourish and start exporting. Increasing the level of added-value by improving R&D is another expectation.

The document of 2006 was harshly criticized by Turkish experts for its superficiality and for its price tag of 1.2 million dollars [6-9-10]. The latest document also shows that Turkey has lost the last decade. It is not possible to claim a robust information technologies and services market. Despite all efforts, competition is not working. High taxation and prices cause people's abstinence for information technologies and services. Due to failure of education strategies, Turkish people are still unaware and deprived of necessary skills. There is also a digital divide in the country.

E-government 'success'

In the absence of local industry, it is reasonable to claim that whole e-government, created by paying billions of dollars, is built on imported hardware. This is important in a country in which trade deficit is a major threat. Moreover, the motivation for these investments was to ignite information society in which private sector is the primary actor. However, there is not a sign of a vivid information sector and Turkish information society, so far, is almost entirely composed of government initiatives. This is an embarrassment for a market oriented strategy. In these circumstances, it is not nonsense to argue that information society has become a reason of inflating public sector in an unproductive way by draining public money to make international companies richer without having proper results.

Besides, information society has been generally associated with a democratic society in which citizens would be able to participate directly to political processes [13]. Conversely, in Turkey, it is reduced to online public services, discarding all its potential in terms of emancipation. The stress on smart city applications in the latest document is another reflection of this. Additionally, it is also argued that neoliberal policies of information society are designed by dominant powers in order to maintain their hegemony [1-2]. From this perspective, it can be argued that these policies have had a success by making Turkey a loyal customer of international companies.

Increasing importance of local production

In the latest document, Turkish policy makers underscore multiple times their commitment for local production and exportation. They accentuate e-commerce and software production, together with Turkey's potential in digital games. However, the core of the strategy is FATİH project. With the project, 10.6 millions tablet computers will be distributed to students and teachers, to be renewed every four years. All schools will have access to the Internet and all classrooms will be equipped with smart boards. The project also involves the production of e-content and an update of curriculum with ICTs.

This creates an enormous market and it is stated that local production will be privileged. The document emphasizes the benefits of focusing on the production of smart devices such as tablets and smart phones due to promising future of these equipments and stiff competition in other sectors. This is supported with an interest on the development of 4G and 5G mobile devices. Besides, the exportation of digital education content is also considered as an important source of income. The project answers other concerns as well. Millions of households will have their first ICTs device with the distributions of tablet computers, eliminating the price problem. Necessary IT skills will be learned by students.

With a comprehensive project such as FATİH, the latest document offers a more concrete strategy than the others. But precious time has been wasted. It is still questionable that this latest strategy will be a success.

Conclusion

It is evident that policy papers do not reflect social reality. But they are still important source of information for social scientists. They display the thinking of policy makers. Given that this group of people have access to power, it is not easy to ignore their mind and policy papers. Even if there is a gap between social reality and policy papers, these papers have the potential to influence social reality. The results obtained from the brief analysis of the latest strategy document of Turkey must be considered within this framework.

Information technologies and services are important source of growth and employment. In the last decade, a couple of countries in Asia and Eastern Europe obtained significant development in this domain. Turkey did not make much progress, according to the latest document. After the failures of neoliberal policies, highlighting only diffusion, the document shows us the new approach of Turkish policy makers with a relatively stronger stress on local production and exportation. In contrast to previous documents, FATİH project offers real opportunities beyond wishful thinking. But as an example of the gap between social reality and policy papers, local company that signed for the production of 700 thousands tablet computers announced 100% Turkish design of their products, causing questions about the production [4].

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