

The Nationalist Movement Party's Euroscepticism: Party Ideology Meets Strategy

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This article explores what conditions or what specific issues lead to shifts in the positioning of the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) towards Turkey's European Union (EU) membership goal. The article first examines the MHP's background and characteristics and compares it with similar parties in Western Europe. Subsequently, the MHP's EU stance during 1999–2002 and in the post-2002 period is discussed. The article concludes that ideology matters for the MHP but that shifts in degrees of Euroscepticism during particular periods can be explained by strategic considerations of the MHP, which respond to the party's electoral gains or losses, its position in the party political spectrum and whether it is in government, in opposition or outside parliament.

Keywords: EU; Turkey; Euroscepticism; Ideology; Strategy; MHP; Nationalist Party

This paper focuses on the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) in Turkey and how the MHP positioned itself on the issue of the European Union (EU) during the period of 1999–2010. The aim of the paper is to seek and offer explanations for changes in the MHP's attitude towards Turkey's potential membership in the EU during the last decade. Does the MHP consistently reject membership in the EU for Turkey? If not, what conditions or what specific issues lead to shifts in the MHP's positioning towards membership? To understand the changes in MHP's responses to the EU, the paper will refer to factors identified in the established literature on political parties and European integration which have been used to explain how the European issue is politicised by political parties. Therefore, the paper will first review the existing literature on political parties and European integration. After a cursory assessment of the MHP's background and the characteristics that make it comparable to extreme-right parties in Europe, the paper will identify and discuss

the MHP's experience as a coalition partner during 1999–2002 and how the MHP has changed its views on the EU in the post-2002 period. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the relevance of the existing literature on political parties and European integration for the case of the MHP in Turkey.

Political Parties and the EU

Research on political parties and European integration concentrates on how political parties have positioned themselves towards the EU and whether and how party opinions on Europe can be explained. Three different streams can be identified. The first group focuses on Euroscepticism, which in general analyses the range of negative attitudes towards the EU (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2000; Taggart 1998). In this literature, it has been argued that the political mainstream produces more moderate views on European integration, whereas Euroscepticism has been employed by political parties on the fringes of the party system: the extreme right or extreme left. Within Euroscepticism, two types are differentiated: economic and cultural opposition to integration. Parties oppose European integration in order to defend national sovereignty and national community and/or reject the European project on the basis of its neoliberal character, which undermines the national welfare state (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002; Marks & Wilson 2000). The main hypothesis is that extremist parties on the right draw on feelings of cultural insecurity to reject further integration and to shield national sovereignty from EU intervention or domination (de Vries & Edwards 2009). Scholars in this field distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2000; Taggart 1998). Hard Euroscepticism is the 'outright rejection of the entire European project and EU membership'. Soft Euroscepticism is 'qualified and contingent opposition, which does not imply the rejection of membership itself'.

A second group of scholars maintains that views on European integration are based on cleavages (originally Lipset and Rokkan [1967]) or rooted in ideology – left/right or 'new politics' (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002; Kopecky & Mudde 2002; Marks & Wilson 2000; Marks, Wilson & Ray 2002). It is generally agreed that the EU does not produce a new cleavage but that European integration is incorporated into already existing ideologies of party leaders, activists and constituencies.

Finally, a third group argues that, as the EU issue becomes politicised, parties act 'opportunistically', by adopting a pro- or anti- EU position in order to gain new votes (Iversen 1994; Ladrech 2002). More specifically, the claim is that ideology and interest affect a party's position on European integration in the long term but political parties may change tactics and electoral strategies in order to make the most of the 'EU issue' in the short term (Sitter 2002). Shifts in strategy are based on assumptions about voters' issue positions or public opinion, and are related to efforts to participate in government or tactics that require the display of critical opposition.

The MHP's Past and Trajectory up until 1999

In many ways, the MHP is similar to the radical right in Europe.¹ The MHP uses themes that are comparable to the ones used by the radical right in Europe. The traditional platforms of nationalism, ethnocentrism, the protection of territory and a focus on the struggle between nations can easily be detected within the MHP. The MHP promotes Turkishness and has a romantic and racist notion of Turkish history and culture with the broader understanding that all Turks share a common ancestry. The MHP's core ideology has its roots in its long-time leader Alparslan Türkeş's much cited pamphlet titled *The Nine Lights and Turkey*, which, among other things, advocates anti-Marxism and anti-communism but also underlines the MHP's belief in a parliamentary multi-party democracy (see also Landau 1982).² Hence Landau, in the 1980s, described the MHP as a 'typical best for everyone ideology with obvious emphasis on nationalism, idealism and morals in a popular vein' (Landau 1982, p. 602). During the last decade, the MHP has increasingly claimed that it has its own brand of conservatism and cultural nationalism which brings it close to the Christian Democrats in Western Europe (Öniş 2003).

The 'other' is an important issue for the extreme right, and it also plays a crucial role in the articulation of the MHP's identity (Yavuz 2002). However, some scholars suggest that the MHP's definition of the 'other' has changed over time: in the 1970s it was communism, in the 1980s it was the Kurdistan Worker's Party (Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan, PKK), in the 1990s it became political Islam and nowadays it is the EU (Arıkan 1998, p. 37). Yet, it should be noted that, unlike the MHP's other enemies, the PKK has remained more of a constant thread due to, and especially during periods of, terrorist insurgency. By and large, the MHP has portrayed the other as enemies of the state and the Turkish nation.

Compared with some of the European radical-right parties, the MHP is a rather recent phenomenon. The roots of the MHP go back to the establishment of the conservative rural Republican Farmers Nation Party (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi, CKMP) in 1948 (Arıkan 1998, p. 131). In 1965, Alparslan Türkeş, a colonel in the coup of 1960 and a former member of the ruling junta, gained control of the CKMP and during the 1969 Party Congress he changed the party's name to the Nationalist Movement Party. During the 1970s, the party, especially its youth wing the Grey Wolves, was considered a protagonist of the violent left-right struggle in Turkey. When the Turkish army seized power on 12 September 1980, the MHP was banned together with all other active political parties at the time, and many of its leading members were imprisoned. The party was re-founded in 1983 as the Conservative Party (Muhafazakar Parti, MP), then changed its name to the Nationalist Task Party (Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi, MÇP) and then back to its former name in 1992. In 1993, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu and other five deputies left the MHP and founded the Great Union Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi, BBP), an ultranationalist and Islamist splinter party. The MHP was led by its ultranationalist leader Alparslan Türkeş from 1965 until his death in 1997. In 1997, Devlet Bahçeli took over and was highly successful in

creating a new image for the MHP. He focused on creating a centrist image and downplayed ultranationalist and extremist views. Another significant change has been that, particularly under Bahçeli, the party has distanced itself from the use of violence.³ This shift represented a clear demarcation from the pre-1980 MHP, which had a legacy of extensive violent acts (for more on the nationalist rhetoric, see Bora 2003).

Similar to its European counterparts, the MHP rejects any loss of sovereignty to a centralised European bureaucracy. However, what obviously does not appear in the MHP's rhetoric is discussion of the idea of a 'nation of Europe' (which, for the far right in Europe, generally, excludes the Turks) which coexists with the focus on traditional nationalism. Another difference is that the MHP does not typically possess deploy anti-immigration rhetoric, at least not any that is comparable to its European counterparts'. In a similar vein, it cannot be seen as a single-issue party that is openly racist and xenophobic (see also Öniş 2003, p. 39). Nonetheless, it is a party that prefers hierarchical arrangements, a limitation of diversity and individual autonomy. It is also, at this point, no longer opposed to free market economics,⁴ which explains its permissive attitude towards the EU's economic criteria (see also Öniş 2003).

The MHP's nationalist outlook has always considered the party and the nationalist movement at large as aligned with and attached to the state, and this tradition has fortified a political stance whose goal has been to strengthen the state. However, this natural alliance was harmed in the aftermath of the 12 September 1980 military coup by the aggressive stance of the state against the MHP and its traditions. After the coup, the leadership of the MHP was arrested and prohibited from active politics, which eventually led to a rethinking within the MHP in terms of its attitude towards the state. In the context of its relations or attitude towards the state, another significant issue for the MHP has been the role of the state with regard to religion. While the MHP has high respect for the state and key institutions such as the military, since the post it has taken a clear position against restrictions placed on religious freedoms such as wearing a headscarf in public places. In general, the MHP's understanding of nationalism does not exclude a role for religion. As a matter of fact, the MHP has fused ethnic Turkish nationalism with Islam, although the former has always dominated the latter component to varying degrees. These features combined with the rise of the pro-Islamic vote pool explain, to a certain extent, the MHP's recent success in attracting some Islamist votes.⁵

An important issue when discussing political parties is their relative position in the political party system. Although the MHP has remained on the fringes of Turkish electoral space, it could be argued – despite dips and upheavals – that its significance has increased relatively over time. In the 1960s, the MHP's electoral vote rose gradually from 2.2 per cent in 1965 to 6.4 per cent in 1977, as it became part of the governing coalition in 1975–77 and then again briefly in 1977.⁶ In 1981, the MHP was closed down by the military regime and returned to electoral politics under Türkeş in 1987. The 1987 election had dismal results for the MHP, which received only 2.9 per cent of the vote. In 1991, it participated in the general election as a coalition with the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP), receiving a total of about 17 per cent of

electoral support. The MHP participated in the 1995 elections alone and remained below the 10 per cent threshold (which was established in the 1980 Constitution), and thus received no seats in parliament. The breakthrough for the MHP came with the 1999 election, making it evident that the ethnic nationalism of the MHP rose to a dominant role in Turkish electoral politics of the late 1990s (Çarkoğlu & Hinich 2006, p. 12).

A further critical issue is the MHP's potential as a governing partner in coalitions. The European continental party systems have bred far-right – and far-left – parties that feature a harder form of Euroscepticism. Generally, extreme-right parties in Western Europe tend to evince centrifugal electoral competition, and therefore do not have much incentive to moderate their Eurosceptic attitudes. However, the few that have had the chance of participating in government have modified their stances. For instance, the Norwegian and Danish Progress Parties and the Italian National Alliance party have all discarded some of their more extreme elements in high-profile splits over the last few years. This is in line with the argument that Eurosceptic parties are expected to modify or avoid Euroscepticism to the extent that they aspire to or actually participate in governing coalitions. Between 1999 and 2002, we observe a similar trend with the MHP while in government together with the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP) and the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, DSP). As the literature suggests, being in a governing coalition during this period mitigated and provided countervailing forces to MHP's traditional stances (see Avcı 2004).

Finally, EU support is not typical of the MHP's constituency, since the MHP voter is considered to be rather Eurosceptic (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu 2007, pp. 197–200). Traditionally, the core of MHP support is found in the central and west Anatolian provinces of Turkey. It is weakest in the southeast because MHP's nationalist line does not appeal to the ethnic Kurdish vote. In the 1990s and in the most recent election of 2007, the party made strong gains along the Mediterranean coast and moderate gains in the Aegean region. The party has also become, relatively speaking, stronger in the larger cities of the northwest region, such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

1999–2002: The MHP in Coalition Government

From 1999 to November 2002, the MHP's role became more noticeable as a coalition partner and a key actor in passing (or blocking) reforms required under the Copenhagen criteria. The MHP was in the coalition government led by Ecevit, together with the ANAP. Ecevit's DSP received 22.3 per cent of the votes in 1999, and his coalition partners the MHP and ANAP received 18.1 per cent and 13.3 per cent, respectively. On 18 March 2000, the new government announced that the three coalition partners had finally reached a compromise on the commitments Turkey would make in the context of the EU accession process. The National Programme for Adoption of the *Acquis* (NPAA) listed the short- and medium-term reforms, which required 89 new laws, amendments to 94 existing laws and a significant overhaul of Turkish politics. This occurred only after long deliberations and much struggle in

parliament. The NPAA appeared to be a joint declaration by the three coalition partners but also, in a way, was a symbol of all the difficulties the coalition partners had faced when trying to agree on sensitive issues. Many of the reforms required by the EU's Accession Partnership were either watered down or dealt with in a vague manner. Despite the commitment made in the NPAA, progress was inconsistent, particularly in some of the substantial areas such as minority rights, freedom of speech and the abolition of the death penalty. Most of the delay was due to protracted discussions concerning 'national interest'. Although nationalist tendencies existed in all three coalition parties, they tended to be more pronounced in the MHP. Consequently, the MHP acquired a critical role in the coalition when it came to EU reforms. Parties either responded to the MHP's objections or compromised despite some degree of internal protest. Frequently, the MHP's attitude led to deadlocks within the frail coalition.

The MHP did not reject EU membership totally: for instance, Bahçeli stated that 'we want to take part in this Union', yet in the same breath he also stated that 'this participation should be in compliance with the magnitude, history and potential of our country'. Moreover, he added that 'it is hard to claim that the EU administration is quite aware of Turkey's efforts and contributions to the Union so far' (Anadolu Agency, 18 June 2002).

A key issue for the MHP was Cyprus's bid to join the EU. The bid itself and its implications were considered problematic. Bahçeli believed that the EU would create a fait accompli in Cyprus because of the EU's support for the Greek and Greek Cypriot positions (Avcı 2004). Yet another important issue of contention for the MHP was the abolition of the death penalty, as this had direct implications for the Öcalan case. Abdullah Öcalan, the former leader of the PKK, was found responsible for the death of an estimated 35,000 people in the guerrilla war between 1984 and 1999. He was sentenced to death for high treason by an Ankara State Security Court after his capture in 1999, even though Turkey had maintained a moratorium on executions since 1984. The MHP and other nationalists within the Ecevit government coalition wished to retain the right to order the execution of Öcalan. In October 2001, an amendment to the Constitution abolished capital punishment except in time of war, under the imminent threat of war and for terrorist crimes. Bahçeli's view was that Turkey wanted to unite with Europe in an honourable, fair and full membership, and that in order for it to do that there should be 'no bargaining concerning Öcalan' (*Türkiye*, 1 December 1999).

MHP leaders were worried that if they accepted the lifting of the death penalty while in government as a coalition partner, it would be very harmful for the party; indeed, one of the MHP's election pledges in 1999 was that if it came to power it would ensure the execution of Öcalan (*Sabah*, 6 December 1999). This pledge explains why the MHP changed its position during the course of the discussion despite the fact that it had initially suggested that it would not oppose the abolition of the death penalty if the DSP and ANAP legislated the measure through parliament with the support of the opposition (*Turkish Daily News*, 24 May 2002).

The use of Kurdish in education and on television constituted another issue for the MHP. The problem with extending rights to the Kurdish minority had much to do with the violent struggle between the PKK and the Turkish army. Quite often, the enlarged package of 'cultural rights' is seen as rewarding terrorism or approving violence, and in that context Bahçeli called the EU's attitude concerning terrorism 'double-faced and not serious'. He argued that 'most European countries continue to embrace terrorists who are the enemies of Turkey' and that this demonstrates that Turkey is justified in its concerns (*Cumhuriyet*, 21 November 2001). Finally, the MHP opposed the proposed amendment of article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code, which bans the incitement of hatred on religious or ethnic grounds. Similarly, the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) became an intractable problem. The final issue dividing the coalition parties in the EU debate was early elections (at some point in conjunction with the EU reform package): Bahçeli wanted to call for early elections to end the political uncertainty that had grown in recent months as Ecevit's illness kept him from work while coalition members clashed over EU reforms. The debate on early elections overlapped with a final attempt to pass a number of necessary EU reforms. Parliament finally approved elections to be held on 3 November 2002, and also approved on 3 August 2002 a package (the third package) of human rights reforms that it hoped would clear the way for EU membership. This package was adopted after a marathon overnight session. It included the abolition of the death penalty in peacetime, to be replaced with life imprisonment with no possibility of parole. It also legalised broadcasting and education in languages other than Turkish, notably Kurdish. Furthermore, the package did away with penalties for criticising state institutions, including the military, eased restrictions on demonstrations and associations and allowed non-Muslim religious foundations to buy and sell real estate. The package was presented by Yılmaz's ANAP and was passed with the support of the DSP, ANAP and opposition parties, despite the opposition of the MHP. The MHP voted 'no' en bloc. The other parties – despite their various prior statements – supported the package. There were defections from all parties (government and opposition) but there was no consistent resistance to the package as a party line. In remarks made on 4 August 2002, Bahçeli stated that the MHP would appeal to the Constitutional Court in a bid to force parliament to reverse its decision regarding the death penalty and minority rights: the reason behind this was that the MHP wanted to retain the right to execute Öcalan. Furthermore, the MHP also believed that cultural and ethnic rights would lead to ethnic clashes and separatism (*Turkey Update*, 14 November 2000). The Constitutional Court eventually rejected this petition in December 2002.

The 2002 election proved to be disastrous for the MHP. The party received 8.34 per cent of the vote and remained, therefore, without parliamentary representation according to Turkish election laws, which specify a ten per cent nationwide threshold for entry into the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). This was a major loss compared with the 1999 election, when the MHP received the second-highest vote with 17.98 per cent of the national vote and was apportioned 129 representatives in the

TGNA. This meant that from 2002 (up until the next election) the MHP was no longer either in government or in parliament.

MHP in Opposition after 2002

The years 2002 and 2003 were a turning point for the MHP. The 2002 election manifesto of the MHP clearly underlined its overall commitment to the EU: 'The MHP supports Turkey's EU membership which is one of Turkey's basic political targets' (p. 91). The same manifesto explained the moderation that the MHP exhibited during the 57th government (1999–2002) as a dual strategy. It proudly pointed out accomplishments concerning the EU such as the signing of the EU Accession Partnership document. The MHP was described as making important contributions to the EU path while looking out for the national interest when accepting the National Program and passing related legal and institutional adjustments (pp. 9–10). EU membership was presented as being beyond ordinary political discussion, but an issue that required a realistic and national perspective (p. 11). At the same time, the MHP explained that due to their 'national responsibilities' they had put up a red flag when it came to topics such as the death penalty and education/publication in Kurdish. These national responsibilities, or, in other words, sensitivities, were identified in almost all of Bahçeli's speeches touching on the EU: the Cyprus issue, Greek–Turkish relations, PKK-related terrorism, issues concerning minorities in Turkey (such as the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki seminary, which has been closed since 1971), and Armenian genocide claims. These are generally issues that are perceived as a threat to national unity or identity and also continue to recur as themes in the MHP's later research and development documents (titled *Araştırma Geliştirme* [ARGE] documents) (MHP ARGE 2004; 2005a, b and c; 2006; 2009). In a similar vein, the MHP stated that it would like to reform the domestic legal system and adopt EU and international legal norms but without hurting national unity and harmony (MHP 2002, p. 74).

Nevertheless, once in opposition in 2003, Bahçeli hardened his rhetoric and began to harshly attack the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) which was now in charge of Turkish government policy towards the EU. The MHP's attacks targeted the EU and AKP simultaneously. Bahçeli viewed the AKP's behaviour towards the EU as 'submissive'. Based on a Turkish idiom, he describes the AKP's attitude as 'I'll close my eyes and get my duty done,' hinting at quiet and passive obedience.⁷ The AKP was the EU's political subcontractor and ignored the threats and dangers aimed at Turkey; in particular, the AKP was insensitive towards Cyprus and ignored threats aimed at the Lausanne Treaty.⁸ By keeping the EU project alive, the AKP sought to secure legitimacy for itself and a political future.⁹ The EU's reform packages were renamed and mocked as 'demolition packages'.¹⁰ When evaluating the AKP's attainment of a negotiation date with the EU, Bahçeli claimed that 3 October 2005 was like an empty shell. It was a date that led nowhere and had been obtained by sacrificing Cyprus.¹¹ He said that ultimately there was no final date and clear timeline

for Turkey's membership of the EU. The EU process was symbolic and only for purposes of display.¹²

Another defining moment for the MHP came at the end of 2006, with the discussions concerning the recognition of Cyprus. It reacted strongly to the EU summit and stated that 'the EU train has derailed at the Cyprus intersection'.¹³ The AKP was blamed for this and Bahçeli argued that the 'AKP government is a serious security risk for Turkey's national interests'.¹⁴ The emphasis was on Cyprus being sacrificed and Turkey being at a turning point.¹⁵ From 2006, the MHP began to describe the EU process as thwarted, relations were likened to a sickness (gangrene) and the prediction was that the inevitable breaking point was now visible on the horizon.¹⁶ Consequently, from 2007, Bahçeli ended his tradition of evaluating EU Progress Reports or EU summits that relate to Turkey.

This further hardening is reflected in the MHP's 2007 election manifesto, which described Turkey's recent past with the EU as 'a story of disappointment filled with blackmail, ultimatums, preconditions, unfair demands and pressure'. According to the MHP, Turkey was being treated as if it were handicapped and it was clear that the EU did not want Turkey as a member with equal rights. The impaired relationship no longer worked and a period of strategic thinking was required (MHP 2007, p. 119). As it happened, the 2007 election was a success for the MHP, which doubled its votes compared with 2002 to 14.3 per cent and obtained 71 seats in parliament, making it the third-largest party.

The MHP also benefited from a nationalist political environment at large in Turkish politics. There were a number of developments that fuelled nationalism in Turkey, most crucial of which were particular developments surrounding the PKK, Cyprus, the attitudes of some EU politicians towards Turkey, and US foreign policy in the Middle East. In 2004, the PKK abandoned its ceasefire of six years and PKK-related violence has escalated since, prompting anti-terrorism protests, often strongly nationalist in character. Open hostility towards Turkey's EU membership among the leadership of EU countries such as France and Germany, a general anti-Western attitude as a reaction to US foreign policy, and the perceived hypocrisy of the EU's decision to admit Cyprus after Turkey had backed the 2004 Annan Plan added to the more nationalist atmosphere (see also Öniş 2007). The rising tide of nationalism in Turkey was and is well embraced by the MHP.

Increasingly, the MHP also acted opportunistically and used a dual strategy. It has argued that Turkey is not obliged, sentenced to and/or in need of EU membership, which may come at a very high price (MHP ARGE 2009, p. 9). Most recently, the MHP's programme published after its Ninth Ordinary General Congress on 8 November 2009 gave a glimpse of the party's current view regarding foreign policy. The new program asserted that

The characteristics, grounds and framework of relations between Turkey and the EU should be redefined. Turkey's relations with the Union should neither be seen as 'fate' nor 'a problem of identity.' No matter what the result is, we are not obliged to be swept around the EU's orbit.

At the same time, the MHP also stated explicitly that it will continue to ‘support the EU–Turkey negotiations [but] only as long as the EU shall not harm the national unity and union, terror and separatism and does not harm Turkish interests in issues such as Cyprus, Greece and Armenia’ (MHP 2009). Furthermore, the MHP maintained it would not accept any option other than full membership (MHP 2009). Alternatives to the EU were not explicitly mentioned but the MHP has suggested a diversification of Turkish foreign policy by focussing more on the Turkic world, Russia and the Middle East.

Conclusion

The MHP has traditionally been critical towards European integration due to its extreme-right political position. In the party leadership’s own words, until the early 1990s it exhibited a more ‘distanced’ attitude towards the EU. During the run-up to the 1999 elections, Bahçeli focused on the move towards the political centre, which was well received by parts of the electorate and secured the success of the MHP in the elections. Once in government, the MHP argued that, since EU membership had evolved into a ‘state policy’, and symbolised for Turkey ‘much more than a simple cost–benefit analysis’, it needed to eventually consider a ‘multidimensional and cool-headed approach’ towards the EU issue.¹⁷ As a coalition partner in government between 1999 and 2002, the MHP faced many critical hurdles related to the passage of EU reforms. The MHP’s own key message was that joining the EU was in the national interest although some of the required political reforms were not, but despite these difficult issues, and while still in government in 2002, the MHP stated that it wholeheartedly supported Turkey’s EU membership. In its 2002 election manifesto, it even boldly stated that the progress on the EU front accomplished until 2002 primarily owed to the MHP’s commitment (p. 144), whereas in reality the measures involved were passed despite the MHP. To its credit, however, the MHP did not desert the coalition over the rather extensive EU reform packages. With the massive electoral loss in 2002, the MHP shifted to an openly more hostile EU stance, now calling the relationship ‘unhealthy’ and granting it only ‘conditional support’. This coincided with declining public support for the EU, rising nationalism and a general disappointment surrounding the developments around the Cyprus issue.

Between 2002 and 2010, the MHP’s EU criticism increased in dosage, scope and intensity although it still does not qualify as hard Euroscepticism, an outright rejection of European integration. In its discussions and criticisms of the EU, the MHP has primarily relied on ‘sovereignty-based Euroscepticism’ but it has never rejected the European project fully. Two different time periods can be distinguished: the period between 1999 and 2002 and the period after the electoral loss in 2002 until 2010. Between 1999 and 2002, the MHP sought to present the image of being a more open and cooperative party. But the ‘mainstreaming’ effect of being in government, ultimately, did not benefit the party. In 2002, after its coalition experience, the MHP was perceived as too nationalistic by its recently acquired more mainstream voters, and

as not delivering enough by its core ultranationalist constituencies. Therefore, the MHP quickly drew its own lessons and reverted to its ultranationalist roots, and eventually, by 2007, it was back as an opposition party in parliament. Since then, the MHP has exhibited harsh opposition to the AKP pro-EU government. It is also taking advantage of rising nationalism in the country.

The MHP clearly is a Eurosceptic party whose critical attitude is primarily defined by its ultranationalist character. The MHP's concern about so-called 'national sensitivities', and the way these issues are evaluated, is a reflection of its ideological concerns; however, this has not meant that these stances are not negotiable. In particular, the periods when the MHP shifted back and forth between a softer Euroscepticism and something closer to hard Euroscepticism can be explained by strategic considerations. These strategic considerations have responded to the MHP's electoral gains or losses, its position in the party-political spectrum and whether it is in government, in opposition or without seats in parliament. The MHP is currently the third-largest party in parliament, and should it gain further ground in future elections the party will face the dilemma of whether to play down its 'conditional' opposition stance to the EU in pursuit of more votes and office, and thereby risk the alienation of its core voters, yet again.

Notes

- [1] There is a large literature on the radical right in Europe; for an overview, see Kitschelt and McGann (1995).
- [2] The full list is nationalism, idealism, moralism, societalism, scientism, independentism, ruralism, progressivism and populism, and industrialism and technologism.
- [3] For a more recent statement, see Bahçeli (2006).
- [4] This latter comparison is to a large extent based on, and in line with, Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) description of new radical-right parties in Europe.
- [5] For an in-depth discussion on the MHP's appeal to the religious vote, see Çarkoğlu (2000) and Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000).
- [6] 1965: 2.2 per cent (11 seats); 1969: 3.0 per cent (one seat only, Türkeş himself); 1973: 3.4 per cent (3 seats) and 1977: 6.4 per cent (16 seats).
- [7] Bahçeli on the EU Reform Package, 22 March 2003, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [8] Bahçeli's evaluation of the Sixth Reform Package, 19 June 2003, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [9] Bahçeli's press conference on the EU's Turkey Report, 7 October 2004, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [10] Bahçeli on the Sixth EU Reform Package, 19 June 2003, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [11] Bahçeli on the Brussels Summit, 21 December 2004, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [12] Bahçeli's press conference on the EU's Turkey Report, 7 October 2004, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [13] Bahçeli on the EU and Turkey's bargaining process on Cyprus, 8 December 2006, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
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- [15] Bahçeli on the Decisions of the Brussels Summit, 15 December 2006, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [16] Bahçeli on the EU Progress Report, 9 November 2006, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>
- [17] Bahçeli's opening speech at the Sixth Ordinary General Congress, 5 October 2000, available online at: <http://www.mhp.org.tr>

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