

# Social Media Strategies of The European Union Bodies: A Comparison With Turkey's Experience

## Avrupa Birliği Kurumlarının Sosyal Medya Stratejileri: Türkiye Örneği ile Karşılaştırma

Fatih ÇÖMLEKÇİ<sup>1</sup>  
Galatasaray Üniversitesi  
Serhat GÜNEY<sup>2</sup>  
Galatasaray Üniversitesi

### Abstract

The aim of this research is to explain and bring forward social media strategies of the European Union bodies and compare with the Turkish experience in terms of Turkey's accession process to the EU. Social media is critical for governments and institutions regarding informing citizens and allowing youth involvement in politics. In this context, strengths and weaknesses of social media strategies (perspectives) of EU and Turkish government will be brought into question. Documents published by EU and Turkey on social media, statements of politicians and social media experts, examples of social media campaigns and quantitative data on EU social media accounts will be the main resources of this research. The main finding is that social media can enhance citizen involvement/participation in politics and improve democracy if strategies would be based on not just informing but interacting with citizens. As long as those strategies of governments/institutions include professionalism, inventiveness, and transparency.

**Keywords:** Social media, European Union, Turkey-AB relations, Institutional media strategies

### Özet

Avrupa Birliği kurumlarının sosyal medya stratejilerini Türkiye örneği ile karşılaştırmalı olarak ve Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği'ne üyelik süreci bağlamında açıklamak ve tartışmaya açmak çalışmanın temel amacıdır. Sosyal medya, vatandaşlara dönük bilgi akışı ve genç nüfusun politik süreçlere katılımı özelinde kritik bir mecra olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Avrupa Birliği kurumlarının ve Türk devletinin sosyal medya stratejilerinin (perspektifinin) güçlü ve zayıf yanları tartışmaya açılacaktır. Sosyal medya konusunda Avrupa Birliği ve Türk devlet kurumları tarafından yayınlanan dokümanlar, politikacıların ve sosyal medya yetkililerinin konu hakkındaki söylemleri, Avrupa Birliği tarafından hayata geçirilen sosyal medya kampanyalarından örnekler ve Avrupa Birliği'nin sosyal medya hesapları ile ilgili sayısal veriler araştırmanın temel kaynaklarıdır. Çalışmanın temel bulgusu ise, sosyal medya kullanımının yalnızca vatandaşları bilgilendirme ile sınırlı kalmayıp onlarla etkileşime geçmeyi ve profesyonellik, yaratıcılık ve saydamlık kavramlarını da içerdiği noktada, bu mecranın politik süreçlere toplumun katılımını artıracığı ve demokrasiyi güçlendireceği yönündedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Sosyal medya, Avrupa Birliği, Türkiye-AB ilişkileri, Kurumsal medya stratejileri

### Introduction: New Communication Technologies And Social Media

Significant developments in communication technologies which took place in the 20th century affected the social change and "improved" our daily lives. It is obvious that information and communication technologies such as radio, TV and Internet accelerated the globalization process. For Castells (2011), after the rapid expansion of Internet, digital networks have become basic parts of modern society. The main innovation Internet brought was the quick transfer of all kinds of data around the world quickly and that created an abundance of information. Also, information became easily accessible. Nowadays, social structures and operations are organized around digital information networks. Those networks have started to change the structure of the economy, politics and culture.

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Galatasaray University, Dept. of Media and Communication, fatihcomlekci@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Assoc. Prof., Galatasaray University, Faculty of Communication, hserhatguney@gmail.com

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The arrival of new forms of digital social media during the 21st century has changed the ways of communication and sharing information. (Unwin, 2012).

Social media is the term used for online technologies and practices to share content, opinions and information, promote discussion and build relationships. ("Social Media Guideline," 2016). It allows the several communication formats like text, picture, audio and video. Social media is the general term for information and communication technologies used for sharing information, ideas and opinions, mostly through connection with other individuals and groups. Scholars stressing the inherent democratizing and empowering function of the Internet and social media also stress its openness, transparency and ease of access. (Chalmers, 2015) In a democracy, social media can be used as a tool by governments and institutions to involve citizens in the decision-making process. (Davies, 2014) Thanks to the rapid growth of social media, there has been an evolution of old notions "broadcasting information" to "contributing and interacting". Social media (web-based and mobile) turned communication into an interactive dialogue which can take many different forms including forums, the Web '2.0' based websites, blogs (personal blogs or journals), micro-blogging (like Twitter), wikis, videos, podcasts, photographs, and pictures. (Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Myspace...) Interactivity has been the main characteristic of new media which mean powerful user engagement with media output, individualized media use and greater user choice. (Lister, 2009) Social media technologies engendered radically new ways of interacting. (Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith, 2010)

Social media is used by individuals to get information and interact people and by business to make a profit via advertisement/campaigning. Moreover, after the popularization of social networks, governments and official institutions started to run social media accounts to create a social media presence. Governments and institutions such as the European Union are using social media, mainly in two different ways. First, they use social media to inform citizens, to communicate / interact with them and to shape and steer public in the direction of their own agenda. Social networks allow them to understand citizens' needs, wishes, and priorities and take action accordingly. Second, governments (also international institutions / organizations) are instrumentalizing social media as a diplomatic tool in order to communicate with other governments / institutions and also for better response for international crises. Especially after 2010, social media became a significant tool for the European Union and the governments to interact citizens and keep in touch with global events. As stated by Podkalicka and Shore (2010), the EU has been keen on mobilizing online technologies and social media networks.

Eventually, the aim of this study is to explain how the European Union uses social media and try to show which social media strategies European Bodies practice. Also, the study aims to show strengths and weaknesses of those strategies. And the final motive of the research is to compare the social media strategies / perspective of the European Union with the Turkey's experience. Turkey, as a candidate country for European membership, is trying to accord its policies on communication, the Internet and social media. Researching social media strategies of European Union bodies and comparing it with the social media actions of Turkish government can provide useful insights regarding Turkey's accession process. Documents published by the European Union and Turkish government on social media, statements of politicians and social media experts, examples of social media campaigns conducted by the European Union and quantitative data on EU social media accounts will be the main resources of this research.

### **Social Media Usage And Strategies of the European Union Bodies**

The Internet (web pages) have been in use in the European Union institutions as a part of communication strategy, since the mid-1990s. Use of social media is more of a recent development and first introduced by Barroso cabinet in 2004. Blogs by the commission members were the first implementation of social media and the first blogger was communication commissioner Margot Wallström. This blog received 3.3 million visits during the 2005-2009 period. These blogs made it possible for commissioners to interact with the readers and encouraged open discussion. The English language was used to make sure that they reach as many readers as possible. (Koskinen, 2013) EU Tube, a subsection of Youtube in which videos about EU were shared in three languages (English, German, French), followed the blogs. In 2009, in addition to the official website, the European Parliament created profiles on several social media sites to create a feeling of being closer to the citizens.

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(Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013) European Parliament created Facebook, Myspace and Flickr profiles in an attempt to reach citizens better, particularly first-time voters before EU Parliament elections in 2009. Since then, usage of social media among the MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) has developed and become more strategic / systematic. (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013)

Prior the rapid spread of Internet networks, European Union suffered from the low-quality and incomplete information flow regarding its activities. Spanier (2012) entitled this as EU's "communication deficit" and defined the situation as "the apparent impossibility for the EU of communicating with its citizens". With the help of the social media, they have found a way to bypass journalists and conventional media, and so to approach the public more directly. As stated by Michailidou (2008), "Internet offers a viable alternative to an offline, more conventional media-regulated communicative platform." New digital media grant the EU the opportunity to create its own discourse online and develop an Internet-communication strategy. (Kaplan, 2014) According to the 2015 stats, Internet penetration in the EU is 79,3% and this number is constantly increasing. And 73,5% of EU population use the Facebook. (Internet World Stats, 2015) So, the Internet presents many opportunities regarding European Union's integration and communication strategy. Since 2014, EU is making an effort to increase a two-way communication flow. Its declared strategy based on a switch from information-oriented to communication-oriented sort of interaction. According to the Communication Handbook for the EU Agencies (2013), the Internet and social media have huge potential for EU agencies. Internet presence provides a cost-effective way to reach EU citizens while social media gives the opportunity to engage with them.

Today's EU institutions have hundreds of different sort of social media presence comprising blogs, platforms and websites. According to Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2013), the Internet has the potential for legitimizing the European institutions. European Union is currently using nearly all of the social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Youtube, LinkedIn, Flickr, Periscope, Pinterest, Instagram, Spotify, Storify, Vimeo, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo (in China), VK.com, Foursquare, Vine, Reddit and Blogs. There are official accounts of European Union bodies on several social media platforms and also significant European Union leaders like Jean-Claude Juncker, Federica Mogherini and Donald Tusk have personal accounts which are used in the name of the European Union. Social media is a very important component of the European Union's media and communication strategy.

European Commission has an official Youtube channel called "EU Tube" which shares the videos of Parliament discussions, speeches on the important issues of EU agenda, informative expressions on EU policies and up-to-date cultural, political and economic news. EU Tube defines itself a Youtube channel that shares "*the sights and sounds of Europe*" in English, German and French. Videos are broadcasted with English subtitles to make it easy for all European Union citizens to understand and get informed. EU Tube channel has 36.303 subscribers by July 2016 and a massive 25.533.000 views so far. The interesting thing is, the videos mentioned are also shared by European Commission's Facebook account and streamed by a large number of Internet users. For instance, the speech given by Federica Mogherini (High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) on Turkey uploaded to Youtube and Facebook pages of the European Commission, on 18.07.2016. In three hours, the same video was viewed 126 times on Youtube, but 21.000 times on Facebook. This dramatic difference shows that Facebook is a more efficient way to reach people rather than Youtube. Also, Facebook provides circulation of videos by its sharing option and welcomes free discussion among Facebook users on a particular video/subject.

Also, European Parliament has a Facebook account which is quite popular. This account is followed by 2,1 million Facebook users (July 2016) and its the most successful social media initiative led by a European Union institution. (Sometimes mentioned as "the flagship of EU's social media presence.") Regular live chat with MEPs, updated news about ongoing European issues (normally twice - daily) and feeds about globally important political/social/environmental issues can be found on this social network. In addition to that, there is an MEP tab to find any member active on social media, plus a tab for EU's national information offices – for news in many different languages. Apart from that, EU Parliament Facebook page covers cultural events and shares information in order to ease daily lives of European citizens. The most interesting thing is, EU social media team posts mentioned news/updates mostly with entertaining / enjoyable and as well informative videos to attract people's attention. Their goal is to use the unique, multidimensional and innovative structure of social media mostly to reach

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youth proportion of EU population. In parallel with that, sometimes they launch a voting campaign and at the end they hand over the position "EU Parliament Facebook editorship" for one day to a young social media team. This is a symbolic practice which indicates the importance of youth participation to European democracy within the European Union. It should be considered that since the 1980s, European Union democracy is characterized by disengagement of citizens, especially the younger citizens. Decreasing turnout numbers in the elections, declining party membership, decreasing interest on critical political matters and negative opinions about politicians could be pointed out as symptoms of this reality. And now for many academicians and observers, social media encourages more active participation in political debates and more widespread participation in elections. Effective use of social media could be an instrument on overcoming the EU's democratic deficit. (Davies, 2014) For instance, during the 2009 European Parliament election, social media was intensively used by the candidates to directly communicate with the citizens, to distribute their message promptly and to gain popularity among young and first-time voters. Social media was a convenient platform for them to getting their voice heard.

Correspondingly, social media is used as a tool to mobilize the young generation to ensure that they participate and get involved with European Union issues. This can be useful in terms of building a European Union identity and common public sphere. Briefly stated, social media offers a great opportunity for European institutions to become closer to their citizens. (Delancray and Lorthiois, 2014) Social media strategy of European Union is not just based on informing people about matters, but to communicate with citizens. Enhancing interaction with citizens via social media and finding better ways (videos, graphics, humor... etc.) to communicate with young social media users are key components of this strategy.

The European Union Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly and her efforts reveal an important example of "communicating EU citizens via social media" strategy. O'Reilly, who has an active Twitter account with 15.600 followers, organized an event called "Interactive event: Your wish list for Europe" on 4 March 2014. This event is a perfect example of online-offline relation. O'Reilly asked two questions to the EU citizens:

- Which policy areas do you want the EU to focus on?
- What do you expect from those who will lead Europe for the next five years?

O'Reilly's goal was to build an interactive wish list for Europe. The meeting actually has taken place in European Parliament, Brussels. However, there was a possibility for every EU citizen to send their questions online. Citizens were able to use #EUwishlist hashtag, send their questions via mail in written or video formats. More than 300 citizens, students, interest group representatives and other attendees engaged in debate with the President of European Parliament Martin Schulz, President of European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso and O'Reilly at this event entitled "Your wish list for Europe". There was also an active social media discussion under the #EUwishlist hashtag, simultaneously ongoing with the meeting, in which more than 2000 tweets exchanged on this topic. It was possible to watch the discussion online and also the event video was uploaded to Facebook after the meeting.

Another example is "Facebook Live Chat" program which is carried on the European Parliament's Facebook page. For instance, on 14 July 2016, MEP Kathleen Van Brempt answered questions of EU citizens on "car emission" issue. Protection of the environment is a critical issue for EU and it's important to inform citizens about recent regulations. So, the chair of Parliament's inquiry committee on car emissions, Kathleen Van Brempt organized a live conversation and answered the posted questions to tell citizens about the efforts of Parliament, on making regulations for car emission stricter. This is only one example but it is useful to stress EU's efforts on social media to boost interaction with citizens and open / free discussion. Moreover, European Union Commission announced via its Facebook account that citizens can send their ideas on simplifying EU regulations and by doing that they can actually contribute to the law making process. The phrase used by Commission officers was *"We really like to hear / read your views here on Facebook. But we want more"* (European Commission Facebook Account, 03.08.2016) As seen in this case, EU is constantly making efforts to enhance interactivity and citizen involvement in social/political processes.

The European Union sees social media as a bridge between citizens and its officials / institutions. This sort of events features interactivity and multi-dimensional communication between EU and its

citizens. For the EU, posting news on social media accounts and informing citizens is still important but this doesn't reflect the exact capacity of digital networks. Social media changes the classical understanding of space and time and allows participation and open discussion, anytime and anywhere. In addition to this, mentioned social media discussion serves for the transparency motto of the European Union. EU communication and public affairs professionals can benefit social media much more by listening to the citizens and responding them better, namely by being proactive. A way of engaging with citizens and listening to them better is to include social media monitoring in EU's general social media policy. Social media monitoring can help EU to keep track what citizens, voters and competitors talking about and it can allow identifying the target audience. (Owens, 2016) This kind of social monitoring and research is essential for a successful social media strategy.

On the other hand, European Union is trying to utilize social media to prevent disinformation, which spread via social media as a part of propaganda / information war. The "EU vs. Disinformation" group on Facebook has a motto as "We reveal manipulation and disinformation in pro-Kremlin media". The group has founded in July 2016 and gained 2.941 followers so far. This is a semi-official account and run by the EU's East StratCom Task Force. The main goal of this social media project is to uncover the "incorrect" information which has been spread by Russia and also share the "correct" information on a specific issue. (for instance, pro-Kremlin media said that after Brexit, other EU members want to leave the EU too; but this group claims that support for the EU has grown since the UK voted to leave). The bottom line is, EU instrumentalizes social media as a foreign policy tool and uses it within the compass of "information war".

In a 2014 interview, David Tunney, Head of New and Social Media Networks in the Strategic Communication Division of the European External Action Service (EEAS) stressed that: "Traditional diplomacy is being transformed by social media and online communication." Nowadays, social media is often used by politicians, governments and institutions for diplomatic purposes. David Tunney adds:

"EEAS made a strategic choice to use social media as a diplomatic digital tool for external communication, dialogue and political engagement. Facebook is vital for interaction with people and for highlighting some of the work of the EEAS. Flickr is important as photo resources for people who are interested in foreign affairs and also for creating a visual identity for the EEAS. Twitter provides a fast and easy way to send out messages and react to events. Currently, we have 20 EU Ambassadors using Twitter. We are also increasingly using *Storify* as it brings together many different elements, Twitter, Facebook and online news agencies. Social media can play a powerful role in this emerging digital diplomacy by promoting the EU's core values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and international cooperation." (Hanganu, 2014)

As seen, European Union's bodies are using various social media platforms and benefiting from their distinctive advantages. In this case, EEAS utilizes social media to inform citizens about EU's foreign policies, to react important international issues and to communicate with other institutions / governments in terms of digital diplomacy efforts.

The European Union is also actively engaged with Twitter by institutional and individual (EU officers, politicians) accounts. European Commission's Twitter account is followed by 604K people and European Parliament's Twitter account is followed by 248K people. (July 2016) Twitter is seen as a tool to help enhance the transparency, accountability, participation and collaboration in addition to the conventional government service tools. (Kim, Park and Rho, 2013) European Parliament's Twitter profile and its activity are described as "up-to-minute news service in 24 languages, articles, live streamed debates and photo galleries."

European Union Commission has three priorities when it comes to using social media:

- Communication on political priorities
- Stakeholder and campaign communication
- Use of social media in staff members' own capacity

Also, it is a fact that European Union Commission authorities are encouraging their staff to communicate with the public and stakeholders via social media. For this purpose, the European Commission produced the document called "the guidelines to all staff on the use of social media" and

the European Parliament declared on its Strategic Plan of Communication 2011-2014 that parliament's presence on social media offers a valuable and cost-efficient opportunity to interact with citizens. (Roginsky, 2014). Promoting key messages through social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter which are used by journalists is another priority for EU. ("Communication Handbook for the EU Agencies", 2013) European Union citizens are spending considerable time in online platforms and the easiest / most effective way to reach them in order to provide information is social media accounts / campaigns. Online networks allow ascending citizen participation, user-generated content and free discussion about the subjects which concern the European Union public sphere. Digital media is so important for the European Union because it helps the reinforcement process of European identity. In this context, "language" preference can be a problem for EU institutions social media activity. The emerging hegemonic language policy based on English to support "European public sphere" is the main political aim. But then, this public sphere (or spheres) will be an elite construction. (Koskinen, 2013) The language itself is not merely a communication tool, but a part of power relations. To avoid that, EU institutions are making an effort to post English content, but also in German and French.

By the way, a research conducted by Karantzeni and Gouscos (2013) shows interesting findings of social media and the European Union identity / e-participation relation. If we summarize those findings:

- 1- Young European citizens are important for European integration process
- 2- E-participation projects are critical for European integration
- 3- Online social media provides plenty of useful information with respect to EU integration
- 4- European Union institutions are striving to use eParticipation methods instead of social media (mostly) but young EU citizens mostly involve EU issues primarily via social media
- 5- Therefore, EU policy makers have to focus/promote European integration goal through social media. So, EU has to adopt social media instruments in order to reach young EU citizens, in terms of democratic participation. This would also strength European identity among EU youth

According to this research and its findings, social media can promote EU projects in public areas and provide great visibility and massive participation. Especially, with social media, it is easier to reach young people and to include them into the policymaking process which is also important regarding EU society's future. Young people aged 16 – 24 in the EU-28 are more active users of social media platforms than other age groups, including posting on blogs, sharing content or sending any message via social media. (Davies, 2014) Effective use of social media by EU bodies can make EU institutions more approachable to citizens and make it available for them to participate, get involved with the policies, feel as a part of the EU public sphere and promote their interests and opinions. By this way, social media can work as a medium which closes the gap between citizens and hierarchical body of European Union.

On the other hand, Internet and social media are critical for EU with regard to economic strategies and digital single market goal. European Union bodies use Internet and social media to provide accurate information to their citizens in accordance with its communication strategy and also avail from social media to create a European Union identity. Encouraging democratic involvement through digital tools is an another aspect. But also, EU has a goal to benefit from digital networks to contribute to innovation, growth and jobs. According to the Digital Agenda for Europe 2020 (2016), Europe is planning to modernize EU rules on the digital single market to make e-commerce easier. Also, they predict to perform a strategy to improve security measures against cyberattacks. So, making online networks safer for the citizens, providing decent access to the Internet for every EU citizen and gaining favor from digital networks economically is another aspect of the issue.

### Social Media Accounts of European Union Bodies

**Table 1:** In this table most popular social media accounts of European Union bodies shown with their follower numbers and sharing frequency (July 2016 has been selected as a sample)

	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	INSTAGRAM	YOUTUBE
European Parliament	2,115,288 followers 62 shares on July 2016	249,000 followers 157 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)	41.200 followers 26 shares on July 2016	23.070 followers 22 shares on July 2016

European Commission	596,887 followers 68 shares on July 2016	607,000 followers 329 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)	27.600 followers 52 shares on July 2016	36.303 followers 34 shares on July 2016 (EU Tube)
European Council	233.202 followers 38 shares on July 2016	188,000 followers 62 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)	14.000 followers 11 shares on July 2016	---
European External Action Service (EEAS)	146.307 followers 16 shares on July 2016	147.000 followers 220 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)	2.270 followers 8 shares on July 2016	1.792 followers 20 shares on July 2016

As shown in the table, currently European Parliament's Facebook account (2.115.288 followers) and European Commission's Twitter account (611.000 followers) are the most popular social media profiles of any European institutions. It can be said that the EU institutions are more informative / explanatory on Facebook and you can see much more political statements on Twitter accounts. (Roginsky, 2014) It is clear that Facebook accounts gather more followers generally but European Institutions share content more frequently through Twitter accounts. The interesting thing is, EU institutions' sharings via social media accounts includes an image, graphic and / or video footage mostly (more than %90 percent). Sharings and tweets which include visual material gain more attraction and Retweets/Re-shares. Facebook posts by European Union institutions gets into circulation more intensely comparing to Twitter and/or Instagram posts. Also, Facebook sharings allow further discussion and more interaction. Youtube and Instagram profiles of European Union institutions follow Facebook and Twitter profiles on popularity.

### Individual Social Media Accounts of European Union Officers

**Table 2:** In this table most popular social media accounts of European Union officials shown with their follower numbers and sharing frequency (July 2016 has selected as a sample)

	FACEBOOK	TWITTER
Jean Claud Juncker (President of the EU Commission)	55.876 followers 1 share on July 2016	293.000 followers 45 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)
Federica Mogherini (High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy)	67.385 followers 14 shares on July 2016	244.000 followers 81 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)
Donald Tusk (President of European Council)	106.368 followers 24 shares on July 2016	582.000 followers (personal account) 385.000 followers (formal EU account) Total 72 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)
Martin Schulz (President of the European Parliament)	188.774 followers (personal account) 39.637 (formal EU account) 24 shares on July 2016	261.000 followers 16 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)
Emily O'Reilly (European Ombudsman)	---	15.600 followers 42 tweets on July 2016 (Retweets included)

Personal social media accounts of EU officers are very efficient because an account with a real human face / name makes easier for citizens to interact. It is clear that EU officers are using social media as much as official accounts. With the help of social media, they listen, interact and react more efficiently and so they are able to establish a more direct relation to the citizens. Also, many staff members of the European Commission and other EU bodies use social media actively with some rules to agree with: Objectivity, Impartiality, Loyalty, and Discretion.

### Turkey's Social Media Strategies within the scope of the European Union Communication

According to the 2016 statistics, 46 million Turkish citizens actively are using the Internet and the Internet penetration percent is 58%. In addition to that, 96,2% of the Internet users in Turkey use social networks and the average time spent using those social networks in a month is 10,2 hours. (OECD, 2016) It is observed in the researches that in the usage of social media people in Turkey holds the second place after USA by surpassing Brasil, England and India. (Saritaş and Aydın, 2015) Digital News Report (Dogramaci and Radcliffe, 2015) survey shows that social media is popular as a news destination for online users in urban Turkey; with the leading platform being Facebook (used to follow the news, by 69%) and Twitter by a third (33%). Other popular uses of social media include entertainment and lifestyle. It can be said that Turkey has very high Internet, mobile, and social media / platform penetration, especially specific to the youth population. Social media are seen as an effective way to involve politics, get information about the daily issues and attend discussions on important agenda items.

In Turkey, public institutions often use social media to publish press releases, activity details, photographs and videos, speeches of bureaucrats and politicians and other various statements. In addition to that, some institutions answer citizens' questions about services via social media and provide practical support. Especially local institutions use social media effectively in terms of improving services and engaging better with citizens. (OECD, 2016)

Turkey, within the scope of the European Union Communication Strategy, is trying to increase the effectiveness of the current methods and develop new mechanisms. In the wake of recent technological developments in communication, public institutions need to use social media more effectively to ensure participation. This is critical for the creation of a democracy culture and answering citizens' needs. (OECD, 2016) For instance, Uysal, Schroeder and Taylor (2012) claim that contrary to highly interactive features of social media, the Turkish government is not engaging in building relationships with its public through Twitter. Similarly, Taşkıran (2016) concludes in a recent research that Turkish ministries benefit from social media on the purpose of informing citizens rather than using interactive characteristic of social networks for building a relationship with citizens. (Taşkıran, 2016) Also, a research on social media policy in Turkish municipalities shows that a written guide for the personnel or a social media policy doesn't exist at the institutional level. (Karkin, Koseoglu, and Sobaci, 2015) However, this picture is changing day by day and the Turkish government is interacting with its citizens' a lot more.

According to the communication strategy of Turkish government (Ministry of EU Affairs), the goal has been stated as:

...reinforcing conventional methods of communication with adequate use of social media and digital technologies, since these are the fastest means for delivering information to the target audience. ("European Union Communication Strategy 2014": 12)

Also, another objective is to:

work to ensure more exposure on social media about the EU-related activities of central and local public institutions and organizations and emphasize social media activities to enhance interaction with civil society. (2014: 15-16)

In parallel, to ensure youth population's involvement in democratic political process and EU accession process, to express EU experience through social media are Turkey's other short-term goals with regard to its communication strategy. (2014:18) This is important because Turkey has a huge youth population compared to many EU countries and it's clear that young people more interested / involved with social media. (Europe's biggest youth population, 16,6% of the country aged 15-24, compared to an EU average of 11,5%) Social media is critical for Turkey in terms of the participation of youth in democratic life, which is specifically important for Turkey taking into consideration of its huge youth population. Youth involvement into policy making process is critical for a healthy democracy and digital networks promote mentioned youth participation. Social media enables people to experience participatory democracy and to access accurate information which is ignored by the other media channels. (Saritaş and Aydın, 2015) Social media has changed the traditional top-down news flow and allowed people to participate ongoing discussion.

On behalf of the Turkish government, it is critical to convey its messages and inform people through social media in order to involve huge youth population into the democratic political process. Specific to EU-Turkey accession process, it is also important to transmit information about the EU agenda, its bodies and accession process itself, through social media apparatus. With the help of social media campaigning, Turkey can gain more public support for the EU membership and in the meantime, EU can convince its public for Turkey's full membership to the EU.

The document entitled "Turkey's New European Union Strategy" (2014) which was prepared by Ministry for EU Affairs also highlight the importance of social media in terms of continuous socio-economic transformation and effective communication strategy. In this document, it is stated that conventional communication methods are not sufficient in the global age and a new communication strategy has to effectively make use of social media and digital technologies, which enable interactive access and allow personalized and organized collaboration. According to the document, primary goals of the "Communication Strategy" is to build efficient communication channels between EU and Turkey, provide accurate information on Turkey for the EU public and help to shape a more accurate perception among the EU public. Social media seems to be a key component of the mentioned communication strategy, thanks to its essence based on interactivity and connectedness.

On the other hand, for Turkey, social media can be an effective tool for internal communication and for persuading (and informing) public about the social transformation regarding EU accession process. Also, "2015-2018 Information Society Strategy and Action Plan" prepared by Ministry of Development is an important document to understand social media strategies of the Turkish government. According to this report (2015), mobile technologies are going to be most preferred technology for e-government services and it's expected that social media use in e-government services will increase. The increase in the use of social media appears in areas like public decision making, informing and advertising. (2015-2018 Information Society Strategy and Action Plan, 2015) An average Internet user in Turkey is spending 10,2 hours per month on social networks and those numbers are even higher among children and youth. So, benefiting social media networks for e-government applications, information flow from government to citizens via social media and citizens' involvement in democratic processes through digital networks is a necessity.

At this point, freedom of expression and freedom in social media usage are critical issues for Turkey. In the European Commission's Turkey report (2015), criminal cases against journalists and social media users and government's power to block the Internet without a court order stated as concerns. Also, in the 2013 Turkey report, the European Union stressed the importance of freedom of social media. It is clear that breach of personal / private information, cyber attacks, cyber bullying and social media communication of crime organizations are excluded from this freedom scope. But, apart from this, freedom of expression issue (especially on social media) is critical as part of Turkey's accession process and more importantly for the democratic life in Turkey. Securing freedom of expression on social media is vital for Turkey to strengthen its democracy. Fight against illegal / criminal organizations on social media must be separated meticulously from the right to express oneself freely. Governments can benefit social media as a tool to interact with citizens and to strengthen its democracy.

### **Conclusion**

European Union's social media strategies based on a switch from information-oriented communication to interaction-oriented communication. Social media is the cheapest, easiest and most influential way to provide such dialogue between EU and its citizens. A social media strategy doesn't require an astronomical budget but still it allows institutions to reach and interact with millions of people. So, it can be said that social media strategy is the most important part of the EU's communication strategy. Our research shows that European Union institutions and EU officers are using social media accounts frequently and within a policy based on "interaction" which is the primary characteristic / feature of social networks. EU is benefiting from individual and official accounts at the same time, and while official accounts are providing information and opening spaces for the discussions with citizens; individual accounts are giving a more real / human face to the EU and making it easier for citizens to interact with the EU bodies. In the "European Commission's vision for digital transformation" (2013) document, it is stated that:

We believe that digital communication channels can bring the EU closer to people and enable the Commission to play its role more effectively. A strong digital presence will help us be more relevant, coherent and transparent while giving the institution a more human face.

It is important and critical if this motto actualised by the institution's social media professionals. For instance, European Parliament's Facebook account uses humor sometimes to build a more sincere interaction with the citizens. Nature of social media is somehow related with entertainment also, and institutions can take advantage of this to establish better / more efficient communication with the society. This is also important for gaining popularity towards institutional social media accounts.

In this manner, Turkey should change its social media image with a non-bureaucratic and sincere approach. If we compare social media strategies of the European Union bodies with the Turkish government's efforts, it seems that government should improve social media strategies and utilize interactive features of social media. Informing citizens via social media is important but not enough if we keep in mind the innovative and connective features of social media. In this regard, Turkish public authorities and social media experts can also use humorous / entertaining content time to time, in order to grab people's attention and attract youth population. Public social media accounts can gain more followers by this way and enhance its impact on social networks. Those improvements and increased recognition can also trigger a healthy debate atmosphere between government and the citizens.

However, freedom of speech and expression are vital components of an efficient social media strategy and assurance of free debate atmosphere. Governments and official organizations have to encourage free use of social media for democratic involvement in politics and right to express oneself freely. Social media allows discussion between citizens and politicians, encourages youth participation towards politics and includes them to decision-making processes. So, social networks should be seen as an opportunity to enable free discussion and enhance democratic life. Turkey has been criticized several times by the EU on freedom of social media and improvement on this issue can accelerate accession process of Turkey to the EU. Also, this can improve democratic culture and correspondingly it would be possible to benefit from emancipatory characteristics of social networks.

In terms of citizen's wishes for engagement, participation, transparency and accessibility, social media interaction has to be a priority for EU and also for Turkey. Services for transparency / openness and engagement / participation through social media can positively affect citizen's trust in the governments and institutions. After all, social media is changing the ways of communicating, interacting and mobilizing of the citizens. In the age of digital citizenship, governments and institutions should keep pace with dynamic, innovative and inventive characteristics of social media and constitute their strategies in the direction of the needs of "digital citizens".

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