

The Psychosocial Dynamics Behind Turkey's Withdrawal from The Istanbul Convention: A Study of Cultural Values, Collective Identity, and Resistance to Global Gender Norms¹Haris Munandar , ²Rania Nabilla Putri¹[Department of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Palangka Raya, Indonesia.](https://doi.org/10.33084/ijue.v4i1.13469)²[Department of Internasional Relations, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Yogyakarta, Indonesia.](https://doi.org/10.33084/ijue.v4i1.13469)**Research Article****Citation Information:**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in March 2021 marked a striking reversal, as Turkey had been the first country to ratify this Council of Europe treaty combating violence against women in 2012, despite persistently high femicide rates nationwide. This study examines the psychosocial factors underlying Turkey's decision, focusing on the interplay between cultural values, collective identity, and resistance to global gender norms. *Method:* Employing a qualitative explanatory approach through library research, data were collected from academic literature, official documents, institutional reports, media publications, and political statements. The analysis applies Richard Snyder's Decision-Making Theory, examining internal settings (society and human environment), social structure and behaviour (common values, institutional patterns, and social processes), and external settings (other cultures and societies). *Result and Discussions:* Findings reveal that Turkey's withdrawal was predominantly driven by domestic factors, particularly Islamic teachings and traditional cultural values concerning gender roles, family honour, and patriarchal structures. The conservative public and ruling AKP party, led by President Erdoğan, shared a common value orientation perceiving the convention as threatening traditional family values and normalizing homosexuality. Anti-gender movements in Turkey, inspired by similar movements in Central and Eastern Europe, amplified these concerns. Turkey's growing de-Europeanization and frustration with EU accession processes further reinforced the rejection of externally imposed norms. This withdrawal represents a complex psychosocial phenomenon where cultural identity, religious values, collective resistance, and political calculations converged. The decision reflects broader global contestation over gender equality norms, highlighting tensions between universal human rights frameworks and locally embedded cultural-religious values. This study contributes to understanding how psychosocial dynamics shape foreign policy decisions in culturally conservative contexts.

Keywords: Istanbul Convention, Turkey, Psychosocial Dynamics, Collective Identity, Anti-Gender Movements



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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women remains one of the most persistent human rights violations worldwide. Despite significant international legal frameworks designed to protect women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by 189 countries, gender-based violence continues to affect millions of women globally. The World Health Organization reported that approximately 736 million women nearly one in three have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (Mohan, 2021). This staggering statistic underscores the urgent need for comprehensive international instruments to address violence against women.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, represents a landmark achievement in this regard. Opened for signature in May 2011, the convention establishes legally binding standards for preventing violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators. It has been signed by 45 countries and the European Union, with 34 states having ratified it as of 2021 (Niemi et

al., 2020). The convention's four pillars prevention, protection, prosecution, and coordinated policies provide a comprehensive framework for addressing gender-based violence across Europe and beyond.

Turkey's relationship with the Istanbul Convention has been paradoxical. As the host country where the convention was opened for signature, Turkey became the first nation to ratify it in March 2012, incorporating its provisions into domestic law through Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women. This move was widely celebrated as a progressive step in a country where, according to WHO data, 38% of women experience violence from their partners significantly higher than the European average of 25% (Deutsche Welle, 2021). However, in a sudden and unexpected decision on 20 March 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued Presidential Decree No. 3718, withdrawing Turkey from the convention through Official Gazette No. 31429.

This decision triggered widespread domestic protests and international condemnation. Women's rights organizations, including the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, documented at least 300 femicides in Turkey during 2020 alone, with only seven percent of the population reportedly opposing the convention (Michaelson, 2021). The timing of the withdrawal was particularly perplexing, as it occurred just days after Turkey hosted a Council of Europe delegation discussing the convention's implementation (Şeker & Sönmezocak, 2021).

The research question guiding this study is: Why did the Turkish government withdraw from the Istanbul Convention in 2021? To answer this question, this study employs Richard Snyder's Decision-Making Theory, which emphasizes the interplay between internal settings (society and human environment), social structure and behaviour (common value orientations, institutional patterns, and social processes), and external settings (other cultures and other societies) in shaping foreign policy decisions (Snyder et al., 2002). This theoretical framework is particularly well-suited for examining the psychosocial dimensions of Turkey's decision, as it allows for systematic analysis of how cultural values, collective identity, and social pressures interact to influence policy outcomes.

Previous research has examined Turkey's withdrawal from various angles, including legal analysis of the presidential decree (Eskitaşçıoğlu, 2021; Cantekin, 2021), gender politics under the AKP government (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Çagatay, 2018), and the rise of anti-gender movements in Turkey (Eslen-Ziya, 2020; Özdil Gümüş, 2021). However, limited attention has been paid to the psychosocial dynamics underlying this decision specifically, how collective identity, cultural values, and perceptions of external threats interact to produce resistance to global gender equality norms. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive psychosocial analysis of Turkey's withdrawal.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative explanatory approach, which is appropriate for investigating complex social and political phenomena where the focus is on understanding "why" and "how" certain outcomes occur (Yin, 2018). The explanatory design allows for systematic analysis of the multiple factors contributing to Turkey's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. The research procedure followed a structured, sequential process. First, the researcher identified the research problem and formulated the research question. Second, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical framework and identify relevant factors. Third, data were collected from diverse secondary sources. Fourth, data were organized and categorized according to the analytical framework derived from Snyder's Decision-Making Theory. Fifth, the data were analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and causal relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis.

Data collection was conducted through library research, utilizing secondary data sources including: (1) academic journal articles and books on the Istanbul Convention, Turkish politics, and gender equality; (2) official government documents, including the Turkish Constitution, Presidential Decree No. 9, Law No. 6284, and the Official Gazette publications; (3) institutional reports from the Council of Europe, GREVIO, the World Health Organization, and human rights organizations; (4) news media articles from both Turkish and international sources; (5) public statements and speeches by President Erdoğan and other political figures; and (6) social media content and reports from anti-gender and pro-women's rights organizations. All sources were carefully selected for relevance, credibility, and timeliness.

The data analysis employed qualitative content analysis, following the procedures outlined by Krippendorff (2018). This involved: (1) coding the collected data according to the theoretical categories derived from Snyder's framework (internal settings, social structure and behaviour, and external settings); (2) identifying patterns and themes within each category; (3) interpreting the findings in relation to the research question; and (4) synthesizing the results to produce a comprehensive explanation of Turkey's withdrawal. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. The research was limited to the period from 2011, when Turkey ratified the convention, to 2021, when the withdrawal occurred.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Internal Settings: Society and Human Environment

The analysis reveals that domestic factors played a decisive role in Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Within the category of *society*, the influence of conservative and anti-gender groups on the decision-making process was substantial. Anti-gender movements in Turkey, which gained prominence under the AKP government, actively campaigned against what they termed "genderism" the perceived imposition of gender equality and recognition of sexual diversity (Hakola et al., 2021). These groups framed the Istanbul Convention as a "Trojan Horse" that would introduce a "third gender" and normalize same-sex marriage, threatening traditional family values and Islamic principles.

The **National Family Platform**, led by Adem Cevik, collected 18,000 signatures from 3,000 NGOs demanding Turkey's withdrawal from the convention. Cevik personally met with President Erdoğan to argue that the convention undermined family integrity and posed a national security threat (Milli Gazete, 2019). Similarly, the Turkish Family Assembly, which emerged during the 2019 Feminist Night Walk protests, issued statements distributed through mosques, condemning the "terrorism of gender ideology" and demanding the cancellation of both the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284 (Hakola et al., 2021).

The anti-gender discourse in Turkey was reinforced by organized online campaigns. Five Facebook groups including "Those Who Seek Justice," "The Platform for Family and Divorced People," and "Fathers and Children Association" actively posted over 100 messages between 2017 and 2019 criticizing the convention and Law No. 6284 (Elmas et al., 2021). These groups disseminated narratives about men being unjustly expelled from their homes based on women's unsubstantiated testimony, framing this as a violation of men's rights and family cohesion.

The **human environment** dimension highlights how cultural values and demographic characteristics shaped policy preferences. Traditional Turkish culture constructs honour through concepts of *seref* (dignity, associated primarily with men), *namus* (chastity, associated with women's sexual behaviour), and *chastity* (a combination of social and sexual propriety) (Taş-Çifçi, 2020). These concepts position women as bearers of family honour, requiring them to submit to male authority and maintain sexual purity. Women who transgress these norms risk not only their own reputation but also that of their entire family. This cultural framework legitimizes patriarchal control over women's bodies and behaviour, and in extreme cases, justifies violence as a means of preserving family honour.

Conservative groups perceived the Istanbul Convention as a direct threat to this cultural order. By empowering women to assert their autonomy and seek legal protection against domestic violence, the convention was seen as encouraging women to defy male authority and disrupt the traditional family structure. As one conservative commentator stated, the convention would "make wives rebel against their husbands and place the law under women's orders, thereby destroying the family" (Özdil Gümüş, 2021). This perception created a powerful social force demanding the convention's withdrawal.

Social Structure and Behaviour: Common Values, Institutional Patterns, and Social Processes

The *major common value orientation* factor reveals the centrality of Islamic teachings and traditional values in shaping Turkish society's response to the Istanbul Convention. As a country where 99.8% of the population is Muslim, religious values profoundly influence social attitudes toward gender roles and family structures (Karaman, 2021). Despite Turkey's official secularism, Islamic interpretations of gender roles continue to permeate social life. The concept of *fitrah* the natural order established by God is invoked by conservatives to argue that men and women have inherently different roles that complement rather than compete with each other.

The AKP government, led by President Erdoğan, actively promoted this understanding through its "gender justice" framework, which replaced the term "gender equality." This framework, grounded in Islamic teachings, posits that men and women have distinct but complementary social functions, with women primarily responsible for motherhood and domestic roles (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017). Friday sermons in many cities reinforce this message, emphasizing women's duty to bear children and support their husbands (Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

The *major institutional pattern* factor demonstrates how political institutions aligned with conservative values to facilitate the withdrawal. President Erdoğan, empowered by Presidential Decree No. 9 Article 3 which grants the president authority to terminate international agreements unilaterally exercised this prerogative to withdraw from the convention (İBA & Söyler, 2019). The AKP, which holds a majority in parliament, consistently promoted policies supporting traditional family structures and pronatalist population policies. President Erdoğan's statements reveal a consistent pattern of rejecting gender equality in favour of gender complementarity: "You cannot put women and men on an equal footing; it is against nature because their natures are different" (Izadi, 2014).

The *relevant social process* factor highlights how President Erdoğan's public statements shaped public opinion and mobilized support for withdrawal. In numerous speeches, Erdoğan framed women primarily as mothers, denounced feminism, rejected LGBT rights, and warned against threats to the traditional family. In one notable address, he stated: "A woman who denies her motherhood... is only half a person and risks losing her uniqueness as a woman" (Tuysuz, 2016). These statements reinforced conservative social norms and legitimized anti-gender movements. The alignment of values between political leadership, government institutions, and conservative civil society created a feedback loop of mutual reinforcement and expectation fulfilment what Snyder et al. refer to as *adult socialization*. Conservative groups demanded action consistent with shared values, and the government responded by withdrawing from the convention, thereby solidifying its political support base ahead of the 2023 elections.

External Settings: De-Europeanization and Anti-Gender Movements

The *other cultures* factor reveals how Turkey's deteriorating relationship with the European Union and rejection of Europeanization influenced its decision to withdraw. Turkey's EU accession process, initiated in 1987, has been characterized by protracted negotiations and growing frustration. The Copenhagen Criteria, which require democratic governance, rule of law, and protection of human rights, led Turkey to adopt numerous reforms, including the ratification of CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention (Un & Arkan, 2021). However, by the mid-2010s, Turkey's enthusiasm for EU membership waned. The Gezi Park protests (2013), the 2016 coup attempt, and subsequent authoritarian consolidation under Erdoğan led to a process of de-Europeanization, where EU norms and values were increasingly framed as foreign impositions threatening Turkish sovereignty and Islamic identity (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019).

President Erdoğan explicitly framed Turkey's withdrawal as an assertion of cultural and political independence from European influence. He stated: "Instead of the Copenhagen Criteria, we will say Ankara Criteria and continue our journey" (Duvarenglish, 2020). This rhetoric framed the Istanbul Convention as an unwanted European imposition that disregarded Turkey's distinct religious and cultural values. In another speech, Erdoğan declared: "If we really need a convention like that, we can create a fairer, better, and stronger convention and call it the 'Ankara Convention'" (Duvarenglish, 2021). This discursive framing positions Turkey as a Muslim-majority nation capable of developing its own norms and standards independent of European influence.

The *other societies* factor highlights the influence of anti-gender movements in Central and Eastern Europe on Turkey's decision. Several EU member states including Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia have not ratified the Istanbul Convention, while Poland has taken steps to withdraw (Directorate of Communications, 2021). Anti-gender movements in these countries, often rooted in Catholic social teaching, share similar narratives about the convention threatening traditional family values and normalizing homosexuality (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Turkey's Directorate of Communications explicitly referenced these countries in its statement justifying the withdrawal, suggesting that Turkey was not alone in its concerns about the convention. As one Turkish scholar noted, anti-gender narratives from Eastern Europe were actively imported and adapted to the Turkish context, with pro-government journalists and conservative activists studying and replicating these discourses (Gunaydin & Asan, 2020). The Turkish Family Assembly adopted slogans similar to those used by anti-gender movements in Italy, France, and Hungary, such as "Stop the global war on the family" (Eslen-Ziya, 2020). These transnational networks of anti-gender activism provided ideological inspiration and political justification for Turkey's withdrawal, reinforcing domestic conservative narratives while lending them international credibility.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the psychosocial dynamics behind Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. Through the lens of Richard Snyder's Decision-Making Theory, the analysis reveals that Turkey's decision was shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, with domestic cultural-religious values emerging as the predominant influence.

The internal setting analysis demonstrates that conservative and anti-gender groups in Turkish society effectively mobilized against the convention, framing it as a threat to traditional family values, Islamic teachings, and patriarchal social structures. These groups found a receptive audience in a society where 99.8% of the population identifies as Muslim and where traditional concepts of honour, chastity, and gendered roles remain deeply embedded. The human environment specifically, cultural values surrounding women's honour and family integrity created fertile ground for anti-convention sentiment.

The social structure and behaviour analysis reveals the alignment between public values, political institutions, and social processes in producing the withdrawal decision. President Erdoğan and the AKP party, sharing common value orientations with conservative civil society, acted in accordance with their collective identity and electoral calculations. The president's public

statements shaped social norms and expectations, creating a feedback loop of mutual reinforcement between political leadership and conservative constituencies.

The external setting analysis highlights the role of de-Europeanization and transnational anti-gender networks in providing political justification and ideological support for the withdrawal. Turkey's deteriorating relationship with the EU, coupled with growing anti-Western populism, framed the convention as an unwanted foreign imposition. Meanwhile, anti-gender movements in Central and Eastern Europe provided templates for resistance that Turkish conservatives adapted to their own Islamic context.

In conclusion, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention represents a case study in how cultural values, collective identity, and resistance to global norms shape foreign policy decisions. The decision reflects a broader global phenomenon where universal human rights frameworks encounter resistance from locally embedded cultural-religious value systems. While Turkey has committed to continue protecting women's rights through domestic legislation, the withdrawal raises serious concerns about the future of women's rights in a country where gender-based violence remains pervasive. This study contributes to understanding the psychosocial mechanisms through which cultural identity and perceived external threats influence policy outcomes, offering insights relevant to scholars, policymakers, and advocates working on gender equality in culturally conservative contexts.

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