Traditional public opinion research does not take into account social media as an emerging data source. Even the best-designed survey includes a temporally limited and often biased sample of interviewees well below the potential of social media data collected in real time. In addition to that, traditional methods can not answer questions like “How do opinion leaders shift their rhetoric given a domestic political revelation or external shock?”, or “Is there a ripple effect of new or reversed sympathies through opinion leaders to the general public?” Social media can be used to answer such questions because it enables us to do temporal public opinion analysis by looking at the dynamics of the public opinion over time. “Identifying Policy Opinion Shapers and Trends in Turkey” (I-POST) is a collaborative cross-faculty project designed to exploit this data resource to define who is shaping political public opinion in Turkey. In fact, with more than one hundred million daily tweets, users create a barometer of political and economic sentiment that is as reliable as well reputed polls designed by Reuters, Gallup and other online services (O'Connor et al. 2010). However, the application of the Twitter data to follow trends and shifts in public opinion remains vastly under-researched. Therefore, I-POST is a timely project proposed by an interdisciplinary research team of computer scientists and social scientists with the ambition of redefining the frontier in employing social media in public opinion research. The project has the potential to put Sabancı University on the “academic map” as a center of excellence in high technology data collection and political opinion tracking research. I-POST will have a high impact in research as well as in society by capturing and reporting trends in real time. This increases the transparency of the opinion formation process and contributes to both societal and academic awareness of changes and trends in popular political rhetoric. I-POST also has a high commercial potential that, after this initial period of development and testing, could be employed by large media companies and/or political parties.

The Objectives of I-POST can be summarized as:

- Development of new technologies and methods for social media data collection and analysis to track the trends and evolution of public political opinion and contribute to innovation in public opinion research.
- Construction of a gateway for public opinion researchers as well as general public for tracking trends in public opinion on political issues. I-POST could use the Istanbul Policy Center as a forum and base of operation in that regard.
- Laying the first step towards creating a center of excellence in terms of a rich data resource and expertise in analysis tools for researchers in public policy.
- Development of a proof-of-concept prototype to show the research and commercial potential of I-POST.

Primary deliverables:

1. Two publications in peer reviewed political science journals
2. One web portal that may be hosted by the IPC including the trend tracker and discussion forum
3. One workshop with two hosted international speakers and published workshop proceedings
4. Software system for social media data collection and analysis as a proof of concept for a commercial tool.