



Turkey's EU membership and the Public Opinion

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A high-level political debate about the prospects of possible Turkish membership in the EU has been intensifying since Turkey became a candidate country in 1999. However, the state leaders might not be the ones to have the final say. Some member states have already announced they would hold a referendum and let people decide whether to let Turkey in or not. According to the latest news the authorities in Ankara will go for a popular approval of Turkish membership once the accession talks are successfully completed as well. The public opinion in both the EU as well as Turkey may thus create yet another complication in the rather rocky EU – Turkey relations.

Possible referenda outcomes in the EU

In summer 2008, a referendum draft bill concerning the accession of new countries to the EU was successfully passed in the first reading in the French Parliament. If the parliamentarians vote in favor of it in July 2009, it will come into force. However, as the French commentator Dominique Moisi explains, the referendum will only be obligatory “for accepting new EU member countries with populations over five percent of the bloc's entire size” **(1)**. Given the size of the currently known candidate and potential candidate countries, it is clearly visible that the provision is aimed against Turkey *per se*. No other country fulfills the population condition as defined by the French clause.



Throughout the history of the EU the European citizens were asked to express their opinion on the ongoing enlargement in referenda only once. It was the French citizens who were given the unique chance to prevent Denmark, the United Kingdom and Ireland from entering the EU in 1972, but the outcome of the popular vote was positive. However, this might not be the case of Turkish accession. Mr. Moisi clarifies that "for an average Frenchman, a Turk is an Arab... [and] every new riot in the suburbs involving Arabs nurtures the 'no' camp" **(2)**. Hence, if the French eventually do stand in front of a ballot box one day, they might orchestrate the first rejection of an acceding country in a popular vote ever.

Austria also announced it would hold a referenda in the case of Turkey's accession and "the chances are high that citizens would vote against it, as polls repeatedly reveal that Austria is the bloc's most Turkey-skeptic member, with disapproval ratings as high as 80 per cent" **(3)**. Big "no camps" are to be found also in other member states. According to the results from the latest Eurobarometer conducted in spring 2008, in the EU 27 bloc only 31 per cents of the respondents agree and 55 per cent disagree **(4)** with the Turkish membership in the Union, which makes Turkey the least supported country. However, it must not be forgotten that European citizens are not keen of the idea of enlargement in general. In the EU 27, out of twelve countries on a list, only three, i.e. Switzerland, Norway and Iceland, enjoyed a clear support of the respondents and one country – Ukraine a very light support **(5)**. Still this cannot serve as an excuse and the negative stance of the public towards Turkey can be by no means taken easy.



It is interesting to note that “the overall level of the support of Turkey’s membership rises to about 45% when the question is worded to remind the respondents how they would support Turkey’s membership when and if she were to satisfy all membership requirements” **(6)**. On the one hand it is a positive trend, but on the other hand the results lead us to a presumption that there is an emotional element rather than a rational one which holds people back from having a positive attitude towards Turkey. According to the 2006 Eurobarometer “a clear majority of about 60% support the view that Turkey’s cultural differences with those of EU members are so large as to impede its membership” **(7)**. Such ideas are being deepened by rather harassing statements of some of the political leaders. For example, the former President of France Valérie Giscard d’Estaing argued that “Turkey is part of another culture, another way of life and its integration would mean the end of Europe” **(8)**. The current president Nicolas Sarkozy is of the same opinion. “If Turkey were European, we would know it,” he said **(9)**. A member of the Prodi’s European Commission Franz Fischler once said: “Turkey is a *sui generis* society, far more oriental than European,” **(10)** and we could go on and on with similar examples. Even an independent government advisor and the author of the concept of national branding Simon Anholt notes that “Turkey’s brand image today in the West is in the same shape as if Atatürk had never lived” **(11)**. This needs to be changed as soon as possible. The misinformation about what kind of country Turkey really is and who the Turks really are leads not only to negative moods towards Turkey in the EU. In response to the rejection by the Europeans, negative sentiments towards the EU are stirred up among the Turks.



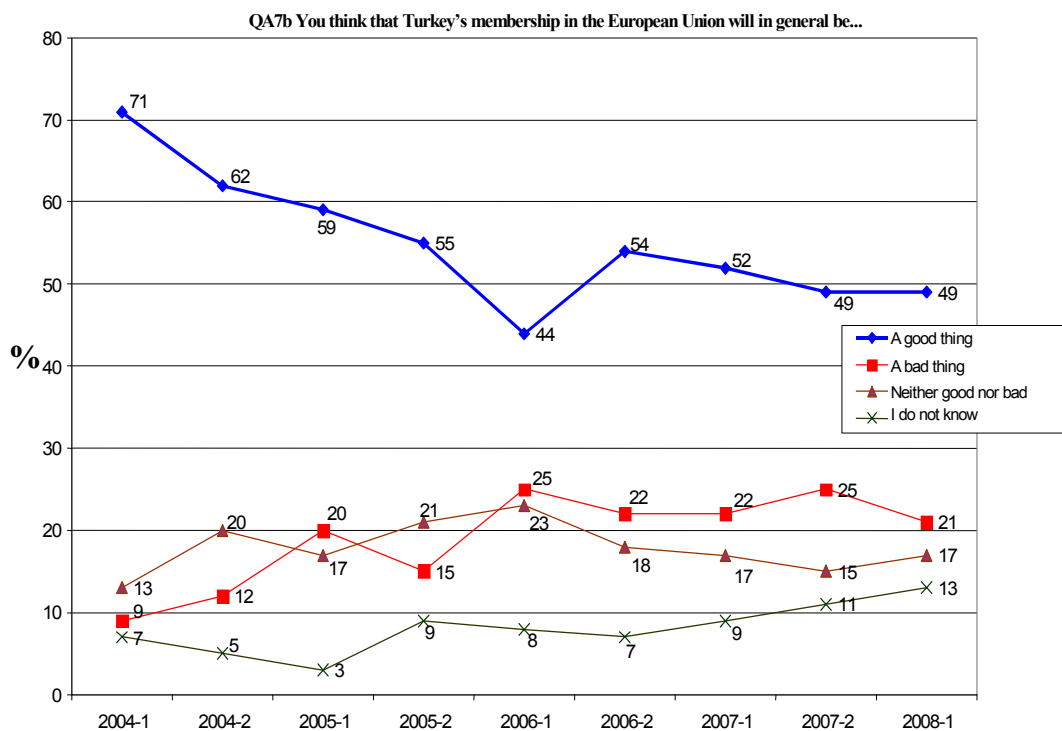
Possibility of a referendum in Turkey

In November 2008, the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan promised a referendum to the Turks: "If we succeed in the membership negotiations and reach the referendum phase, we will go to our people. I believe our people will approve it, but now it is too early to say" **(12)**. And it is too early indeed. The EU underlines that Turkey cannot become a member state before 2014 **(13)**. Surely, by that time the EU will be a different EU and Turkey will be a different Turkey. However, even though it is too early to predict the possible outcome of such a referendum, it is important to analyze whether the Turkish public opinion on EU membership has been changing in recent years and if so then why.

According to a survey, which was conducted at the end of 1990s, the support of the EU was quite high among the Turks. The numbers inform us that "those who would vote in favor of full EU membership in a referendum comprise 64% of the sample while 30% indicate they would vote against" **(14)**. It is interesting to note that such a positive stance was, apart from other things, caused by the good image of the EU in the eyes of the Turks. This was revealed by another study, which approved that "the Turkish electorate at large has very high expectations from membership and as their expectations and optimism about the possible membership grow, their tendency to support membership also grows" **(15)**. Hence, we can conclude that approximately a decade ago, the image of EU was highly positive in Turkey and so was the citizens' support of the membership. However, in recent years a U-turn has been observed.



It is quite ironic that a downturn trend in the support of the EU came hand in hand with the political breakthrough of 2005, when EU finally decided to start accession talks with Ankara. According to a study of the German Marshall Fund “the ratio of Turks who see membership in the EU as a "good thing" fell from 73 percent in 2004 to 54 percent in 2006“ **(16)**. In 2008, the support is even lower – below 50 per cent. These numbers are similar when compared to the results collected by the Eurobarometer surveys outlined in the chart below. We can see that the lowest support ever was in 2006, when only 44 per cent of the respondents thought that membership in the EU was a good thing. This indicates how sensitive the public opinion on the developments in high politics is. The year 2006 was a year when the EU decided to freeze partially the accession talks with Turkey. As we can read from the graph below, the public reacted quite radically. Moreover, also the image of the EU is not as positive as it used to be. As a consequence of that, according to a Transatlantic Trend’s survey conducted in 2007, ” the majority of Turks considered EU global leadership 'undesirable' (54%)” **(17)**. Why did the negative trend occur and why did the EU lose its good image and hence the support of the Turkish public?



Source: Eurobarometer 69, Turkey national report, p. 23.

What happened?

Eurobarometer 2008 concludes that it is hard to understand why the Turkish public's support of EU membership is low and why such a sharp downward trend occurred in recent years. "Those who think that becoming a member in the EU would be a bad thing predominantly give no specific policy reason" (18). However, it is not that difficult to figure out the answer. "Opinion-polls conducted from 2002 onwards... indicated that 45% of Turks were convinced that Europeans did not want them" (19). This belief is based on several arguments.



Turkey is a record breaker when we consider the length of Ankara's pursuit of full membership. Official relations started in 1959 when the Turkish application for associate partnership was accepted by the European Economic Community – the predecessor of the EU. Even almost half a century later, Turkey is still not a member state. The Turks surely ask: Why does it take so long? Of course, one of the reasons is that Ankara has not fulfilled all the accession conditions yet. However, while Turkey is working on having the homework done, EU is working on creating legal framework under which it will be possible to say no to Turkey when it fulfills the accession requirements. The negotiation framework for Turkey, unlike the negotiation framework for any other country, states: “[accession] negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand” **(20)**. Hence, one can conclude that EU itself wants to keep the doors open for getting out of the commitment to accept Turkey as soon as it complies with conditions laid down. However, this will probably not happen soon. The heydays of the process of the synchronization of Turkish laws with the *acquis communautaire* seem to be over. “Domestic crises over the past two years have slowed national reform... and undermined the political will needed to pursue accession negotiations... Instead of showing determined political commitment to the EU process, some top Turkish leaders have preferred to adopt an injured tone of complaint about Brussels' demands and criticism” **(21)**. Moreover, according to Hugh Pope Ankara has been rethinking the overall direction of her foreign policy recently. Some of the prominent “policy makers... declare that the country could be a self-standing regional hub that doesn't need the EU” **(22)**: However, the goal of full membership is still an officially affirmed goal.



As these things take place, the European voices proposing a weird and vague substitute for Turkey's membership in EU grow louder and louder and the Turks can hear them very well. The Turkish Secretary General for EU Affairs Mustafa Oguz Demiralp thinks that "EU leaders' habit of using Turkey's population, geography and culture as arguments for a 'privileged partnership' instead of full membership weaken the Turkish public's trust in the EU" **(23)**. It is no wonder that "only 26% of the Turks still believed that their country will actually join the EU (compared to 56% of Europeans)," **(24)** a German Marshall Fund's survey informs. Demiralp also argues that "it is more suitable to describe Turkish public opinion as "distrustful", instead of "pessimistic" towards the EU membership process" **(25)**. His opinion was approved by a study in which the Turkish citizens were asked whether the EU treated their country sincerely and fairly. More than half of the respondents, i.e. 55 per cent, said no, 29 percent said that the EU treated Turkey partially fairly and only 4 per cent thought that the EU was fair when it comes to relations with Turkey" **(26)**. As a consequence of that "trust in the EU...remains lower in Turkey (31%) than in EU Member States (50%)," **(27)** the last Eurobarometer of 2008 reveals. However, having in mind the bigger concept, these low numbers are not surprising at all.

Mehmet Bardakci argues that "the EU lost credibility with the Turkish people as an honest broker on the Cyprus issue following the referenda on the Annan Plan" **(28)**. Cyprus has been occupying a special place on the agenda of Turkish foreign policy for many years and the public is very much concerned with everything regarding Cyprus. Hence, when the EU awarded the Greek Cypriots full membership after they refused the unification of the island in referenda and when the EU consequently imposed an economic embargo on the Turkish Cypriots, who voted for unification, the image of a "fair EU" was devastated even more.



Conclusion

After Turkey successfully finishes accession negotiations, referendums are likely to be held on both sides – in the EU as well as in Turkey. Hence, the public opinion will be crucial and people will have the final say on whether Turkey will be admitted as a new member state or not, provided the EU will be willing to grant Ankara full membership and not the proposed cheap substitute, namely privileged partnership. The surveys reveal that the French and the Austrians, who might hold “enlargement referenda”, will most probably not support the idea of Turkey in EU because of “cultural differences”. However, the fear of different culture is based on misinformation. That’s why the Turks feel as if they were not wanted in the EU and react by changing their perception of the EU as well. Moreover, they are aware of Brussels getting step by step out of the commitment to integrate Turkey and grant Ankara full membership. As a consequence of that the Turks have lost trust in the EU, whose image, once praised, is now rather bad and seriously damaged also because of European policies on Cyprus.

Notes:

(1) Referendum plan for Turkey EU membership an ‘insult’: French minister, EUBusiness, June 6, 2008. <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/1212737523.38/>

(2) Turkey in the EU – What the Public Thinks, EurActiv, May 29, 2008. <http://www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/turkey-eu-public-thinks/article-171187>



(3) Austria signals referendum on Turkey's EU accession, EurActiv, August 25, 2008.
<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/austria-signals-referendum-turkey-eu-accession/article-174868>,

(4) Standard Eurobarometer 69, Values of Europeans, Questions QA44.8 – QA 44.12, European Commission, November 2008.

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_annexes.pdf

(5) Numbers retrieved from Standard Eurobarometer 69, Values of Europeans, Questions QA44.8 – QA 44.12, European Commission, November 2008.

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_annexes.pdf

(6) Standard Eurobarometer 69 Public Opinion in the European Union, National Report: Executive summary: Turkey, European Commission, Spring 2008, p. 2.

(7) Standard Eurobarometer 66, National Report: Executive Summary: Turkey, European Commission, Fall 2006, p. 4.

(8) Senem Aydin Duzgit, *Seeking Kant in the EU's relations with Turkey*, TESEV publications, Artpres, Istanbul, 2006, p. 4.

(9) Senem Aydin Duzgit, *Seeking Kant in the EU's relations with Turkey*, TESEV publications, Artpres, Istanbul, 2006, p. 4.

(10) Senem Aydin Duzgit, *Seeking Kant in the EU's relations with Turkey*, TESEV publications, Artpres, Istanbul, 2006, p. 5.

(11) Anholt in Katinka Barysch, What Europeans think about Turkey and why. Center for European Reform, briefing note, August 2007.



http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/briefing_kb_turkey_24aug07.pdf

(12) Turkey to hold referendum on completion of EU accession process, Hurriyet Daily News, November 26, 2008.

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10447760.asp>

(13) For full reference see: <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/e50015.htm>

(14) Ali Carkoglu, *Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU membership* in Turkey and EU, EBSCO Publishing, 2003. p. 173.

<https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/290/1/stvkaf01974.pdf>

(15) Ali Carkoglu, *Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU membership* in Turkey and EU, EBSCO Publishing, 2003. p. 186.

<https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/290/1/stvkaf01974.pdf>

(16) <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/393.php?lb=brme&pnt=393&nid=&id>

(17) Turkey in the EU – What the Public Thinks, Euractiv, May 29, 2008.

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/turkey-eu-public-thinks/article-171187>

(18) Standard Eurobarometer 69 Public Opinion in the European Union, National Report: Executive summary: Turkey, European Commission, Spring 2008, p. 2.

(19) Claire Visier, *Euro-scepticism in Turkey: European Ambiguity Fuels Nationalism*, Centre de Recherche sur l'Action Publique en Europe, University of Rennes, 2006, p. 46.

(20) General Affairs and External Relations Council, *Negotiating Framework for Turkey*,

Luxembourg, 3 October 2005, par. 2.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/st20002_05_TR_framedoc_en.pdf



(21) Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or cooperation? International Crisis Group. Middle East Report N°81 – 13 November 2008.

http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east_north_africa/iraq_iran_gulf/81_turkey_and_iraqi_kurds_conflict_or_cooperation.pdf

(22) Hugh Pope, *Time for EU-Turkey' Urgency'*, The Wall Street Journal, December 15, 2008.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122937745810108233.html>

(23) Interview: Turks increasingly 'distrustful' of EU membership process, Euractiv, November 1, 1007.

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/interview-turks-increasingly-distrustful-eu-membership-process/article-168062>

(24) Turkey in the EU – What the Public Thinks, Euractiv, May 29, 2008.

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/turkey-eu-public-thinks/article-171187>

(25) Demiralp: 'Turks increasingly distrustful of EU membership process', Euractive, October 31, 2007.

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/demiralp-turks-increasingly-distrustful-eu-membership-process/article-168061>

(26) Numbers were retrieved from: *Turkish European Union Perception Survey*, International Strategic Research Organisation: ISRO/USAK, Ankara, December 2004, p. 3.

<http://www.turkishweekly.net/survey-eups.pdf>

(27) Standard Eurobarometer 69 Public Opinion in the European Union, National Report: Executive summary: Turkey, European Commission, Spring 2008, p. 2.



(28) Mehmet Bardakci: Decoding the rise of Euroskepticism in Turkey, Insight Turkey, October 2007.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7057/is_/ai_n28498526