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Turkish Public Opinion and the EU Membership: between Support and Mistrust

Özgehan Şenyuva



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Abstract

The support for EU membership is very volatile among Turkish public opinion. Over the years it has been going through different ups and downs, although it has been consistently low for the last five years. This paper analyzes the changes in the Turkish public's support level to the EU membership and links them to the developments in Turkey-EU relations. The paper also demonstrates that two other major indicators are more stable indicators of Turkish public opinion and the EU: the level of trust to the EU and the eventuality of Turkish membership. The paper finishes with a discussion on the interplay between political discourses and the public opinion in Turkey and how the lack of trust is being utilized for political gains.

Özet

Türkiye kamuoyunun Avrupa Birliği üyeliğine verdiği destek zaman içinde büyük ve sert dalgalanmalar geçirmiş ve yüksek destek düzeylerine ulaştığı kadar oldukça düşük düzeyleri de görmüştür. Son beş yıldır ise AB üyeliğine verilen destek düşük seviyelerdedir. Bu çalışma, kamuoyunda görülen bu dalgalanmaları Türkiye-AB ilişkileri kapsamında değerlendirmekte ve bu gelişmelere kamuoyunun verdiği tepkileri analiz etmektedir. Ayrıca, bu çalışmada dalgalı bir seyir seyreden AB üyeliğine verilen desteğe ek olarak iki farklı değişkeni incelemektedir. AB ve kurumlarına duyulan güven seviyesi ve Türkiye'nin bir gün üye olacağına duyulan inanç. Bu iki değişken, üyeliğe verilen destekten farklı olarak daha tutarlı bir seyir izlemekte ve son on yıldır düzenli olarak olumsuz çıkmaktadır. Çalışmanın sonunda kamuoyu ile siyaset ilişkisi tartışılmakta ve kamuoyunun genel görüşlerinin siyasetçilerin söylemlerine yansımaları incelenmektedir.



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1. Introduction

The study of the political developments and changes in Turkey and the EU member states, as well as the stalled formal relations, especially in the negotiations process, have been studied extensively in recent years. The (mostly negative in recent times) public opinion towards Turkey’s membership in the European Union, both among important member states and in Turkey has also generated interest. Most analysts speak of or at least mention the increasingly lower figures of support for Turkey’s membership in Turkey and in other European states, and often use it as an evidence to support their claims on future forms of relations. However, the explication of the relationship between these political developments and the public opinion is rather limited and overlooked.

This paper aims to take public opinion as an important focal issue, linked directly with the political drivers set forth by the FEUTURE research Work Package 2 – Political Drivers. The other papers written within the politics work package have all mention the role and the impact of the public opinion within Turkey-EU relations and its future, making it necessary to elaborate further on this focal issue. The public opinion, both in Turkey and major EU member states are crucial in analysing the political drivers from Turkey such as:

- Increased anti-EU signals by politicians and opinion leaders in Turkey
- Waning trust for EU institutions among Turkish public opinion
- Decreasing public support for Turkey’s membership in Turkey and EU MS

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Similarly, public opinion constitutes an essential dimension of the following political drivers from the EU:

- Enlargement fatigue
- Politicization of relations with Turkey in national debates and electoral contexts
- Far-right parties across Europe winning national elections and rule key EU MS
- Anti-Turkish signals by European politicians during election processes
- Waning support for Turkey's EU membership among EU public opinion as a result of political developments in Turkey

This paper it aims to investigate the dynamics and components of the public opinion in Turkey and other European countries and their potential implications for the future, based on three ideal-type future scenarios for EU-Turkey relations:

1. Conflict Scenario: Growing estrangement
2. Cooperation Scenario: Engagement without accession
3. Convergence Scenario: Turkey’s EU membership e.g. with internal differentiation.¹

¹ For a detailed presentation and discussion of the scenarios, see FEUTURE Background Paper *Turkey and the European Union: Scenarios for 2023*, by Natalie Tocci, http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/user_upload/FEUTURE_Background_Paper_final.pdf



In order to realize that, the approach the paper takes goes beyond mere statistical analysis, but rather elaborate on the possible indicators that either determine or result from the current state of public opinion statistics. In other words, this paper discusses and elaborates the available public opinion statistics, rather than making statistical analysis of its own.

This paper focuses on the public opinion in Turkey towards Turkey’s membership to the EU in specific and the reasons behind the changes in support for such membership over time.

The major relevant findings of different public opinion studies are presented, followed by a systematic discussion of these indicators. In each section, major issues that become apparent from the statistical findings are presented and their possible implications on the future of Turkey-EU relations are discussed.

The main argument of the paper is, based on its analysis; Turkish public opinion is highly volatile in its support for Turkey’s membership to the EU, displaying major fluctuations over time. The findings indicate that this volatility, which is understudied in the relevant literature, is not arbitrary and incoherent. The public opinion in Turkey is very sensitive to the political developments in Turkish European relations and responds to these developments positively or negatively. Furthermore, it is also argued that the support is more likely to remain low in the near future, except for a major concrete breakthrough in Turkey-EU relations, due to the severe erosion of trust in the European Union institutions among Turkish public opinion. Trust is a very solid and coherent indicator, which has been steadily declining in the last decade. Thus, it is concluded that Turkish public opinion, which highly mistrusts the European Union, is likely to be a major factor in a conflictual scenario, and needs to be handled carefully in any cooperation and convergence scenario.

The analysis in this paper, in line with the other papers of the FEUTURE project politics work packages, is based on the following structure:

The relevance of the major characteristics of public opinion in Turkey for Turkey-EU relationship; the time frame (whether they have an impact on the short-term –one year-, medium term –from now to 2023-, or long-term –beyond 2023-), and the probability of (whether they are very likely, likely, unlikely or very unlikely to happen) changes regarding the public opinion in Turkey.

2. Studying Turkish Public Opinion towards the EU

Use of survey data is the conventional approach when studying the public opinion on a specific issue. There is a long tradition of data collection practices on public opinion towards European integration in other European countries, enabling researchers to perform in depth and over time analysis and reveal trends and determinants.

However, in the Turkish case, as Çarkoğlu and Kentmen argue, “Although Turkey has a long and troubled relationship with the EU, there are only a few empirically informed studies analysing the determinants of Turkish public support for membership of the EU”. (Çarkoğlu & Kentmen, 2011: 365) The analysis mainly relies on the intergovernmental dimensions as well as political and economic high politics.



The low number of empirical analysis of Turkish public opinion on European integration in general and Turkey’s potential membership in particular is a direct result of the lack of systematic, scientific data collection in Turkey. The systematic data collection based on scientific principles that would allow reliable data analysis is rather new, starting only at the beginning of the 2000s. (Şenyuva, 2006) The available data before 2000 are the results of sporadic research conducted by different institutions or individual researchers, ruling out over-time analysis, and pose serious reliability and validity questions.

Turkey was included within the Eurobarometer studies in 2001. This allowed the generation of Turkish public opinion data with strong reliability and validity. Furthermore, this data was comparable with other European public opinions and over time. Thus, we witness a rapid increase in publications on public opinion in Turkey in the second half of 2000s as a result of the availability of Eurobarometer data. Turkey was also included in other cross-national surveys such as the Transatlantic Trends Survey and PEW Global surveys, and these surveys included questions on Turkey-European Union relations.

The arrival of reliable data from international studies enabled researchers from Turkey and abroad to conduct analysis searching for determinants of support and trends overtime. In the same time, survey data produced by research teams from Turkey also became available and reliable.

A quick look at the public opinion survey data on Turkish attitudes towards the EU reveals that there is a strong relationship between the state of relations and the availability of data. The polls are affected by the controversies that surround Turkey’s membership, especially in times of severe public opinion backlash during times of divergence. The most obvious reflection is the on and off appearance of basic questions such as “Turkey’s membership would be a good thing/bad thing” or “would support Turkey’s membership or not”. At times, the decision makers tend to exclude or omit detailed questions on Turkey and membership, within Eurobarometer for instance, in order not to highlight the severe objections and reactions.

3. Ever decreasing public support in Turkey? Trends and debates

The public opinion in Turkey towards EU membership seems to be very dynamic and constantly changing. By looking at the results of different opinion polls, it is possible to identify certain major trends since 2000.

First of all, it is possible to conclude that the support for EU membership within Turkish public opinion is highly volatile and subject to extreme backlashes. For instance, according to the Transatlantic Trends Survey data, the percentage of Turkish citizens who believe that Turkey joining the EU would be a “good” thing fell from 73% in 2004 to 38% in 2010, and in 2014 bounced back up to 53%. (Transatlantic Trends Survey, 2014). This strong fluctuation is apparent in different surveys as well. As seen in Table I. the results of the PEW global attitudes and trends survey also reveal a similar trend: Turkish public opinion sways between supporting and opposing membership:



Table I. How do you feel about our country becoming a member of the EU? Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose our country becoming a member of the EU? [381]

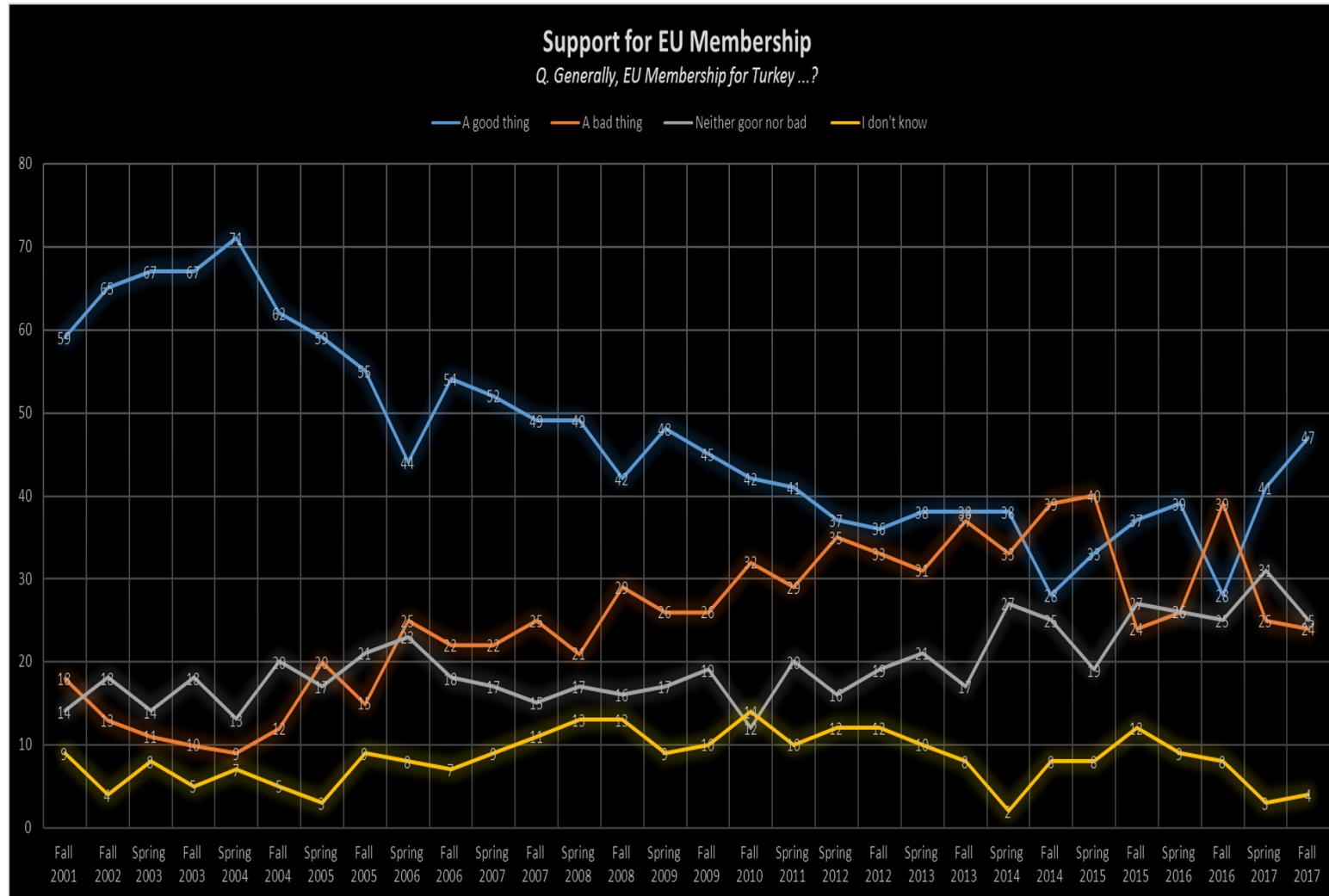
Country	Survey	Strongly favor	Favor	Op- pose	Strongly oppose	Don't know	Refused	Don't know/Re- fused
Turkey								
	Spring 2015	15	40	23	9	0	0	12
	Spring 2014	24	29	13	24	10	0	0
	Spring 2011	23	29	26	16	6	0	0
	Spring 2010	16	38	18	22	7	0	0
	Spring 2005	31	37	12	15	5	0	0

Source: Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Question Database

As mentioned earlier, the Eurobarometer by the European Commission still constitutes the longest running survey in Turkey asking specific questions on European integration and Turkey’s membership. When the results of each and every Eurobarometer survey conducted in Turkey since the country’s integration to the Eurobarometer in 2000 are analyzed, similar fluctuations appear once again, albeit with some major difference in figures with the PEW findings, mainly due to different question wording. (Chart 1). While PEW survey asks directly whether the respondent would support membership of Turkey or not, inquiring political action; Eurobarometer asked the individuals to evaluate the benefits membership, regardless of the position of the individual, inquiring assessment. These two questions refer to different interpretations from the viewpoints of the respondents; for instance, one may oppose membership for personal reasons, while acknowledging that the membership may be a good thing for the country.



Chart 1: Support for EU membership would be...? (Eurobarometer)



The waves of support and opposition are not arbitrary either. The public opinion does not happen in a vacuum. A simple chronological analysis reveals that the major spikes are very much linked with political developments in Turkey, in Europe and between Turkey and the EU. As the FEUTURE Working Paper 12 *Political Changes in Turkey and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations: From Convergence to Conflict?* demonstrates, political changes are directly influencing and shaping overall EU-Turkey relations. It is argued in this paper that political developments also have a bearing on Turkish public opinion (which in turn additionally affects the nature of EU-TR relations).

For instance, the record highs of 2004 and 2005 are very much linked with one of the most important concrete developments in Turkey-EU relations. The relations started speeding up in 2002 with a series of reform packages in Turkish parliament and the positive signals transmitted by politicians and opinion leaders both in Turkey and in other European states. The European Commission has been striking a positive tone in Turkey’s progress, which reached its apex with its recommendation to start negotiations in the Progress report published in October 2004. For the first time since the Customs Union decision of 1995, Turkish public witnessed series of positive developments and delivery of commitments. The EU summit in December 2004 decision to start the negotiations by October 2005 was the concrete proof of Turkey’s progress. The public opinion reflected these concrete developments with unprecedented levels of support for membership. Transatlantic Trends Survey revealed a support level of 74% while the Eurobarometer measured 71% in 2004. Such high support figures were never reached ever again, and in line with the Turkey-EU relations, the support has been steadily in decline ever since, with occasional positive jumps.

Such a similar shift was also observed in 2014, according to the Transatlantic Trends Survey data. The percentage of those who stated that Turkey’s membership in the EU would be a good thing increased by eight points, from 45 % to 53 %, the highest level since 2006 and also passing the 50 % threshold for the first time since that year. It is also important to note that this increase mainly comes from a shift from those who said it would be a bad thing, which dropped from 36 to 29 %, the lowest level since 2009. The Trends findings were in line with those of the June 2014 Eurobarometer, which showed those with a positive image of the EU increased from 20 % in November 2013 to 43 %, an unprecedented increase. Centre-left voters who are discouraged by the ruling party’s policies make up a large percentage of these supporters. They view a closer connection to Europe as a possible source of protection for the liberties they see their government as encroaching upon (Şenyuva, 2014: 3).

A similar relation is observed in the fall 2016 survey results, when the support plummets to 28% while the percentage of those who considers Turkey’s EU membership as a “bad thing” reaches a record 39 %. This point represents a breaking point following the failed coup attempt of July 15th 2016 and the consecutive disappointment with the EU and EU member states to properly recognize the severity of the threat to the democracy in Turkey. The support takes a positive turn and a trend of increase in the following time period. A major hypothesis that needs to be further investigated is that the positive trend is a reflection of certain groups returning to EU support camp, seeking for EU anchorage against the erosion of rights and liberties in Turkey and concerns for the rule of law under the state of emergency (For detailed discussion on the political developments in Turkey following the failed coup attempt and their negative reflections on the relations with Europe, see Göksel, Eralp and Lindgaard, 2017).



Other survey results confirm the 2017 findings of the Eurobarometer. According to the 2017 results of the annual Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy Survey of the Center for Turkish Studies (CTRS) at Kadir Has University, public support for EU membership is 48.4% (Kadir Has University, 2017).

The first set of analysis are quite revealing in several ways. First, over time analysis revealed that Turkish public opinion is highly dynamic and the support for EU membership has been fluctuating since 2001. From the timing of major ups and downs in support, it is apparent that Turkish public opinion does not operate in a vacuum and is highly responsive to the political developments related with Turkey EU relations and furthermore, relations with the major European states.

Second, as chart I shows, radical shifts between two opposite positions, good thing vs bad things are not common, and individuals rather change their positions more to other categories of Don't Know and Neither good nor bad before changing sides. These categories, however, display major drops in recent years, especially with the rupture of July 2016 failed coup. The support and opposition camps seem to be more consolidated.

While the support for membership and evaluation of membership are most commonly used and available indicators, the fluctuations in the responses and the strong impact of everyday politics necessitate the search for other potential indicators to assess the public opinion in Turkey towards the European Union.

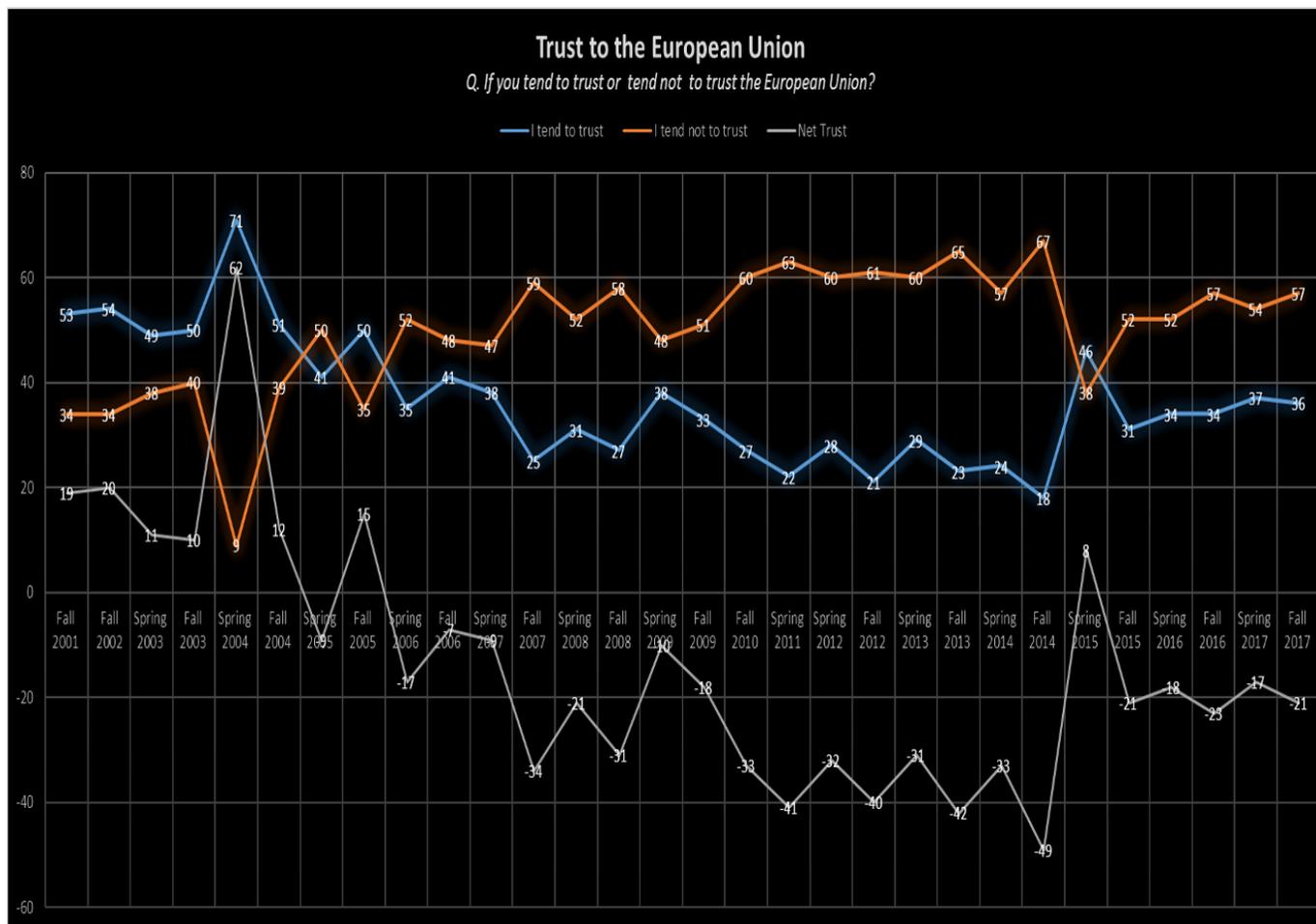
4. In search of stable indicators: Public Trust in the EU and the importance of Eventuality

While determinants of support (or objection for that matter) is a well-studied and explained dimension [see (Çarkoğlu & Kentmen, 2011), (Şenyuva, 2008)] the volatility of support is also linked with the determinants. Özge Yaka uses the Gramscian concept of ‘common sense’ in her “analysis of the complex and contradictory tendencies within the Turkish public opinion, which has oscillated between very enthusiastic support and strong alienation”. (Yaka, 2016: 149) She concludes that as a result of a series of disappointments within Turkey-EU relations (what Eralp (2009) calls the periods of divergence), combined with the antinomies of the Turkish common sense, which embodies the desire for EU membership for a better quality of life and the contradictory issues of identity conflict and major mistrust, Turkish public opinion displays desire and rejection almost simultaneously.

This argument falls in line with the arguments underlining the importance of trust in situations that involve negotiations. Analysing the Eurobarometer data for the period of 2001-2008, Şenyuva demonstrated that while the support for EU membership changes both directions over time, the level of trust for the European institutions among Turkish citizens is in a constant decline. (Şenyuva, 2009) In Chart II there is a clear trend of decline in trust among Turkish public opinion towards the EU. As shown in chart II, the net trust (those who tend to trust minus those who tend not to trust) declines from 19 points in 2001 to 49 points in 2015 (67% tend not to trust / 18% tend to trust).



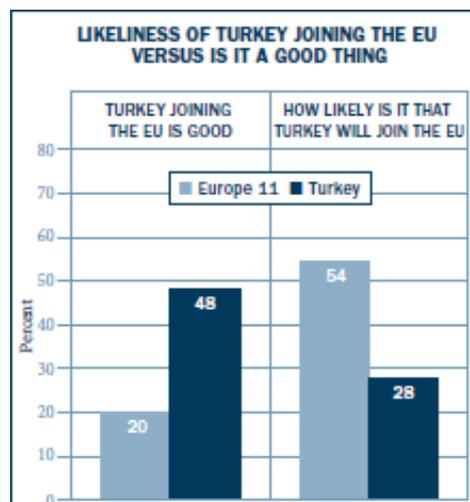
Chart 2: Trust to the European Union (Eurobarometer)



One of the main reasons that feed into the ever increasing mistrust is the question of eventuality: whether Turkey would ever be allowed to join as a full member or not. The fear of being left out is fed by the reality – witnessing how negotiations of certain chapters were blocked by some member states due to interest and/or identity calculations and the anti-Turkish membership rhetoric of certain EU member state politicians. The main message delivered by Turkish political leaders, especially the government representatives and leaders, stroke this sentiment of being left out. Underlining the deviation from legal-technical negotiations it is always argued that Turkey remains committed to the goal of full membership, but it is often treated unfairly because some Member States put their political calculations forefront and focus on their own national interests.

Both these channels feed into a severe questioning of the eventuality of Turkish membership in the public opinion, which in turn affects the levels of support. While people want to become a member, they are also wary of unfair treatment and exclusion. In the same public opinion poll by Kadir Has University, 81.3% of the respondents stated that they believe Turkey will never be admitted as a member. (Kadir Has University, 2017). This figure indicates a decline in belief that Turkey will join the EU one day, compared with earlier data. According to the 2009 Transatlantic Trends Survey, the 65% of Turkish public thought EU membership is not likely to happen. According to the same data, a particular situation was apparent: Turkish public opinion was supportive of Turkey’s membership but were skeptical about its eventuality, while the public in investigated EU member states had a fatalistic view; while they opposed Turkey’s membership, they considered that it was bound to happen whatever they think (TTS, 2009 key findings report: 25). This contrasting view from TTS findings are presented in chart III. EU 11 refers to: the U.K., France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Bulgaria and Romania.

Chart 3



In relation to the FEUTURE scenarios for the future of Turkey-EU relations, so far all dimensions of public opinion in Turkey have been focusing on convergence scenario, i.e. views and attitudes towards Turkey’s membership, and its evaluation. Data on other scenarios are very scarce and limited. The Kadir Has University survey is one the few that includes certain questions on possible forms of relations other than membership. The findings of 2017 Kadir Has study reveal that Turkish public opinion does



not have a favourable standing on cooperation with the EU outside the membership frame. When asked whether another model of relation with EU other than the membership should be established or not, a sound majority of the respondents, 70 % rejected any form of relationship besides membership. Majority of those who approve another form of cooperation, prefer cooperation based on customs union, trade and economics (70 %) and in the field of security and counter-terrorism cooperation (56 %). The fact that membership is a clear and concrete outcome which the respondents have an understanding, while other models of cooperation are abstract and unclear for many is an important factor to consider. Furthermore, another possible factor in affecting the public opinion in terms of other forms of cooperation is a psychological one, the possible sense of failure in becoming a member and having to settle with a consolation price.

5. Domestic Politics and Public Opinion in Turkey

There is a strong relation between the public opinion and the political developments in Turkey. As indicated earlier, the FEUTURE research Work Package 2 – Political Drivers elaborates a series of domestic and European drivers that are closely linked with public opinion.

Using the Eastonian conceptualization of support, Niedermayer and Westle argue that in the countries where there is no reservoir of positive achievements, specific support based on short term cost-benefit analysis of the public opinion displays volatility. (Niedermayer & Westle, 1995) This argument appears to be valid in the Turkish case. Coupled with Yaka’s application and demonstration of the antinomies within Turkish common sense, it appears that Turkish public opinion towards the EU is not a rational construct and is very susceptible to framing and priming. At this stage it is crucial to look at the political messages and cues that are delivered within Turkish political realm.

The eventuality of Turkey’s membership is often discussed within Turkish political circles. The notion of membership, relations with the EU institutions, the negotiations process and relations with other European states are often part of the political discourse. As the narrative analysis of the FEUTURE project demonstrates, the main message delivered by the political leadership, especially by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has a dual structure: criticism of the European states and the EU institutions for unfair and even hostile treatment of Turkey; while constantly underlining Turkey’s commitment for full membership. In her analysis of populist discourses towards Europe by the leading members of the government, Üstün also highlights the mixed messages of hostility and commitment sometimes within the very same speech, a few sentences apart (Üstün, 2018). The ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) is very adept in framing and priming, at using foreign policy at large very skillfully as part of domestic policy, especially the European issue as a polarizing issue. This pattern of mixed messages is not new and can be traced to the early days in power by the Justice and Development Party; swaying between pragmatism and instrumentalisation (Akşit & Şenyuva, 2016). As the surveys illustrate, these signals resonate with the public.

Since the stalling of negotiations, the politicians’ framing and priming works rather efficient for two main reasons. The first is the cost-benefit analysis by the public. While committed to the long-term goal of membership, what the public opinion witness is constantly stalling, and even regression of the



membership process and worsening of relations with some EU member states. Public is also made aware of the increasing hostility towards Turkey and Turkey’s membership in Europe through different channels, i.e. the media and the messages by the politicians. Thus, the cost-benefit analysis is deeply affected by the lack of trust and lack of belief in eventual outcome combined with desire for membership. All these factors create contrasts, contradictions and discrepancies based on material reality of no-progress in membership talks with the historic and philosophical background of membership as part of Turkey's quest for Europeanization.

The second reason may be the increasing sense of moral panic within Turkish society, at least within the majority of it. As illustrated in the discourses of different Turkish political leaders, while membership in the EU as a modernity project is a welcomed abstract goal, in reality, from time to time, the Europeans construct a potential threat to the overall interests and prosperity of Turkey. The leaders call for Turkish citizens to be aware of these dangerous Europeans, and to not confuse the quest for membership with surrender. The depiction of Europe and Europeans - but not the EU itself - as a threat to Turkish interests corresponds with the Strong and New Turkey discourse (Üstün, 2018). As Yaka also discusses, the change in EU-Turkey relations are in parallel with the change in the discourse from ‘weak Turkey needs membership in strong EU’ to ‘crisis-hit weaker EU jealous of Turkey getting stronger’ (Yaka, 2016). This rhetoric, which is often utilized by the politicians, contributes to the creation of a moral panic within the Turkish public perception.

The EU as a polarizing issue, however, creates a different fault line. The critical approach towards the EU is not reserved to the conservative, traditional and Islamists segments of the society. The lack of trust and the sense of unfairness and exclusion lies deep within all segments of society. The EU membership prospect was considered as an anchor for Turkish democracy and as leverage to promote human rights, rule of law and individual and collective liberties throughout the 1990s. However, in the last decade, the EU is suffering from a major credibility problem in the eyes of different sections of the society. For the JDP supporters, the EU is being exclusionary and untrustworthy by failing to fulfill duties and delaying realizing promised commitments. İstanbul Ekonomi Araştırma’s recent public opinion poll shows that only 36 % of the JDP supporters are in favor of EU membership. (İstanbul Ekonomi Araştırma, 2017) For some individuals it goes beyond; the EU enables and watches idly as Turkey slides further away from rule of law and liberal democracy. For most within the opposition, the EU is part of the Western establishment that has watched the JDP taking over the whole state establishment, and even enabled and encouraged it. In her article in *The American Interest*, Claire Berlinski provides a detailed critical account of the Western perspectives and accounts of Turkish democracy and the JDP rule. (Berlinski, 2017) Although Berlinski does not specify the EU particularly, many in Turkey are resentful of the Europeans. This is also reflected in the findings of the recent Dimensions of polarization in Turkey study by the Bilgi university. The survey results demonstrate while Turkey is a very polarized society at large, the EU, actually anti-EU sentiments, constitutes an island of agreement, bringing normally polarized segments together. The average of the respondents who indicate that they would vote yes in a EU membership referendum is 33 %, and the responses by party affiliation are very close, with the exception of the Kurdish based People’s Democratic Party (49%), while the support among JDP and the newly formed İYİ party are the same (30 %), the supporters of the traditionally secular and western



oriented Republican People’s Party are not very far off in their support –in this case lack of it- (39%). The lack of support for EU membership across different party voters is a reflection of the negative feelings and mistrust towards the EU, according to the same study. The researchers have looked into the Sevres syndrome, a name given to the traditional and historic mistrust towards the European states (Yılmaz; 2006). In a ranking of zero to four, where zero indicates absolutely no belief in Sevres syndrome (thus hostile intentions of the European states) and four indicates complete belief in the Sevres syndrome, all party supporters had an average score above three points, another strong evidence of anti-European sentiments being shared across party lines. The highest scores were of the supporters of Nationalist Action Party (3.6) and the newly formed IYI Party (3.7), while the supporters of Justice and Development Party (3.5) and the Republican People’s Party (3.4) were right behind. The Kurdish based People’s Democratic Party supporters also scored above three (3.1).

6. Conclusion: Public Opinion in Turkey and the Future of Turkey-EU relations

The supporters of Turkey’s membership to the European Union and those who oppose it within Turkish public opinion are a very important aspect of the future relations. The study of public opinion needs to go beyond simple score keeping of Yes and No sayers; and focus more on why there are such radical increases and decreases in the support levels. As demonstrated in this paper, while the support comes and goes in massive waves, certain other aspects keep operating in the background and reveal much more than simple yes/no scores.

It is clear that recently, Turkish public opinion has turned negative on EU itself, and this fallout goes beyond traditional fault lines within society. What is very important to keep in mind is the loss of hope and great sense of disappointment among the traditionally pro-European segments. This disappointment is a repercussion of the EU’s actual dealings with Turkey (longtime delays and setbacks in TR’s accession process etc.). Coupled with the reality of ambiguity in EU’s handling of Turkey’s membership process, Turkish politicians’ framing and priming with the purpose of riding the anti EU sentiments, exaggerating and even dramatizing issues exacerbate the situation.

The domestic political climate also worsens the already negative public opinion. While leadership cues are constantly and growingly negative, the Europe debate has become part of the domestic, internal debate. During elections in Turkey, anti-European rhetoric has been utilized widely, since it is seen as a way to increase and consolidate votes. Turkish public opinion has shown to be very susceptible to framing and priming. Populist rhetoric and public opinion feed each other; politicians frame public opinion through populist rhetoric, and then utilize anti-European sentiments among the people for their own ends.

Anti-European rhetoric has found an increasingly favourable base in Turkey, as even the traditionally EU supporters in Turkey are disappointed in the EU, since it is perceived as acting more as a pragmatist actor, rather than an actor which cherishes and upholds the values on which it was established.



This atmosphere of disappointment and mistrust, which is stroked by the influential politicians, makes public opinion in Turkey a strong determinant in the most likely scenario of conflict. However, this is a very particular situation, as the support for membership still exists and over the years has seen spikes. It may be argued that public opinion in Turkey is adopting more of a conflict scenario as a reaction to the possible failure for convergence scenario, specifically, failure of membership. European states and the EU is being held responsible for such a failure, with an erosion of trust in the EU and strong belief in unfair treatment of Turkey. Such feelings of mistrust and unfairness are also being framed and stroked by the ruling politicians in Turkey, pushing the public opinion further to a conflictual position. As Turkish public opinion turns conflictual, Turkish decision makers are presented with an opportunity to act along and push the relation to a more conflictual plane without the fear of public reaction. Similarly, such a negative and distrustful public opinion can also act as a barrier for a cooperation scenario. In a two level game between diplomacy and domestic politics, a conflictual public opinion would increase the cost of selling any cooperation at domestic level, thus potentially discouraging politicians to step up to the challenge of owning a deal short of membership.

What should be stressed is that this conflict is more likely to be directed towards Europe at large, rather than towards the EU membership in particular. But the relations with the EU and the membership issue is strongly linked with the European sentiments, and the Turkish public opinion seems to be turning further away and the distance is not only getting bigger but also the drift also seems to be getting deeper.

This drift is not irreversible, however. As the over-time data demonstrates, a relation based on concrete steps and fulfilled promises are very strongly resonated among the public. Thus, any concrete steps taken and real progress demonstrated in Turkey-EU relations, which are targeted for wider population would be very effective. Such concrete steps to re-conquer the minds and hearts of the general public, especially pro-westerners include visa-free travel and relaunching the negotiations process. However, such a policy has an inherit catch-22 situation; any such positive steps by the EU institutions would also risk to be perceived as concessions given to the government. There is already an increasing disappointment and criticisms of the European states and the EU institutions for not doing enough to address the erosion of rights and liberties in Turkey as well as the rule of law and democratic institutions.

In terms of future scenarios, the binary situation of Member / Not member also needs to be overcome and public opinion needs to be informed and be involved in cooperation scenarios. Turkey is already in an advanced form of working partnership within the EU, but the public debate is strictly limited to membership only. The major dynamics of the public opinion for future scenarios of Turkey-EU relations should be well understood and addressed. For instance, cooperation scenario, which envisages deeper engagement without membership, needs definitely to address the trust issue within the public opinion. Concrete steps and initiatives should be developed and implemented that would aim in rebuilding the trust for the European institutions.



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About the Author



Dr. Özgehan Şenyuva

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University

Özgehan Şenyuva is an Associate Professor in the International Relations Department at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, where he works extensively on public opinion, Turkey-European relations and the politics of European football. He has extensive experience in research projects, and was the principal investigator for the FREE: Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (free-project.eu), a pioneer FP7 project that was completed in 2015. He was also part of the FP7 SAHWA project (Researching Arab Mediterranean Youth: Towards a New Social Contract) (sahwa.eu), publishing numerous policy papers, reports and articles on Arab-Mediterranean Youth. He is currently one of the principal investigators of a large scale Horizon 2020 research project: FEUTURE – The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: Mapping Dynamics and Testing Scenarios (feuture.eu). His book (co-authored), *Turkish Public and Elite Perceptions on Turkey-NATO Relations* (in Turkish) was published by Bilgi University Press in 2014. Özgehan Şenyuva is also a member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers of the European Commission and the Council of Europe. He regularly contributes to the German Marshall Fund of the United States on Turkey series.



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ABOUT FEUTURE

FEUTURE sets out to explore fully different options for further EU-Turkey cooperation in the next decade, including analysis of the challenges and opportunities connected with further integration of Turkey with the EU.

To do so, FEUTURE applies a comprehensive research approach with the following three main objectives:

1. Mapping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of their underlying historical narratives and thematic key drivers.
2. Testing and substantiating the most likely scenario(s) for the future and assessing the implications (challenges and opportunities) these may have on the EU and Turkey, as well as the neighbourhood and the global scene.
3. Drawing policy recommendations for the EU and Turkey on the basis of a strong evidence-based foundation in the future trajectory of EU-Turkey relations.

FEUTURE is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wessels, Director of the Centre for Turkey and European Union Studies at the University of Cologne and Dr. Nathalie Tocci, Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

The FEUTURE consortium consists of 15 renowned universities and think tanks from the EU, Turkey and the neighbourhood.

Coordination Office at University of Cologne:

Project Director: Dr. Funda Tekin
Project and Financial Manager: Hanna-Lisa Hauge
Email: wessels@uni-koeln.de

Website: www.feuture.eu

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