

Analysis

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Summary: Turkish public opinion seems to have changed, with an increasing number of survey respondents saying that joining the EU would be a good thing. *Transatlantic Trends* has also discovered that the Turkish public has become less enthusiastic about going it alone in conducting foreign policy. Public opinion is changed by domestic and national events of the time, and it is anything but stable. Changes in the media coverage of foreign affairs and the European treatment of Muslims and Turks will have a major influence on how the Turkish public will respond to the next *Transatlantic Trends* survey. The Turkish attitudes toward the EU will become more relevant when and if any genuine progress takes place in the negotiations between the EU and Turkey.

Turkey's Views of the European Union in 2011

by Ersin Kalaycıoğlu

It was somewhat surprising to observe in the GMF *Transatlantic Trends* Survey for 2011 that Turkish public opinion seems to have changed in an important way. “This year, there was a ten-point increase in the percentage of Turks who thought Turkish membership in the EU would be a good thing (48 percent). Throughout the years, Turkish public opinion has trended downward on this topic, but this was some of the highest support for Turkish membership in the EU since 2006” (p. 38). However, based on the plethora of other Turkish data, the survey concluded that they “revealed a more Europe-friendly Turkish public in some respects, but also one that had a strong desire to work with Turkey’s Middle East neighbors” (p. 38). *Transatlantic Trends* has also discovered that the Turkish public has become less enthusiastic about going it alone in conducting foreign policy, and yet continues, again with less enthusiasm than 2010 to stick with Turkey’s southern (Middle Eastern) neighbors. At the same time, they want to pursue full membership in the EU with more hope. What explains such an increase in Europhile attitudes among the Turks?

Turkish Rapprochement to the EU?

Transatlantic Trends does not provide a clue about why 48 percent of the Turks thought it was a good thing for Turkey to become a member of the EU. While this is an upswing from the dip of 2010, if the chart on page 37 of the survey is examined more closely, the long-term trend is that a hugely positive attitude in 2004 (when 73 percent registered a positive view of EU membership of Turkey) dropped to 40 percent in 2007, increased to 48 percent in 2009, dropped to 38 percent in 2010, and then returned to 48 percent this year. The long-term trend, assuming that the samples are comparable, is that an unrealistic positive mood toward the EU at the time of the start of the full membership accession negotiations seems to have lost pace over the years and came to a standstill by the end of 2009, when only 13 out of 35 chapters could be negotiated and only the one on science and research could be temporarily closed (duly processed). When Turkey finally decided to assign a special cabinet minister as a chief negotiator in January 2009, the gesture on the part of the Turkish government breathed new life into the moribund accession negotiations. But by 2010, it became clear that even the new



chief negotiator, Egemen Bağış, was getting frustrated, as he began publicly to threaten and fume against the EU and EU member countries. The media in Turkey increased reporting in 2009 and 2010 that the accession negotiations were being blocked unfairly by French and Cypriot (Greek) vetoes. The negativism in the declarations of both the government spokespersons and of the media seemed to have made an impact on the responses given by the people to *Transatlantic Trends* in 2010.

The Turkish mood toward the EU has become more marginal and sanguine, as the Turkish economy continued to register relatively high growth rates after 2009 even as eurozone countries, especially Greece followed by Portugal and Ireland, began to show signs of economic disaster. In 2011, Turkish national elections were also won by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has built a Europhile image among the voters. In a recent article (“Public Choice and foreign Affairs: Democracy and International Relations in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 40 May 2009: 59-83), this author has shown that there is some empirical evidence that the only foreign policy issue that has any impact on the AKP’s support at the polls was the support for EU membership of Turkey. The AKP vote seems to be correlated with a pro-EU stance of the voters. It looks as if when AKP support surged to close to 50 percent, so did the attitudes toward the EU.

It is also a matter of fact that the Republican People’s Party’s (CHP) earlier Euroscepticism seems to have somewhat subsided since the change of leadership in that party from Deniz Baykal to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in 2010. The new leader, Kılıçdaroğlu, and associates are more favor-

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ably disposed toward the EU, as has been evident in their visits to EU headquarters in Brussels, contacts with the EU officials in Turkey and Europe, and their declarations in the media. The divide over the issue of EU membership between the AKP government and the CHP opposition seemed to have dwindled since 2010. Consequently, fewer voters have been hearing Eurosceptic or Europhobic messages from the main party leaders in the country in the last two years.

The overall image of the country seems to have also improved from 2010 to 2011, as the economy receives plaudits for its performance at home and abroad, and so does the image of Prime Minister Erdoğan and his party, who seem to boost public support for any issue that they stand for, whether it is the Middle East (Gaza and Palestine, Gaddafi or the Libyan Transitional National Council), the United States, or the EU. Turkey in the eyes of the Turkish voters does not seem to look poor any longer; it seems to be more respected and possess more soft power in the world. When the prime minister and other members of the government speak, the world seems to pay more attention, particularly since the 2009 Davos “one minute” incident between Erdoğan and President Peres of Israel. *Transatlantic Trends* also indicates that although the size of the country, with 75 million inhabitants, is still seen as a problem, the preponderance of Muslims in Turkey seems not to carry much weight in the assessment of entry into the EU, either in the eyes of the Turks or the Europeans. The current enriched and empowered image of the country in the eyes of its citizens seems to have improved their evaluation of the chances of Turkish entry as a full member in the EU as well.

The EU and its member states seem to be increasingly engulfed in worries about the daunting problems of slow growth, recalcitrant high unemployment, and insolvency of eurozone member countries. Enlargement seems to have dropped off the EU agenda, or at the least, lost its urgency in the EU circles, not only for Turkey but also for the more favored candidates as well. Thus, Turkish entry into the EU seems to have become not less but more probable under the circumstances in the eyes of the Turkish voters.

Conclusion

Public opinion is changed by domestic and national events of the time, and it is anything but stable. Turkish public

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opinion on foreign policy is also deeply influenced by the messages given by the government and the opposition, and by the news provided by the media. Therefore, depending on the governmental policy shifts, changes in the media coverage of foreign affairs and the European treatment of Muslims and Turks will have a major influence on how the Turkish public will respond to the next GMF *Transatlantic Trends* survey. However, it seems quite unlikely that there will be any major progress on EU-Turkey relations in the months to come, or before the EU can put its house in order and develop a new appetite for enlargement. Until then, the changing moods will continue to yield oscillating percentages of positive and negative opinions of the EU in Turkey.

The Turkish attitudes toward the EU will become more relevant when and if any genuine progress takes place in the negotiations between the EU and Turkey. Until then, although Turkish mood and opinion swings toward the EU, and NATO, the United States, and the Middle East continue to capture the international news headlines, the Turkish public will continue to approach foreign policy and international events intermittently, showing scant interest and even less understanding. Turkish political authorities will continue to decide on foreign policy matters with a huge area for maneuverability, which will be influenced rarely, if ever, by the organized or unorganized public, and have almost no accountability.

About the Author

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