

Analysis

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Summary: The recent findings on Turkey in the German Marshall Fund's annual Transatlantic Trends survey suggest that the attitudes of Turks deviate significantly from those of citizens of the United States and European Union. Such figures have led to a flurry of commentary debating whether Turkey is drifting away from the West. While there is no question that current public opinion has been shifting away from the United States and European Union, it is useful to put such figures into some kind of context before making hasty inferences about where Turkey may be headed. Most importantly, it is important to recognize that Turkish attitudes toward the EU are largely responsive, and that the government appears more capable of shaping or bypassing public opinion than is often appreciated. It is also important to note that the sense in Turkey of an Atlantic community is gradually eroding.

“Somebody Loves Me, I Wonder Who?”

by İlter Turan

The opening lines of a song that George Gershwin composed and Ella Fitzgerald made famous — “Somebody loves me, I wonder who” — may be quoted, if slightly out of context, to describe the most recent findings on Turkey in the German Marshall Fund's annual *Transatlantic Trends* survey.¹ It seems that nowadays the attitudes and preferences of Turkish citizens deviate significantly from those of Americans or citizens of the European Union (EU). The findings tell us, for example, that 34 percent of Turks think that their country should act alone in the world, that Turks are much less concerned than Europeans or Americans about Iran becoming a nuclear power, that 55 percent of Turks think their values are very different from those of the West, and that fewer Turks than last year feel that Turkey joining the EU would be a good thing. Such figures have led to a flurry of newspaper commentary debating whether Turkey is drifting away from the West. While there is no question that current public opinion has been shifting away from the United States and European Union, it is useful to put such figures into some kind of context before making hasty inferences about where Turkey may be headed.

The Turkish Public and Foreign Policy

Historically, Turkish politics has been primarily domestic-driven. Domestic concerns have usually occupied center stage, while questions of foreign policy have received only occasional attention in day-to-day political debate. Although this situation began to change somewhat after the rapid integration of the Turkish economy into the world economic system and the end of the Cold War, and continues to change as Turkey becomes more active as a regional power, it remains the case that the Turkish public fails to demonstrate a sustained interest in external politics except in times of crisis. Governments, not surprisingly, have sometimes found it in their interest to promote public involvement in foreign policy issues, but with few exceptions, the public interests itself in foreign policy only rarely, and there remain few institutional channels for public influence to shape foreign policy. In this light, we should be cautious in drawing inferences about where Turkey is headed based solely on survey data.

EU Membership: If You Don't Want Me, I Want You Even Less

Taking into account the political context and environment in which the survey was conducted, there are

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¹ <http://www.gmfus.org/trends/2010/>



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several important items indicated in the *Transatlantic Trends* findings. The poll revealed, for example, that support for Turkey's EU membership has declined to a low of 38 percent from a high of 74 percent in 2004. Such a decline is better understood when one looks at EU public sentiment on whether Turkey joining the EU would be a good thing: support has dropped to 23 percent from 29 percent in 2004. The Turkish public may not be fully aware of the precise details of this lack of support for Turkish membership in the EU, but it is aware of the general lack of enthusiasm. More importantly, commentary bordering on insult by Nicolas Sarkozy and constant suggestions by Angela Merkel that a special relationship should take the place of full Turkish membership foster corresponding negative responses among Turkish citizens.

There are two important questions here. First, does a decline in public support for Turkey's EU membership indicate a deep-seated shift in attitudes, or is it an intuitively defensive response to unfriendly commentary emanating from some European capitals and leaders? Second, does this drop in support constrain the Turkish government in its effort to implement policies intended to integrate Turkey further into the European Union? My impression is that the drop in the level of support is in fact a response to the negative statements by some EU leaders. This unfavorable response both exacerbates and is compounded by low expectations concerning the likelihood of Turkey's accession to EU membership (26 percent). Should the messaging of the leaders of EU member states become more positive, or should significant progress be achieved in accession negotiations, then support for EU membership will likely experience a marked increase. On the question of whether the drop in public support significantly impedes government policy, one should remember that immediately after

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the recent referendum on amending the Turkish constitution, the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that it would devote its attention to implementing legislation and policies intended to meet the EU's expectations for Turkey's accession as a full member.

I Have Few Friends in the World, If Any

While the Turkish public's support for EU membership is declining, are other countries emerging with which Turkey should look forward to developing closer relations in the future? The response to the question "With whom should Turkey act in closest cooperation?" confirms that the desire for a future partnership with the European Union is down to 13 percent from 22 percent last year. But it also shows that only 6 percent cite the United States and 5 percent cite Russia as highly desired partners, both figures up two points from last year. The largest percentage of respondents comprises those who prefer that Turkey go it alone, although this number has dropped from 43 percent in 2009 to 34 percent in 2010. Only in the case of the Middle East has there been a substantial rise from 10 to 20 percent within one year, almost matching the drop in support for a partnership with the European Union.

What do these figures mean? Three observations are in order. First, even though Turkish public opinion does not usually constitute a major input into foreign policy, it does in some cases limit the range of policy options available to the government. Yet, while relations with Armenia and Cyprus stand out as obvious examples, this is not always the case. Although only 5 percent of the population thinks that Turkey should act in close cooperation with Russia, Turkey's economic relations with Russia have in fact been expanding rapidly. Erdoğan and Putin have characterized the relationship between their two countries as a strategic partnership. They have decided to remove visa requirements between the two countries, Turkey has signed an agreement with Russia for it to build a nuclear plant in Turkey, the Blue Stream Pipeline carries natural gas into Turkey and on to Southern Europe, and Russians have agreed to support the construction of the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline so that Russian oil can bypass the Turkish Straits. By all indications there is very close cooperation between Russia and Turkey, and it is only getting closer.

Second, public attitudes regarding external relations are shaped largely by what the government does, not the



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other way around. In this context the rather steep jump in support for close relations with the Middle East, reinforced by a lower level of concern about Iran's nuclear activity, appears to reflect increasing support for the government's policies rather than a change in public opinion that needs to be taken into consideration by the government in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. If similar figures were available for the Balkans and the Turkic states of Central Asia, we might observe a similar rise in support for close cooperation with those countries, reflecting the growing regional emphasis of Turkish foreign policy.

Third, there seems to be little consensus among the public as to which country or group of countries Turkey should turn to for close cooperation. This may reflect in part the uncertainties of a changing world political environment, as power shifts between regions and old partnerships fail to provide a satisfactory means of dealing with new realities. But there is an additional Turkish reality that needs to be kept in mind. It is manifest in the magnitude of the "Turkey should go it alone" responses. Turkey's position, surrounded as it is by a diversity of major cultural groups with which it shares certain commonalities, has enriched the country in many ways. But the fact that Turkey does not fully belong to any of its major neighboring cultural groups has left Turks with a sense of insecurity and a tendency to think that Turkey has no friends. Many Turks would agree with the oft-made statement that "Turks have no friends other than themselves." It would therefore not be surprising for this sentiment to continue to be popular for some time to come.

A Cause for Concern

The discussion of the *Transatlantic Trends* findings may create the impression that public opinion is unimportant and should not be cause for serious concern. This is only partially the case, however. Opinion may easily change, and it may follow rather than shape government policy. Yet there is reason for concern. In the good old days of the Cold War, the members of the Atlantic community shared a sense of belonging to the same community. The current study indicates that — at least in Turkey's case — the sense of an Atlantic community is being challenged. Those who value this sense of community should ask what needs to be done to protect it. Its continuation should not be taken for granted.

İlter Turan, Professor, Bilgi University

İlter Turan is currently a professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He has served as the program chair of the 21st World Congress of Political Science in Santiago, Chile, July 12-16, 2009. He is board chair of the Health and Education Foundation and serves on the board of several foundations and corporations. He is widely published in English and Turkish on comparative politics, Turkish politics, and foreign policy. His most recent writings have been on the domestic and international politics of water, the Turkish parliament and its members, and Turkish political parties. He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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