

Changing Mindset of Turkish Public: Should Turkey be a Member of the EU?

by

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Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) ever since its early application for associate membership of the European Economic Community in 1959, resembles a roller coaster ride especially when one focuses on the mass electoral support for membership on both sides of the relationship over the last few years. This relationship has long been shaped around elite rather than mass concerns. However, in the years leading to the start of the EU's negotiations with Turkey for eventual membership mutual concern of mass support for the ultimate realization of this project came to dominate public agendas on both sides. On the European side, it soon became evident that there simply was not much of popular support for Turkey's definitive membership. On the Turkish side, once comfortable majorities in support of membership were slowly transformed into solid opposition and scepticism concerning the very basis of the European ideals. While the development of public opinion in the EU concerning the Turkish membership may not be of much practical consequence in the short run, the daily tracing of the Turkish public opinion forms the very basis of the legitimacy for the ongoing reforms in the country. As such, an accurate diagnosis of their bases is critical in steering the country in the high seas leading up to membership.

Despite the fact that mass support for EU membership forms the legitimacy basis of the reform process in Turkey critical and in-depth analyses of this support base has not attracted much academic attention. I aim here to give a short overview of the historical development of the public opinion support for EU membership and then give a summary evaluation of the most recent state of affairs by using the results of a recent poll taken in April-May 2006.¹

Historical Development of Mass Support for EU Membership

I take the two surveys carried out in 1996 and later in 1998 asking the respondents whether they "would like Turkey to be a member of the EU" as the starting point of our tracing of the public opinion dynamics over the last decade (Erder, 1996, 1999). From November 2001 until January 2003 a similar question concerning support for membership in a hypothetical referendum was used in four consecutive survey analyses in which I took part. Then the Eurobarometer's Candidate Country survey provides one observation followed by another on the basis of the same referendum question from a survey I conducted in March 2004. Two similar observations in 2005 are from surveys conducted by Infacto research company. The last observation is from a survey I took part in designing in April-May 2006. I will present an in-depth analysis of this very last survey below.

Figure 1 below summarizes the trends observed since 1996. From early 1996 to mid 2006 very little seems to have changed. In terms of the level of support we started from 55% and we find about 57% support in May 2006. From 1996 to the end of 2002, we observe a supportive wave raising the popular support as high as 74% and then retreat back down to about 65%. However, with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet*

¹ This survey (The New Face of Politics in Turkey) was carried out by Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu with the support of the Sabancı and Isık universities and the Open Society Institute-Turkey.

ve *Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) the level of support rises above 70% once again and remains at around that level until the end of 2005. The first half of 2006 seems to have led to a significant drop in the level of support for membership and we observe the lowest level of support ever since May 1998 at around 57%.² The opposition to membership is as high as 30% while around 13% indicate being indecisive or provide no answer for the question. If we take a utilitarian approach to membership, we can trace support back to evaluations as to the degree to which membership would be beneficial for Turkey. Evaluations on a 0 to 10 scale, 0 representing very detrimental effects of membership and 10 representing very beneficial effects, we observe that 26% of the respondents place their evaluations between 0 and 4 being on the detrimental side and 48% place their evaluations between 6 and 10 staying on the beneficial side of evaluations. The indecisive group, being equidistant to both ends at point 5 comprises 22% of the answers. The significance of this result is that even though the level of support for membership in a referendum question has been dropping as of the beginning of Summer 2006 those who view membership as detrimental do not comprise a very significant group. What is perhaps more clear is that many Turks tend to be uncertain. As Figure 2 shows, if we take the points 4 to 6 as potentially wavering group on membership issue, then we might have 33%, or one in every three voters, being unable to make up their minds. This it seems is the real cause behind changing atmosphere in the country concerning membership. Hesitation not only on the part of the Turkish elites but also on the part of masses seems to grow and this creates potential for any political movement to use anti-EU rhetoric to mobilize their support base. We see reflections of this phenomenon in a number of different dimensions of public opinion support. One is on the geographical distribution of support across Turkish provinces. Another is in on the partisan and demographic bases of EU support.

(Figure 1 and 2 about here)

Geographical distribution of support

Over the course of four years between 2002 and 2006 three different surveys reveal significant changes in the composition of geographic bases of support for EU membership. In order to trace these changes I first divide all provinces into five clusters according to their socio-economic characteristics and political preferences. Then in each survey support levels in clusters are calculated on the basis of the data collected from provinces that fall in each cluster. Figure 3 shows the most recent geographic distribution of support for EU membership in comparison with the previous two surveys in 2004 and 2002. Cluster 4 which comprises the east and southeastern provinces has the highest level of support in all three surveys. This cluster's level of support is lower in 2006 (79.7%) compared to 2004 (89.4%), but higher compared to 2002 (72.2%). It is also noticeable that from 2002 to 2006, the difference between this clusters support level and that of the nation-wide support is growing in favor of the cluster provinces. That is, in 2002, Cluster 4 support was about 8 percentage points higher than the nationwide support level. In 2004, it was 17 points and in 2006, 22 percentage points higher than the nation-wide support. This may be taken as an indication that this region which is by-far the poorest and the least developed in all five clusters, and which is predominantly populated by citizens of Kurdish background, is becoming much more supportive of the EU cause. The fact that such divergence occurred when the nation-wide support level dropped about 7 percentage points below that of 2002, is quite significant. There is no other cluster of provinces for which a similar pattern is observed.

(Figure 3 about here)

The second highest level of support which was about 7 percentage points above the nation-wide level of support in 2002 was observed for the large metropolitan provinces which

² See Çarkoğlu (2003, 2004) for a detailed historical account of the fluctuations in Turkish support for EU membership.

include the three largest cities of İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir as well as Kocaeli, Bursa, Antalya and Adana. This was a reflection of a rare phenomenon in Turkish politics where the least and most developed provinces seemed to predominantly agree on one policy goal, that is the membership in the EU. This however, seems to have dramatically changed over the last four years. In 2004, level of support for EU membership in Cluster 3 did not change compared to 2002. However, since the nation wide support has risen back then, there remained no positive support difference between the country as a whole and the metropolitan provinces in favor of these Cluster 3 provinces. When we reached 2006, the positive differential in support of EU membership, favoring the Cluster 3 provinces, has turned into a negative differential since these provinces remained below the nation-wide support level by 3 percentage points. For no other cluster of provinces do we observe a positive differential turn into a negative one like the one we observe for the metropolitan provinces of Cluster 3. The fact that the most developed, most populous and socially as well as economically most dynamic and diverse Cluster 3, remains below the nation-wide support level is a significant development. It shows that the battle ground between the pro-EU supporters and Euroskeptics is beginning to be lost primarily in the big metropolitan provinces. Although a slight majority is still behind the EU project, we observe that the momentum has turned against the Europhiles.

For Cluster 1 provinces of the coastal areas of the Black Sea and the Aegean regions, we observe a complete opposite development. This cluster remained 4 percentage points below nation-wide support in 2002 as well as in 2004, but has risen above it in 2006 by 5 percentage points. Cluster 2 started at about the same level of support as that of Cluster 1, but never has risen above it, and in 2006, it still is about 2 percentage points below nation-wide support for EU membership. Lastly, Cluster 5 provinces of the Central Anatolia, and western borders of the eastern Anatolia region, had the lowest level of support for 2002 with 11 percentage points below the nation-wide level of support. However, from 2004 onwards this cluster of province has caught up with the national support levels and remains at that nation-wide average for the last three years. This cluster of provinces comprises the conservative partisan support centers that predominantly voted for the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP) in 1999 and for AKP in 2002. The fact that with election of the AKP this cluster adopted the nation-wide support level is a significant development. It seems that geographically, the conservative elements do not stand against the EU. They reflect the overall nation-wide inclinations rather than being against it. This perhaps is the biggest success of the AKP government in convincing their followers about the worthiness of the EU cause. Despite the fact that about 15 percentage points drop occurred in the level of support for this cluster since the months prior to the 2004 municipality election, it still maintains a comfortable advantage over the anti-EU group. Here again, we see that winds of change are now blowing in favor Euroskeptics. In all five clusters we observe significant drops in the levels of support membership. However, in clusters 4, 5 and 1 we still have higher levels of support compared to the results of early summer 2002.

Partisan and demographic bases of EU support

When we look into the individual face-to-face interviews from Spring 2006 we observe similar signs of growing tension and polarization that feeds uncertainty in the minds of the people concerning EU membership. My earlier analyses of similar kind revealed no partisan differentiation in the levels of likelihood of support for EU membership. In other words, in 2002 pre-election data, there was no significant difference between the likelihood of being an EU supporter between people who intended to vote for different parties. All party constituencies were more or less equally likely to be for or against membership. In 2006

however, we observe that being an MHP voter reduces the likelihood of being a supporter of membership by 48% after controlling for the effects of other variables. Education level only becomes a positive factor that raises the likelihood of support after graduation from high school. However, all other levels including university graduates can be grouped together as being at a lower level of likelihood for EU support. Hence higher education does not necessarily bring more support EU membership. The most educated segments of the society are not necessarily more or less supportive of the EU cause compared to the lowest levels of education. Compared to 2002 results such an awkward differentiation along the education levels is a new phenomenon.

In 2002, younger voters were less likely to be supportive of the EU membership. In 2006, age ceases to be a significant factor that differentiates people on their likelihood of support. However, people of larger households tend to be significantly more likely to support membership suggesting that lower socio-economic status and rural segments may in fact be of higher likelihood of being supportive of the EU membership. However, geographically, no statistically significant differentiation between clusters is observed at the conventional levels of significance. After taking the effects of other variables that reflect socio-economic development, no difference is observed between people of different regions. In other words, the whole country has become more homogeneous on their evaluations of membership prospects but this was achieved only with a much lower level of overall support for membership.

A slightly positive impact is observed at a low level of significance stemming from evaluations of uncertainty facing Turkey. People who tend to see more uncertainty in Turkey's relations with the outside world also tend to be more supportive of EU membership. This suggests a growing need in the minds of the Turkish public perhaps that facing uncertainty in the international arena Turkish membership may be a good insurance in a sense to secure preferential foreign policy outcomes.

Those who believe that Turkey can resolve its own problems without being member in the EU tend to be significantly less likely to support membership. Those who believe that Turkey needs EU membership to resolve its own problems are more than double the likelihood of supporting EU membership compared to those who believe that Turkey can resolve its problems on its own without being a member in the EU.

Most important factors that shape people's membership support decisions are concerned with pure utility evaluations and the extent to which people judge membership to be likely. Those people who evaluate membership to be more and more beneficial tend to be more and more supportive of membership. Similarly the more people tend to believe that membership is possible after the start of negotiations the more likely they are to be supportive of the EU membership. Given these results it should be no surprise that people tend to be not only more pessimistic as to the likelihood of membership after the start of negotiations but also tend to see the benefits of membership as less and less appealing.

Besides the statistically significant variables we should also note those which turn out to be insignificant in our 2006 survey. The most notable is religiosity. In 2002 the more religious people tend to be less supportive of membership. However, after AKP's election victory and the ensuing pro-EU reform agenda adopted by the AKP government, religiosity ceased to be a significant factor that differentiates the Euroskeptics in Turkey. Similarly identity politics based on sectarian divide between Alevis and Sunnis or ethnic divide between Kurdish

speakers and those who do not speak Kurdish do not seem to be important factors that differentiate Europhiles from Euroskeptics. Whereas in the past especially Sunni religiosity and Kurdish background were significant factors that differentiate the membership supporters from those who were against membership. One similarity between the 2002 and 2006 results concerns the impacts of economic evaluations. In both cases retrospective or prospective evaluations concerning Turkish economy are not significant in differentiating membership supporters from dissenters. In other words, at the time of relative economic crisis in Summer 2002 as opposed to relative prosperity of Spring 2006, prevailing economic conditions do not seem to be effective in shaping people's opinions concerning EU membership.

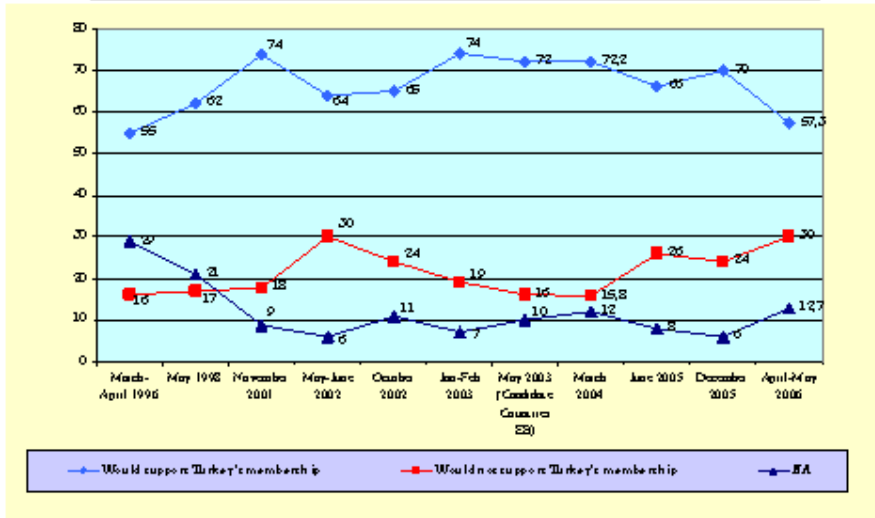
In short, public opinion support for EU membership seems to have matured and gained a partisan flavor over the past four years. Although geographic, sectarian and ethnic differences ceased to be significant more and more people seem to evaluate EU membership in partisan terms keeping in mind their support for government policies at large. In the past however, such partisan differentiation was not at all in place. Most importantly, the recent developments in the country seem to have pushed the public at large to reevaluate benefits and costs and the likelihood of membership. As these considerations remain on public agenda people seem to have become less convinced of the potential benefits and eventual likelihood of membership all resulting in overall lower levels of support for membership in the EU.

References

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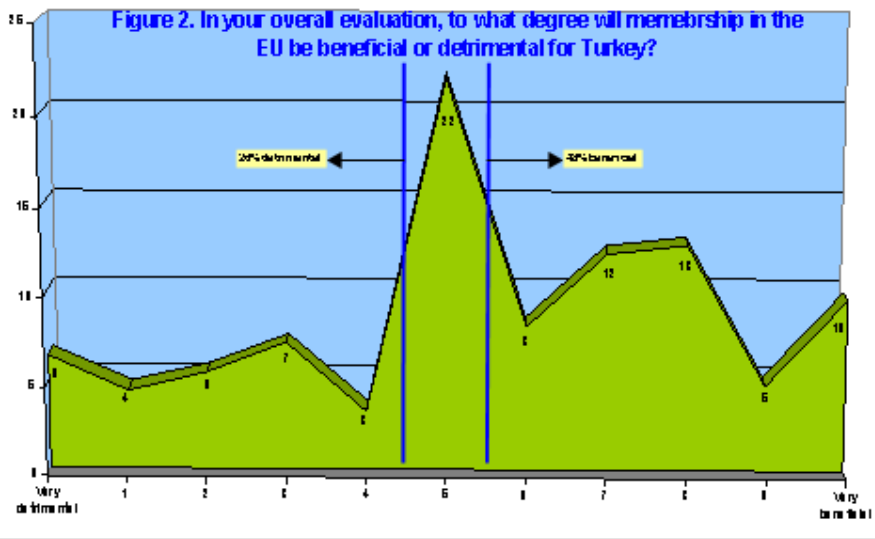
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Figure 1. Referendum about EU membership, 1996-2006



1

Figure 2. In your overall evaluation, to what degree will membership in the EU be beneficial or detrimental for Turkey?



2

Figure 3. Level of Support for full EU membership across clusters of provinces – May 2006

