

The Souring of Turkey EU–Relations: is there a Way Out?

By Senem Aydın-Düzgit

Turkey-EU relations are a far cry from where they were in the early years of this millennium. Turkey was declared a candidate country destined to join the Union on the 1999 Helsinki Summit. Following significant constitutional reforms that expanded basic rights and freedoms, the Copenhagen Summit of December 2002 decided that the EU would open accession negotiations with Turkey. The condition was that the European Council in December 2004, based on a report and recommendations from the Commission, decided that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria. This decision provided Turkey with the prospect of a full EU membership for the first time. It triggered subsequent democratic reform packages and constituted what is also referred to as the ‘golden age’ of Europeanisation in Turkey, which lasted until the formal opening of accession negotiations in October 2005.

Since then little progress was made. Only 13 out of 35 chapters have so far been opened in the accession negotiations, with just one chapter provisionally closed due to the conflict over Cyprus. Turkish democracy is stagnating and has been suffering substantive breaches of fundamental rights and freedoms, and there is not much talk of Turkey’s EU membership neither in the Turkish nor the EU discourse. The current stalemate is also reflected in the attitudes the Turkish public and the political actors display towards the EU.

Turkish public opinion on EU membership

Turkish public support for the country’s EU accession remained considerably high until the second half of 2005 when the accession negotiations were launched. Support for EU membership rose significantly after the Helsinki Summit from 62% in 1998 to 74% in 1999 and to 75% in 2001. Support levels stabilised at around 70% between 2002 and the second half of 2004, a period that coincided with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and the relative strengthening of the EU perspective for Turkey.¹

Figure 1 summarises the Eurobarometer data from 2004 to 2011.² The data suggests that from the second half of 2004 onwards (with slight exceptions in 2006, 2009 and 2010), the Turkish public increasingly considered EU membership not necessarily a good thing. By the first half of 2011, support levels fell to 41%. Data from different sources confirm this trend. For instance, according to the World Values Survey, while the average trust rate for the EU among the countries surveyed remain at around -8%, it is -37% for the Turkish public, demonstrating that mistrust towards the EU is almost five times higher among the Turkish public than the average.³

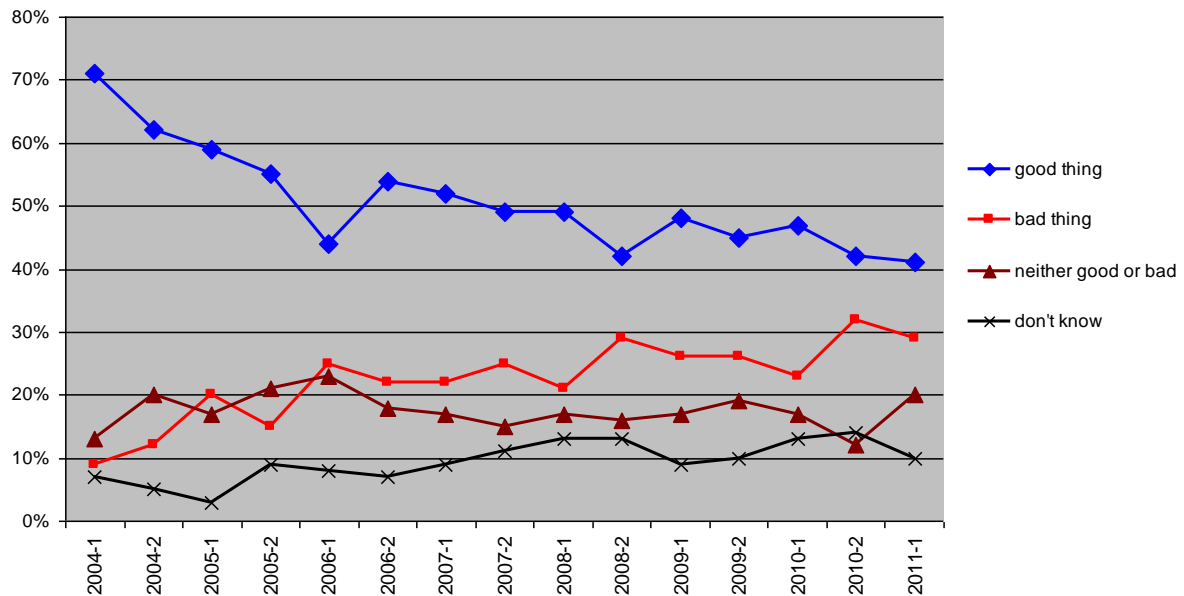
Figure 1

¹See European Commission (2002) Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2001, Brussels; European Commission (2003) Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2003.2, Brussels; European Commission (2004) Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2003.4, Brussels. European Commission (2005c) Eurobarometer 62, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels; European Commission (2005d) Eurobarometer 63, Public Opinion in the European Union, National Report, Turkey.

²See also European Commission (2009) Eurobarometer 71, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels; European Commission (2009) Eurobarometer 72, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels; European Commission (2010) Eurobarometer 73, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels; European Commission (2011) Eurobarometer 74, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels; European Commission (2012) Eurobarometer 75, Public Opinion in the European Union, Brussels.

³For a more thorough analysis, see Emre Erdoğan, “Türkiye’nin Yalnızlığı: Karşılaştırmalı Kamuoyu Araştırmalarının Özet Değerlendirmesi” in *Yalnız ve Endişeli Ülke: Türkiye*, Open Society Institute Report, Istanbul, 2013.

Public Support for EU Accession in Turkey, 2004-2011



Why has this been the case? The Eurobarometer data suggests that the biggest drop of support for Turkey’s EU accession took place in the first half of 2006. This was not coincidental, but was in fact triggered by various developments that comprise the debates on the ‘absorption capacity’ of the EU, the possibility of introducing ‘permanent derogations’ and a ‘privileged partnership’ with Turkey as well as the impasse over the Cyprus conflict.

Following the rejection of the proposed Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands, the EU’s ‘absorption capacity’ quickly became a key element of the debate on Turkey’s accession in 2005.⁴ This concept has, in fact, been on the table since the 1993 Copenhagen Summit, which stated in its conclusions that ‘the Union’s capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is *an important consideration* in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries’.⁵ In the previous enlargement round, it was actually treated as a ‘consideration’ that calls upon the EU itself to reform rather than a formal criterion of accession. Applied to Turkey, however, the debate focused upon Turkey itself, and particularly its unchanging and unchangeable features: its size, population, culture and unpopularity with the EU citizens, conveying the message that, unlike the Eastern enlargement, complying with the formal criteria alone may not be sufficient for Turkey’s full accession to the Union. The concept was subsequently incorporated into the Negotiating Framework for Turkey which stated that

‘while having full regard to all Copenhagen criteria, including the absorption capacity of the Union, if Turkey is not in a position to assume in full all the obligations of membership it must be ensured that Turkey is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond’.⁶

This phrase invited a reflection on alternative scenarios to membership such as a ‘privileged partnership’ proposed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and added the ‘absorption

⁴See Michael Emerson, Senem Aydın, Julia De-Clerck Sachsse and Gergana Noutcheva, *Just what is this « Absorption Capacity » of the European Union ?*, CEPS Policy Brief No.113, 2006, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies.

⁵ European Council (1993) Council in Copenhagen: Conclusions of the Presidency, 21-22 June.

⁶ European Commission (2005a) Negotiating Framework (Turkey), 3 October, Luxembourg.

capacity' to the Copenhagen criteria. Furthermore, the Negotiating Framework for Croatia, adopted on the same day and drafted in almost identical language, omitted this phrase while only referring to 'absorption capacity' as '*an important consideration* in the general interest of both the Union and Croatia'.⁷ In the same spirit, the Negotiating Framework for Turkey also included provisions that were absent from the text on Croatia, such as 'permanent safeguard clauses, i.e. clauses which are permanently available as a basis for safeguard measures... in areas such as freedom of movement of persons, structural policies or agriculture'.⁸ This was the first time that permanent derogations were being introduced in the EU's enlargement policy, suggesting to the Turkish elite and the public that a 'second-class membership' was being envisaged for Turkey. It also coincided with the election of Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel and their wide-reaching statements on the undesirability of Turkish accession. In fact, upon Sarkozy's coming to power in 2007, the French government blocked negotiations on five chapters of the *acquis* on the grounds that the chapters were directly linked to full membership.

Another factor which played a crucial role in hampering Turkish public opinion concerns the Cyprus conflict. Upon the approval of the UN sponsored Annan Plan by the Turkish Cypriots and its rejection by the Greek Cypriots in the April 2004 referenda, the Council declared that it was 'determined to put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community'.⁹ The comprehensive package of aid and trade measures proposed by the Commission in July 2004 was however left largely unimplemented due to strong Greek Cypriot resistance in the Council.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the EU continued to pressure Turkey to open its seaports and airspace to Greek Cyprus as required by Turkey's customs union agreement with the EU. Turkey, in turn, refused to comply on the grounds that no steps had been taken in ending the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. In December 2006, the Council decided not to open negotiations on eight chapters of the *acquis* relevant to the issue¹¹ and not to provisionally close any of the chapters until Turkey met its obligations towards Cyprus. This has, to a large extent, served to block progress in accession negotiations and substantially fed into the perceptions in Turkey that the country is being unfairly treated, with the EU using Cyprus as a tool to block Turkey's accession. On top of this, Cyprus, just like France, also imposed vetoes on the opening of six negotiation chapters. Negotiations reached a *de facto* state of suspension due to these vetoes and the fact that no accession negotiation chapter could be closed until Turkey met the EU's demands on Cyprus.

Previous research found that attitudes towards EU membership in Turkish society are largely dependent on individuals' utilitarian evaluations (hence the expected impact of EU membership on their lives) and the likelihood of Turkey becoming a member of the EU.¹² In relation to that, the Turkish public ranks economic welfare and the freedom to travel, work and study in the EU among the top two signifiers of EU accession.¹³ Furthermore, in a national survey conducted in 2006, two thirds of the respondents expressed the disbelief of

⁷ European Commission (2005b) Negotiating Framework (Croatia), 3 October, Luxembourg.

⁸ European Commission, Negotiating Framework (Turkey).

⁹ European Council (2004) European Council Conclusions on Cyprus, 24 April, Brussels.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, *The Cyprus Stalemate: What Next?*, ICG Policy Report, 8 March 2006, pp. 13-14.

¹¹ The suspension includes the chapters on the free movement of goods, right of establishment and freedom to provide services, financial services, agriculture and rural development, fisheries, customs union, transport policy, and external relations.

¹² See Çiğdem Kentmen (2008) 'Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey', *European Union Politics* 9 (4): 487-510 and Ali Çarkoğlu (2003) 'Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU Membership', *Turkish Studies* 4 (1): 171-194.

¹³ European Commission (2009) Eurobarometer 71, Avrupa Birliği'nde Kamuoyu (Public Opinion in the EU), National Report, Turkey.

Turkey ever becoming a member of the EU.¹⁴ Hence it can be argued that the strong possibility of imposing permanent limits on the free movement of people and on the full enjoyment of EU funds, coupled with the decreasing expectation of full membership, may have had a significant impact on declining levels of Turkish support for EU accession. This in turn implies that the EU project has for a while been facing a lack of societal legitimacy in Turkey, whereby Turkish citizens are becoming increasingly estranged from the European project.

Nonetheless, there is also evidence to suggest that other, and more recent, factors have also played a role in the souring of public attitudes towards the EU. Turkey's growing self-confidence as a foreign policy actor with its growing economy, coupled with the eurocrisis and the existential problems that it poses for the future of the EU is also argued to have strengthened the perception in Turkey that Turkey no longer needs the EU as it once did. Turkish economy has tripled its size over the decade, with a corresponding rise of activism in its foreign policy. One study suggests that while 63% of those with declining support for Turkey's EU membership base their waning enthusiasm on the Turkey-scepticism in the EU, 30% ground their views on the performance of the Turkish economy and Turkey's diversifying foreign policy options which for them render it less dependent on the EU whose material and strategic benefits seem to be increasingly clouded by the effects of the eurocrisis.¹⁵

This may also point at a slight shift in the nature of Euroscepticism among the Turkish public. Until 2005, Euroscepticism in Turkey mainly entailed a reactionary nationalism and rested on a fear of the loss of national sovereignty, the ultimate partition of the country and the loss of moral values.¹⁶ This now coexists with, and is at times even replaced by a type of Euroscepticism that belittles the EU's importance and exaggerates the global power and capacity of Turkey and the AKP. This can be defined as 'delusional Euroscepticism' which exaggerates Turkey's power, capacity and effectiveness regarding its economy and foreign policy and dismisses its problems concerning democracy and human development while misreading the power and effectiveness of the EU and its Member States. This is a type of scepticism which entails self-confidence to the extent of arrogance, looks down on the EU, states that Turkey's economy is very strong and dynamic and that it does not need the EU anchor whereas the EU needs Turkey, believes that Turkey is a regional power and a global actor that will strengthen its position and views Turkish foreign policy through imperialist references.

Both types of scepticism entail an ideological, reactionary or delusional approach devoid of knowledge towards the EU. They misread Turkey and the EU as well as the regional and global developments and changes. It also demonstrates a viewpoint that is at best not beneficial, but in fact harmful point of view in terms of Turkey's good governance and its future. Such scepticism, however, does not only pertain to the Turkish public, but that it has also been strongly bolstered by the discourse of the Turkish political elite, to which we now turn.

The growing rift between the Turkish political elite and the EU

The AKP, which came into power in 2002, successfully promoted EU accession and its democratic reform agenda to widen its support base towards the centre. Through a solid

¹⁴Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu (2009) *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 127.

¹⁵Alexander Bürgin (2012) 'Disappointment or New Strength: Exploring the Declining EU Support among Turkish Students, Academics and Party Members', *Turkish Studies* 13 (4): 565-580.

¹⁶Hakan Yılmaz (2011) 'Euroscepticism in Turkey: Parties, Elites and Public Opinion', *South European Society and Politics* 16 (1): 185-208.

support of the membership perspective, the party attempted to preserve its core constituency by the promise of extended religious freedoms and to guarantee its survival vis-à-vis the secularist state establishment in the judiciary and the military.¹⁷

It can be argued that after the accession negotiations started, the AKP mainly followed a policy line and discourse which favoured the suspension of relations rather than their improvement. While the party's political elite pledged a rhetorical commitment to full membership, they also highlighted that Turkey-EU relations came to a standstill due to the negative and discriminatory approach of the EU. Such criticisms, however, were often one-sided and limited. It is in fact the case that the EU's treatment of Turkey, particularly over the Cyprus conflict, has created a very severe trust problem in the government's perception of the EU. Nonetheless, the government itself has also chosen to act like an 'axis-free nation-state' that tries to engage with different parts of the world in its initiatives for a multi-vector foreign policy rather than concentrate on the EU goal. This was made possible by the presence of certain domestic conditions which made the EU a less valuable actor for the governing party.

Especially after its second electoral victory in 2007, the AKP became much stronger both in society and vis-à-vis the secularist establishment, and thus less dependent on the EU and its democratisation agenda.¹⁸ The reactions of the government to the recently intensified EU criticisms of the state of democracy in Turkey are indicative of the weakened reliance on the EU. In response to the critical report of the European Parliament on Turkey published in March 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that the 'Parliament is entrusted to draft the Report and we are entrusted to do as we see fit'.¹⁹ In addition to the increased strength and confidence of the government, the EU's decreasing societal legitimacy as an external actor has contributed to this indifference. To a question on why the 2010 constitutional referendum was not justified by Turkey's EU accession, the Minister of EU Affairs and the Chief Negotiator Egemen Bağış replied that 'the EU does not make the news anymore, the EU does not sell'.²⁰ In a similar vein, when the European Parliament delivered a resolution which heavily criticised the government's handling of the 'Gezi revolts' in June 2013, Prime Minister Erdoğan responded that he 'did not recognise the EP's decision on Turkey' (Hürriyet, 2013).

Hence since 2005, the AKP has not displayed a political and vision-based commitment to EU membership, but adopted instead a more instrumentalist and functional membership discourse. It did not seem to be too concerned with the stalemate in the full membership process to the EU. The AKP government has frequently expressed that cooperation with other regions of the world could be an alternative to the EU, that the Ankara criteria could replace the Copenhagen criteria or that 'Turkey achieved its status as a regional and global actor without EU membership'. Hence it contributed to a vicious cycle in which it simultaneously fed into the growing Eurosceptic discourse among the people while it also tried to appeal to its growing dominance in the public.

Similar to the AKP, other political parties also did not show the necessary commitment and effort for full EU membership. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) continued with its line of Euroscepticism which traditionally rests on the fear of losing national sovereignty, partition of the country and the loss of national moral values. Euroscepticism was strongly expressed both in the party programme and its discourse. The Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) lately entered a tense relationship with the EU on the basis of the

¹⁷See Soli Özel (2003) 'After the Tsunami', *Journal of Democracy* 14 (2): 80-94.

¹⁸Ziya Öniş (2010) "Contesting for Turkey's Political 'Center': Domestic Politics, Identity Conflicts and the Controversy over EU Membership", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 18 (3): 361-376.

¹⁹ Milliyet Daily (2011), 'Bildiğimizi Okuruz' (We Will Do as We See Fit), 11 March, available at <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/bildigimiziokuruz/siyaset/haberdetay/11.03.2011/1362801/default.htm>.

²⁰Egemen Bağış (2010) Speech delivered at the Annual Radikal-EDAM Journalists' Meeting, 7 May, Istanbul.

Kurdish issue. EU's criticisms of terror and violence as well as its critical stance towards the ethnic nationalist tone of the Kurdish actors in suggesting a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue have initiated a problematic phase in EU-BDP relations. The BDP started to criticise the EU and display a more sceptical attitude. Even though the main opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has recently started to adopt a discourse that places importance to relations with the EU, it has not shown sufficient commitment and effort for full membership. Just like the AKP, the CHP and the BDP followed an instrumentalist and functional approach towards the EU. They have not sufficiently criticised the AKP for the stalemate in Turkey-EU relations, nor have they complained much about the current situation.

Is there a way out?

The future prospects of Turkey-EU relations currently seem to be mired on the EU side by the eurocrisis, short-term political calculations of political leaders and the dominant exclusionary rhetoric towards Turkey, and on the Turkish side by the shift of interest among the political parties and society at large from Turkish membership to the EU towards Turkey's global and regional activism. A lack of vision, trust and commitment on both sides seem to have brought the relations to a standstill. To overcome this impasse, both short and long term measures need to be envisaged. Progress on issues of key importance to the Turkish public such as visa liberalisation would matter in this respect. The fact that a large portion of the waning enthusiasm for membership among the Turkish public is still attributable to the perceived discrimination of the EU against Turkey suggests that such steps could have a positive impact on changing Turkish public opinion for the more positive towards the EU.

Change is also required on the Turkish front where the recent experiences of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East only serves to strengthen the fact that aspirations of grandeur do not necessarily make one a strong foreign policy actor. Turkey's growing troubles with its democracy after a period of reform also attest to the fact that the lack of the EU anchor has had a substantive role in the stagnation of Turkey's democratic consolidation. Turkey-EU relations will not pick up until the vicious cycle of Eurosceptic discourse between the Turkish public and the political elite is broken. This requires the Turkish political actors to adopt and communicate to the public a debate on the EU that is based on a stronger commitment and a wider vision. This may necessitate a reconceptualisation of Turkey-EU relations from the perspective of mutual benefits in a globalised world where debates on more flexible modes of membership are also not excluded.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."