

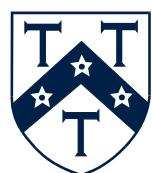
opinion piece

South East European Studies
at Oxford

Public opinion in Member States as a factor in the debate on Turkey's EU membership

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Opinion Piece¹

This opinion piece is based on research of the public debate on Turkey's prospective EU accession conducted together with Konstadinos Maras from Tübingen University and published in 2005.² While public opinion data on the perception of Turkish EU membership refers to the period leading up the original publication three years ago, most of the findings, the *pros* and *cons* featured in the European debate, retain their relevancy today. The main arguments are:

Those in favour of Turkish accession argue that the country's convergence towards the EU's economic, political and constitutional structures would spell a long term benefit on all levels for both sides. This view is based on the "bridge metaphor" that assumes that Turkey could play an important role in terms of economic growth in Europe, political stabilisation of the wider region, and in weakening the "clash of civilisations" thesis, including dispelling the notion that democracy and Islam are irreconcilable.

Those opposed to Turkey's accession deploy the arguments underlying the bridge metaphor in a diametrically opposite way. In the Turko-sceptic perspective, Turkey emerges as a danger to the European economy, the deepening of European integration, and the future of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This perspective stresses a negative picture of economic, political, social, geographic, religious and cultural differences, which it is argued, obstruct Turkey's ability to become a full EU member.

The pro-Turkish position derives largely from a European liberal self-conception, while the negative arguments are mostly based on a short-term view of the enlargement process. The latter appear to overlook the importance of the framework of negotiations and the adjustment process that will strengthen Turkey's capacity to bring its institutional structures and policy to an EU-compatible level. In one, they ignore the key process that underlies the prospect of profound change that would enable accession.

Beyond these patterns of perceptions, I would like to underline some facts about the role of public opinion in Europe with regard to the question of Turkey's EU accession:

¹ It is also part of a paper presented at the conference „Turkey and the European Union: Accession Prospects and Non-Accession Alternatives“ organised by the Open Society Institute, Sofia, 19–20 February 2008.

² Angelos Giannakopoulos/Konstadinos Maras: Die Türkei-Debatte in Europa. Ein Vergleich (The Debate on Turkey in Europe. A Comparison), Wiesbaden 2005.

1. Public opinion about Turkey is an increasingly important factor in the EU: so much so that several member states signalled that they might opt for holding referenda before ratifying Turkey's accession treaty.

During his visit to Turkey in December 2004, the former President of the European Parliament, Josep Borrell Fontelles, noted that the Turkish government must win as much sympathy for Turkey's future membership among the European public as possible.

2. Public opinion is important not only in view of the final stage of the accession process, however. Crucially, European public opinion appears to react to current events in Turkey. The European public's most serious concerns are not related to economic, strategic or geographical aspects of Turkey's prospective EU membership, but are primarily located in the field of Turkish domestic politics and in Turkish political culture. This highlights a significant problem, indeed.

This problem is described by Joost Lagendijk, the Co-Chairman of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, against the backdrop of the recent court case against the AKP:

"I wasn't surprised when I heard yesterday there would be a case, knowing the composition of the Constitutional Court this was going to happen. I think it's very bad for Turkey in two ways. First, it's bad for Turkey's image abroad. I am sure those people in Europe who are against Turkey's accession will be very happy because they'll have an extra argument to say why should we negotiate with a country whose governing party runs the risk to being closed down. [...] The second reason why I think it is bad is that as a consequence, during the coming six to nine months we won't see any new reforms. So again, it's an extra argument for those who are against Turkey's accession for these reasons."

Mr Lagendijk's statement highlights the correlation between the democratic process in Turkey and the European public opinion. During the period of approximately two years after the AKP's initial electoral victory in 2002, a sense of enthusiasm about the revolutionary changes in Turkey dominated the media headlines. Matters deteriorated after the virtual coup last April, and the negative trend continued after the judiciary coup in March of this year. However, as is commonly known, public opinion is not fixed, regardless of its content, but tends to shift according to current developments. The shift in public opinion with regard to Turkey has to do not only with persistent drawbacks in Turkey's domestic reform process, but also with the fact that the European Union is still not clear how to handle Turkey. European actors, including European leaders, EU officials and European elites do not really know if Turkey belongs or should belong to Europe, or not.

After the Turkish Constitutional Court admitted the case against the AKP, Olli Rehn, the EU's enlargement Commissioner, and several other European officials stated that Turkey's accession negotiations should be suspended if the AKP is indeed outlawed. It is clear that such a development in Turkey could be interpreted as a "systemic error," that is a serious and persistent breach of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, which in accordance with the 2004 negotiating framework would justify the suspension of negotiations. Yet, suspending negotiation talks would certainly not aid the process of reform or strengthen the democratic forces in Turkey; it would play into the hands of those whose goal is to suspend negotiations, by

sending a signal they are on the right track, as well as of those in the EU who oppose Turkey's EU accession.

So, what can be done?

The basic question, which the EU treats according to the logic of *ad kalendas graecas*, remains unanswered, despite the opening of accession negotiations in 2005: does the Union want only a *potential*/membership whose realisation can be postponed indefinitely, or does it want *real*/membership, taking responsibility for supporting the country in its course of reform, and the elected government in its political struggle with the military establishment and the bureaucracy?

Alternatives such as a '*privileged partnership*,' which could also be seen as an '*non-privileged membership*' present problems for both Turkey and the EU. In the future they will also have a lasting impact on the definition of what is 'European.' After all, the answer to the question of whether Turkey can be a full partner in European integration depends greatly on how Europe defines itself. In either case, with or without Turkey as a full member, '*privileged partner*' or '*non-privileged member*,' the Union will have to change in the future.

In my opinion, there is a way for the EU to contribute constructively to Turkey's prospective EU membership beyond a "bureaucratic" vision of enlargement. The EU should make clear that Turkey will not belong to Europe *only* once it fulfils the accession criteria – it is indisputable that fulfilling the accession criteria is the very precondition for membership and that Turkey should go on with the reform agenda in order to fulfil them. But beyond this, and because Turkey is *already* a part of Europe, the EU should commit itself to support the country in overcoming its internal fragmentation. Such a clearly stated commitment would radically change the scenario, both, in Europe in terms of conducting a more positive public attitude, and in Turkey, in terms of effectively supporting the democratic, liberal forces and the Turkish civil society.

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