

# **TURKISH CITIZENS' PERCEPTION AND EXPECTATIONS ABOUT EU AFTER THE 12-YEAR NOMINATION**

***Asst. Prof. Funda Çoban, PhD***  
***Aksaray University, Department of International Relations, Turkey***

## ***Abstract:***

*Turkey's "adventure" for being a part of EU dates back to 1959. However, the country has only been accepted as a candidate member in 2005. Since then, both EU and the idea of EU have changed as well as Turkey's approach to EU. In this context this study, which has been based on the report of The EU Support and European Perception in the Turkish Public Opinion of the Economic Development Foundation (2015) emphasizes on the Turkish public opinion on the EU membership in a sociological map in comparison with the latest political fluctuations about EU policy of Turkish governments and the responses from the EU authorities. From this vein, it is crucial that Turkish people have been losing their beliefs to be accepted as a Member State in the EU despite their desire for membership. Thus, it is stressed that both sides, the Turkish and the European institutions, have responsibilities to decrease the hopeless and desperate mood to improve the idea of EU.*

***Keywords:*** *Turkey's EU membership, Turkish public opinion, disbelief to EU, Turkey-EU relations, EU perception in Turkey*

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## **Introduction**

Turkey's EU adventure is full of ups and downs. The fluctuating process starting with the application for membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 became concrete with the signing of the Ankara Agreement in 1963. However, the political, military and economic developments that have taken place over the course of almost fifty years have brought about some doubts about Turkey's EU candidacy.

In this context, the ambiguity about Turkey's EU membership has sociologically created changes in the expectations and perceptions of Turkish citizens about the EU. As a matter of fact, it is possible to ascertain that despite the fact that Turkish citizens still regard EU membership as a desirable foreign policy window, this support to EU has gradually declined in recent years, albeit not dramatically. Following this link, the study at hand aims to open the debate on the reasons for the decline in expectations from the EU in the light of historical

and contemporary developments, using the research that is mainly conducted in 2015 by Economic Development Foundation, titled “The EU Support and European Perception in the Turkish Public Opinion”.

In this respect, the study proceeds in three main axes. In the first part, the history of Turkey's application to EU will be briefly explained in the context of fundamental problems and political background. In the second part, direct references to the aforementioned report will be made to find out the decline in Turkey's perceptions of the EU in additions to some other findings evaluated. In the final section, it will be discussed the alternative scenarios that the upcoming political trends can produce by suggesting that the developments in Turkey's political conjuncture since 2016 have strengthened the tendencies conducted in the report. Thus, some suggestions will be given to overcome the mutual problems with the assumption that the EU project is essentially a democracy and a peace project.

### **The Short History of Turkey's EU Candidacy**

The relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) have begun with the partnership application of Turkey to the European Economic Community on 31st July 1959. The Ankara Agreement, which was signed on September 12th, 1963, after the EEC Council of Ministers accepted the application, Turkey's EU membership process started. The Ankara Agreement, which came into force on December 1st, 1964, was an agreement establishing a partnership. The protocol was followed by the Additional Protocol signed in 1970 (Arıkan, 2003; Ercan & Ali, 2016). During the process, the military coups in Turkey caused the freezing of relations with the EU. With the political normalization that took place in the mid-1980s, Turkey applied for full membership on 14th April 1987. After this, the most important development was the acceptance of Turkey to the EU Customs Union on 6th March 1995. However, the admission of Turkey to the Customs Union was contradictory; because, until then, participation to the Customs Union within the EU was a status where only full members were included whereas Turkey was accepted for the customs union without full membership (Orman, 2014; Öniş, 2003; Aybey, 2004).

In the end, Turkey has become a “candidate country” for the EU in Helsinki Summit in 1999. Later on October 3rd, 2005, negotiations were officially launched. However, negotiations according to the “negotiating framework” were stressing that the process was an “open-ended” one. Since 2005, 14 chapters have been opened to negotiate. Only one chapter, the Science and Research chapter, has been temporarily closed. In fact, a period of about 10 years has been considered for the completion of 35 chapters that need to be technically harmonised in the EU accession process (Karademir, 2014). However, Turkey's Cyprus policy, the reports of various human rights commissions about Turkey, the agreement with Turkey over Europe's solution to the refugee problem, and the perception about the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 prevented the fulfilment of the expectations. Apart from the Turkey's 54-year-old adventure at the EU gate, the fact that the nomination status given in 2005 did not give the expected results and ultimately led to a change in the perception of the EU in the Turkish public opinion.

## **Turkish Citizens' EU Perception According to the Report by the Economic Development Foundation (EDF), "The EU Support and European Perception in the Turkish Public Opinion"**

The research by the Economic Development Foundation, titled "The EU Support and European Perception in the Turkish Public Opinion" (Özsöz et al, 2016) was conducted with 2,489 people who are over 18 in 18 different Turkish cities. While 45.6% of the interviewees are female, 36.8% of all participants are over 45 years old. Additionally, 38% of the interviewees are high school graduates, 16% of them are university graduates, 17% of them are middle school graduates and 21% of them are primary school graduates. Evaluating the occupations of the participants, while housewives took the first place with 25.7%; 15.3% workers are in the second place, 11.8% retired people are in the third place. About 86.4% of the participants haven't visited any European countries before and 32.5 % of the participants have relatives or close relatives of Turkish migrants living in Europe.

About 85% of the respondents indicate that they have "no" or "some" knowledge about the EU; while 4 of every 5 people who participated in the survey expressed that they had heard about EU before. On the other hand, the level of knowledge about the EU has declined geographically from the west of the country to the east. Among the young population (18–30 age range) knowledge about the EU is higher than among older age groups (45 years and over). The main sources to get the information about EU are television, newspapers, radio and Internet. In this respect, official institutions that provide information about EU don't have any important role.

According to the survey, 61.8% of the Turkish public support Turkey's EU membership and 73% of the participants state their belief in Turkey's EU membership is decreasing. According to the survey, 30% believe that Turkey will become an EU member while the rate of those who expect Turkey to become an EU member in the next five years is 23%. The region with the highest belief that Turkey will become an EU member is the Southeast Anatolia Region with 47.7%, whereas the lowest rate is in the region Central Anatolia with 22.8%. On the other hand, the population under the age of 45 seems to be more supportive of Turkey's EU membership and believes more in membership.

The main reasons of the supporters for Turkey's EU membership are the expectations about the economic development, right to travel and working without a visa, facilities for education and settlement. They are followed by the expectations about the improvements of democracy and human rights. The expectation that the possibility of free movement will increase is higher in the group between 18–30 years. Democracy and human rights rank second in terms of supporting EU membership for participants aged 30 years and over.

Geographically, the support for EU membership is mainly about the expectations for economic development. About 65.2% of respondents say that Turkey needs EU economically. The geographical region where this ratio is highest is Southeast Anatolia Region with 78.3%.

When considering the reasons of those who do not support the EU membership, the double standard (26%) that the EU applies in its approach to Turkey and the concern that the EU membership will damage Turkish culture and identity (26%) stands out.

When all these data are evaluated together, the most striking point about the EU perception in Turkey's public opinion is that the hope for the participation in the EU is gradually diminishing, even though there is still a high level of support for the participation of Turkey

in the EU. However, the demographic data shows that expectations and perceptions about participation in the EU vary according to the age and geographical differences. While the young people code the EU with free movement and democracy, middle-aged describe their aspirations in terms of economic development and prosperity. This indicates how different generations in Turkey evaluate differently economic and political developments. Also, taking into consideration the fact that the level of economic prosperity decreases in Turkey from west to east, what has to be expressed is that the EU is a project that is evaluated in the light of daily concerns of the people. Obviously, in the emergence of such empirical data, it is also necessary to reconsider the fact that the Turkish public has no full and sufficient knowledge about the history and scope of the EU. In this respect, the lack of knowledge about the whole project is a question that must be raised by the EU and Turkey. However, it is also possible to reach the conclusion that the political and economic projects in the eyes of the public are evaluated in the light of their everyday troubles instead of general abstract concepts. In other words, ordinary people translate national political issues into their local vocabulary/problems, reaching a level of perception and expectation related to such general designs. In this respect, if an EU projection including Turkey is on the current agenda, it should be further explained that the EU is not a project based on short-term interests but a peace and partnership project getting its strength from a multi-dimensional cooperation.

### **The Changing EU Perception in Turkish Public Opinion through the Lenses of Recent Turkish Political Conjecture**

While EDF's data is at hand, it is also useful to think of some of the political developments since 2016 as the pivotal points of the study. The most important of these are the refugee deal between the EU and Turkey and the other one is the effects of the political statements by Turkey on Europe since the coup attempt in 2016.

According to the agreement between Turkey and the 28 EU member states on 18th March 2016, the Syrian refugees whose asylum-seeker applications were rejected would have been sent to Turkey and in return, EU would have accepted some other Syrian refugees from Turkey. Additionally, Turkey would have received financial support and the EU would have accelerated full membership negotiations. However, the EU has accepted only 3,654 Syrian asylum seekers from Turkey instead of the promised 72,000 refugees according to The 5th Report on Refugee Deal between Turkey and the EU (EU Fact Sheet, 2017; "AB Komisyonu Türkiye-Ab Mülteci Anlaşması", 2017). Besides, another issue that the EU promised but did not fulfill was the financial contribution to asylum seekers. In this framework, it had planned 3 billion EUR for 2016–2017, plus 3 billion EUR for 2018 to be given. Although it has been stated that the amount of "promised" money until 2nd March 2017 is 2.2 billion EUR, the actual amount of the money transferred was only 750 million EUR. According to the agreement, the Customs Union's update negotiations should have been started by the end of 2016, but official negotiations have not yet begun. The regular chapters' technical preparations (23rd Chapter on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and the 24th Chapter on Justice, Freedom, and Security) failed to complete. No progress was made on the issue regarding the visa free movement of Turkish citizens in the EU zone. According to the report, Ankara has not fulfilled the remaining 7 conditions out of 72 in total. These were including the following: "Issuing biometric passports

in full compliance with EU standards, taking measures to combat corruption, establishing an operational cooperation agreement with Europol, regulating anti-terrorism laws and practices in line with European standards, bringing the regulation of personal data protection into the EU standards, effective co-operation and implementation of all parts of the refugee agreement". Although the agreement has stated that "Turkey and the EU have confirmed once again that the parties protect their "vision to give the priority to the fight against terrorism", Brussels has often criticised Turkey for its measures to struggle with the PKK and the FETÖ.

On the other hand, because of the way how the state of exception process is implemented (declared after the coup attempt in July 2016) it has led Europe to be far more distant from Turkey, especially in reference to some European human rights commission and organisation reports. In return, the Turkish side made some statements that emphasise the point of breaking up with the EU (see also Doğangil, 2013). In his different speeches and declarations, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stated "see yourselves [Europeans] in the mirror; Turkey is not your sinner" ("Avrupa Uyardı," 2017), "They [the EU] threat us with cutting the negotiations. You are even late. Give your decision about Turkey instantly" ("Erdogan'dan AB'ye," 2017), "The process of being a member of the EU, the refugee agreement... It doesn't matter. They [the EU] won't be able to threat us, never again!" ("Erdogan AB Kapisina," 2017), "After the 16th April 2017 [namely, the referendum] you may be surprised, they [the EU] may be, too" ("16 Nisan'dan Sonra", 2017).

The issue here turns into a two-sided polemic: the Turkish side refers to the fact that the EU has been keeping Turkey at the status of a candidate for many years, hasn't properly fulfilled the promises of the refugee agreement and hasn't given full support to Turkey in the fight against terror, while the EU side also complains about human rights violations in Turkey, the lack of fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria and the structural deficiencies during the adaptation to the EU laws.

How to assess all these mutual political maneuvers? Is it possible Turkey and the EU to "break up?" Although the answers are subject of another detailed study, it can be briefly stated that Turkey has deep economic, political and cultural relations with Europe since it has been founded, which at the end prevents Turkey breaking with the EU. Turkey's import and export rate with the EU countries is 45–50%. This means the 135–140 billion EUR in terms of export and import capacities. In addition, the direct foreign investment from Europe to Turkey is around 65%. Besides, Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and many other European organisations.

In the framework of different scientific and educational programs, such as ERASMUS and DA VINCI, both sides mutually exchange their human resources. Therefore, in the short or medium term, it seems unlikely that either Turkey, or the EU can fully separate their ways (Öniş, 2008). However, it can be considered that political maneuvers shape the public on both sides and that this shaping reduces beliefs and trust in mutual expectations.

As a matter of fact, it is possible to express that the political manoeuvres summarised above have already aggravated the decreasing trust and expectations by the Turkish public since the mid-2000s. The fact that domestic politics in Turkey is abundantly filled with nationalist and religious references constitutes the field of discourse that sets the stage for this intensification. Some newspaper columns and public opinion leaders' and even politicians' statements stressing that "the EU is a Christian club and will not include Muslim Turkey as a full and

equal member” (“Hristiyan Klubü Telaşta”, 2017), “Europeans are jealous of Turkey's young population, roads, bridges, economic and political development” (“Avrupa’nın Dinamosu”, 2017; see also “Avrupa Türkiye’yi Kıskanıyor”, 2017) are exemplary sources which can be used to feed such a negative perception (cf. Ermağan, 2011).

## Conclusion

The long period in which Turkey has been kept at the gate of the EU without being given full membership status has caused expectations for membership in the European Union to decrease and has raised suspicions. However, Turkish public has still kept the desire to be a part of the EU. The main axis of this desire has been shaped by the expectations of welfare, free movement, and development. From this point of view, it is possible to define the connection of the Turkish citizens to Europe in the context of a “love-hate relationship” (Bülbül et al, 2008). While Europe is a desirable project for the Turkish citizens as the symbol of universal values, development and Atatürk’s modernisation vision, being treated like a “Platonic lover” by the EU transforms this positive perception into an “us versus them” discourse embedded in the nationalist conservative reflexes. The internal political tension that is shaped by the internal dynamics of Turkey additionally contributes to this “us versus them” relationship.

However, as European and Turkish politicians and diplomats have been expressing for years, such emotions are not suitable for the interests of Turkey or Europe in the long run. It is clear that Turkey is a very important partner for Europe's economic, political and cultural needs and vice versa. The intellectual background of this relation in the EU is embedded in the fact that the EU project historically relies on human rights, democracy, and peaceful values which in the end need trust, belief and hope. For this reason, it is extremely valuable both parties to make more informative, rational and integrating projects to serve the happiness and prosperity of the individuals, both in terms of the stability of Europe and the world.

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