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Turkish public opinion and the EU: erosion of trust

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Turkish public opinion towards Turkey's membership is highly related with the state of affairs in Turkish-EU relations as well as the relations with EU member states. Despite a long-standing support for EU membership, it is clear that in the last decade Turkish people's trust for EU institutions is in a steady decline. In the likelihood of an alternative scenario to membership, this lack of trust is crucial in shaping the negotiations.

Public support for Turkey's membership to the EU: changes over time

The public opinion in Turkey towards EU membership seems to be very dynamic and constantly changing. By looking at the results of different opinion polls, it is possible to identify certain major trends since 2000.

First of all, it is possible to conclude that support for EU membership within the Turkish public opinion is highly volatile and subject to extreme backlashes. For instance, according to the Transatlantic Trends Survey data, the percentage of Turkish citizens who believe that

Turkey joining the EU would be a "good" thing fell from 73% in 2004 to 38% in 2010, and in 2014 bounced back up to 53% (Transatlantic Trends Survey, 2014).

The Eurobarometer by the European Commission still constitutes the longest running survey in Turkey asking specific questions on European integration and Turkey's possible membership. When the results of all Eurobarometer surveys conducted in Turkey since the country's integration in the Eurobarometer in 2000 are analysed, similar fluctuations appear (Chart I: Support for EU Membership in the Annex).

The waves of support and opposition are not arbitrary either. The public opinion does not form in a vacuum. A simple chronological analysis reveals that the major spikes are very much linked with political developments in Turkey, in Europe and between Turkey and the EU. As the FEUTURE Working Paper 12 *"Political Changes in Turkey and the Future of Turkey-EU*

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Relations: From Convergence to Conflict?” demonstrates, political changes are directly influencing and shaping overall EU-Turkey relations. Such political developments also have a bearing on Turkish public opinion.

For instance, the record highs of 2004 and 2005 are very much linked with one of the most important concrete developments in Turkey-EU relations. The relations started speeding up in 2002 with a series of reform packages in the Turkish Parliament and the positive signals sent by politicians and opinion leaders both in Turkey and in other European states. The European Commission was striking a positive tone in Turkey’s progress, which reached its apex with the Commission’s recommendation to start negotiations in the Progress report published in October 2004. For the first time since the Customs Union decision in 1995, the Turkish public witnessed a series of positive developments and the delivery of commitments. The decision by the EU summit in December 2004 to start accession negotiations by October 2005 was the concrete proof of Turkey’s progress. The public opinion reflected these concrete developments with unprecedented levels of support for membership. Transatlantic Trends Survey revealed a support level of 74% while the Eurobarometer measured 71% in 2004. Such high support figures were never reached ever again, and in line with Turkey-EU relations, support has been steadily in decline ever since, with occasional positive jumps.

The analysis of public opinion is quite revealing in several ways. First, analysis of trends over time revealed that Turkish public opinion is highly dynamic and the support for EU

membership has been fluctuating since 2001. From the timing of major ups and downs in support, it is apparent that the Turkish public opinion does not operate in a vacuum and is highly responsive to the political developments related with Turkey-EU relations and furthermore, relations with major European states.

Second, as chart I shows, radical shifts between two opposite positions, “A good thing” vs “A bad thing” are not common, and individuals rather change their positions to other categories such as “Don’t Know” or “Neither good nor bad”. These categories, however, display major drops in recent years, especially with the rupture of July 2016 failed coup. The support and opposition camps seem to be more consolidated.

While the support for membership and evaluation of membership are most commonly used and available indicators, the fluctuations in the responses and the strong impact of everyday politics necessitate the search for other potential indicators to assess the public opinion in Turkey towards the European Union.

Turkish public and mistrust towards the EU

Özge Yaka uses the Gramscian concept of “common sense” in her “analysis of the complex and contradictory tendencies within the Turkish public opinion, which has oscillated between very enthusiastic support and strong alienation” (Yaka, 2016: 149). She concludes that as a result of a series of disappointments within Turkey-EU relations -what Eralp (2009) calls the periods of divergence-, combined with the antinomies of the Turkish common sense, which embodies the desire for EU membership for a better quality of

life and the contradictory issues of identity conflict and major mistrust, Turkish public opinion displays desire and rejection almost simultaneously.

This argument falls in line with the arguments underlining the importance of trust in situations that involve negotiations. Analysing the Eurobarometer data for the period 2001-2008, Şenyuva demonstrated that while the support for EU membership both increases and decreases over time, the level of trust for the European institutions among Turkish citizens is in constant decline. (Şenyuva, 2009) In Chart II: Trust to the European Union in the Annex there is a clear trend of decline in trust among Turkish public opinion towards the EU. As shown in the chart, the net trust (those who tend to trust minus those who tend not to trust) declines from 19 points in 2001 to minus 49 points in 2015 (67% tend not to trust / 18% tend to trust).

One of the main reasons that feed into the ever-increasing mistrust is the question of eventuality: whether Turkey would ever be allowed to join as a full member or not. The fear of being left out is fed by the reality – witnessing how negotiations of certain chapters were blocked by some Member States due to interest and/or identity calculations and the anti-Turkish membership rhetoric of certain EU Member States' politicians. The main message delivered by Turkish political leaders, especially government representatives, stroke this sentiment of being left out. Underlining the deviation from legal-technical negotiations it is always argued that Turkey remains committed to the goal of full membership, but it is often treated unfairly because some Member States

put their political calculations forefront and focus on their own national interests.

Domestically, EU membership is a polarising issue. The critical approach towards the EU is not reserved to the conservative, traditional and Islamist segments of society. The lack of trust and the sense of unfairness and exclusion lie deep within all segments of society. The EU membership prospect was considered as an anchor for Turkish democracy and as leverage to promote human rights, rule of law and individual and collective liberties throughout the 1990s. However, in the last decade, the EU is suffering from a major credibility problem in the eyes of different sections of society. For supporters of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the EU is being exclusionary and untrustworthy by failing to fulfil duties and delaying promised commitments. For the voters of the opposition parties, the prospect of Turkey's EU membership is fading due to the erosion of rule of law, individual rights and liberties in Turkey (Istanbul Ekonomi Arastirma, 2018).

Alternatives to membership and public opinion

Data on other scenarios are very scarce and limited. The Kadir Has University survey is one the few that includes certain questions on possible forms of relations other than EU membership. The findings of 2017 Kadir Has study reveal that Turkish public opinion does not have a favourable standing on cooperation with the EU outside the membership frame.

When asked whether another model of relations with the EU other than membership should be established or not, a sound majority of the respondents (70%) rejected any form of

relationship besides membership. The majority of those who approve another form of cooperation prefer cooperation based on the customs union, trade and economics (70%) and in the field of security and counterterrorism (56%). The fact that membership is a clear and concrete outcome of which the respondents have an understanding, while other models of cooperation are abstract and unclear for many, is an important factor to consider. Furthermore, another possible factor affecting the public opinion in terms of other forms of cooperation is a psychological one, i.e. the possible sense of failure to become a member and having to settle with a consolation price.

Conclusion and future concerns

The main conclusion of this brief is that Turkish public opinion is highly volatile in its support for the country's membership in the EU, displaying major fluctuations over time. The findings indicate that this volatility, which is understudied in the relevant literature, is not arbitrary and incoherent. The public opinion in Turkey is very sensitive to political events in Turkish-European relations and responds to these developments positively or negatively. Furthermore, it is also argued that the support is more likely to remain low in the near future,

except for a major concrete breakthrough in Turkey-EU relations, due to the severe erosion of trust in the European Union institutions among Turkish public opinion. Trust is a very solid and coherent indicator, which has been steadily declining in the last decade. Thus, it is concluded that Turkish public opinion, which highly mistrusts the European Union, is likely to be a major factor in future scenarios.

This drift is not irreversible, however. As the data collected over time demonstrates, concrete steps and fulfilled promises very strongly resonate among the public. Thus, any concrete steps taken and real progress demonstrated in the advancement of Turkey-EU relations targeting the wider population would be very effective. Possible concrete steps to re-conquer the hearts and minds of the general public, especially pro-westerners, include visa-free travel and relaunching the accession process.

However, such a policy has an inherent catch-22 situation. Such positive steps by the EU institutions would also risk to be perceived as concessions given to the current government, in a situation where there is already an increasing disappointment and criticism against European states and EU institutions for not doing enough to address the erosion of rights and liberties in Turkey as well as the rule of law and democratic institutions.

Chart I: Support for EU Membership

Source: Calculated from Eurobarometer data by the author

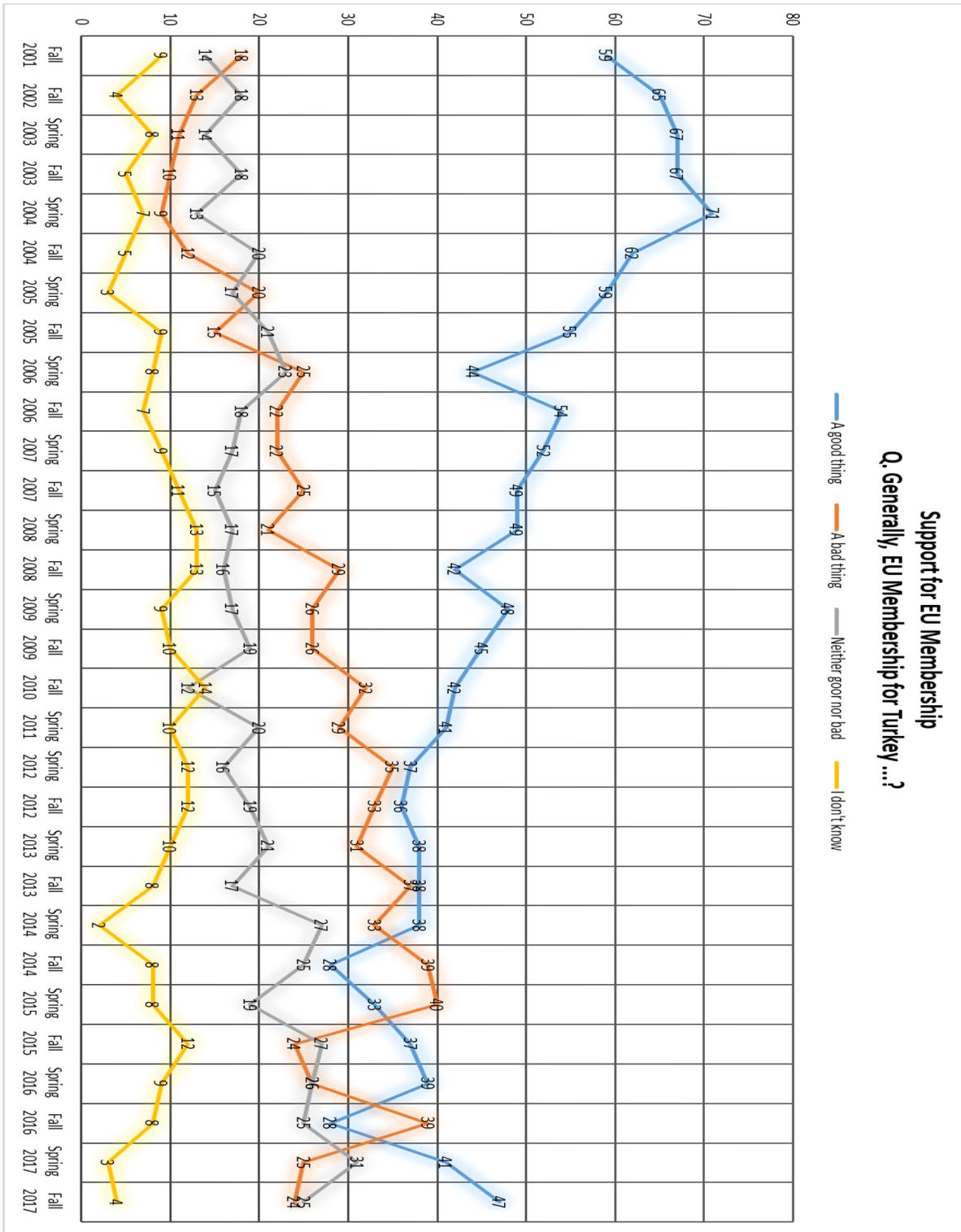
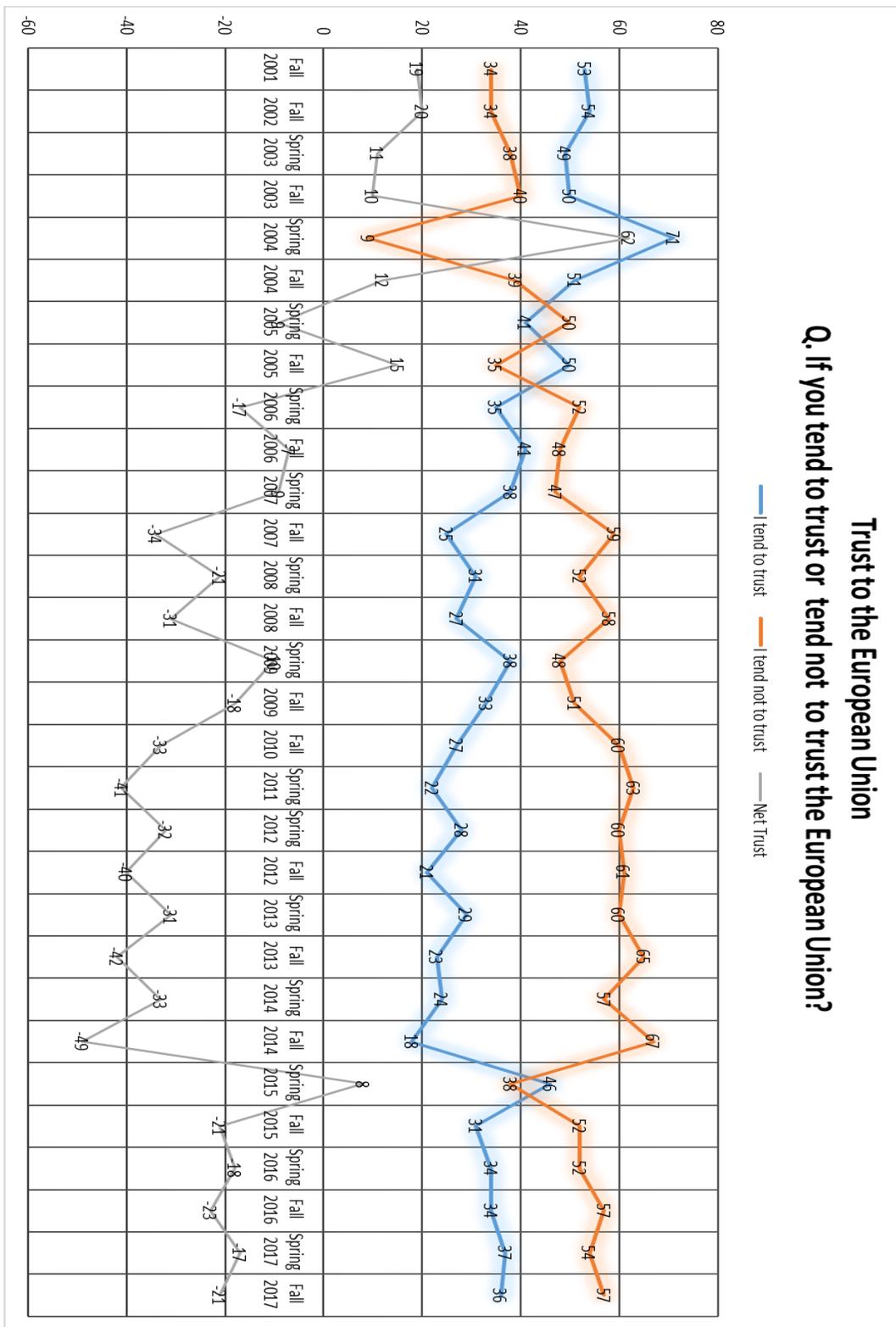


Chart II: Trust to the European Union

Source: Calculated from Eurobarometer data by the author



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