

WHAT EUROPEANS THINK ABOUT TURKEY AND WHY

By Katinka Barysch

Imagine this: Nicolas Sarkozy drops his election pledge to keep Turkey out of the EU; the Cyprus issue is resolved; the EU unblocks the eight frozen chapters in the accession negotiations; successive Turkish governments plough slowly but surely through the massive reform agenda required for EU membership; an accession treaty is signed in, say, 2015. But a year later, after 20 EU countries have already ratified, the French and Austrians vote against the accession in national referendums. The EU is in crisis; Turkey is enraged; other EU aspirants turn away in despair.

¹ Wolfgang Zaunbauer, 'Die öffentliche Meinung zum EU-Beitritt der Türkei', Österreichisches Institut für Sicherheitspolitik, November 2005.

The scenario is bleak but not wholly implausible: Eurobarometer polls show that the share of the EU population that opposes Turkish EU membership has risen steadily over the last decade, and since 2005 it has exceeded 50 per cent.¹ In Germany, France and Austria, three-quarters or more say they oppose Turkish accession. Similarly, an FT/Harris poll from June 2007 found that only 16 per cent of French voters backed Turkish accession.² In Germany, support for Turkish membership stood at just 21 per cent, and even in the traditionally pro-enlargement UK it was not much higher.

² <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1228>.

Of course, it is tricky to gauge the public mood in the short term, and impossible to predict it years in advance. But widespread public hostility already affects Turkey's accession process. It makes European

politicians coy about speaking out in favour of Turkey's membership. The lack of positive political leadership, in turn, leaves the field wide open to the opponents of Turkish accession. Much of the European media, meanwhile, is happy to trade in stereotypes, thus reinforcing public prejudices. "On television, Turkey means minarets, headscarves and the Bosphorus bridge",

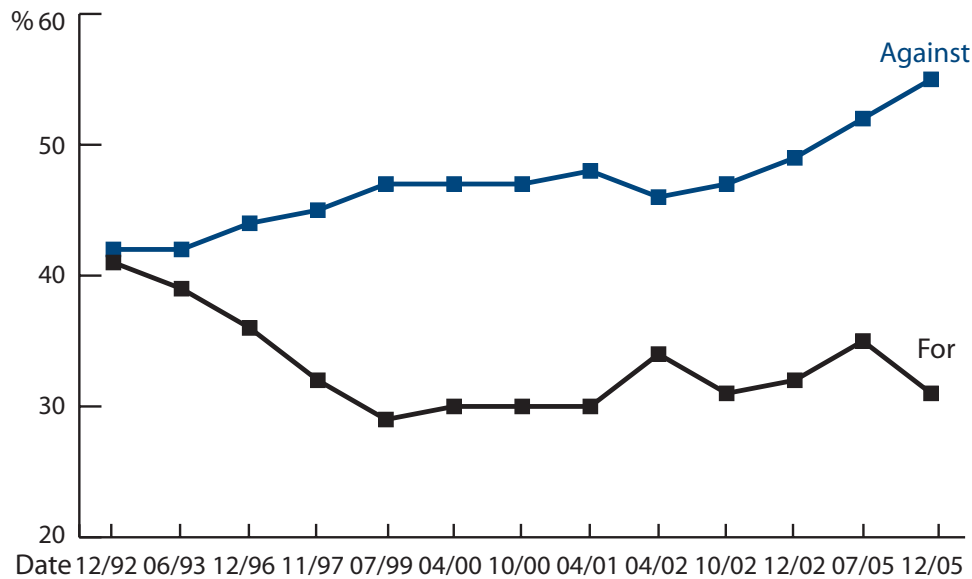
³ Quotes are from the CER seminar on 'Europe's public opinion on Turkish EU accession', held in Brussels on June 19th 2007, unless otherwise indicated.

says Paul Taylor, Reuters' European affairs editor. "In the newspapers, a 'secular state with a predominantly Muslim population' gets edited down to 'a Muslim country'".³

Europeans want to be convinced

West European prevarications have also weakened the pro-reform camp in Turkey. Many Turks ask why they should adopt the difficult reforms required by the EU if the Europeans do not want their country inside the Union anyway. Public support for EU membership has dropped sharply over recent years. Even the most pro-European Turks now accuse the EU of being disingenuous (for constantly re-opening the question of whether Turkey is a suitable candidate for full membership); of following double standards (for making it harder for Turkey to join than for previous candidates); and of being short-sighted (by disregarding the many economic and strategic benefits that Turkish accession would bring). The new constitutional clause in France that requires a referendum on all accessions after Croatia is seen as a particular affront, according to Hakan Altınay, who runs the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation in Istanbul.

Are you for or against Turkish accession?



*Note: Eurobarometer does not ask about Turkish accession in all its surveys.
Source: Standard Eurobarometer, cited in Zaunbauer, see footnote 1.*

Irrespective of eventual referendums, the fact is that Turkey is unlikely to join the EU as long as a majority of EU citizens and many politicians remain opposed. The days of EU integration and enlargement ‘by stealth’ are over.⁴ Today’s voters want to be convinced of the merits of every big step the EU takes, be it adopting a new treaty or letting in more countries. This new ‘age

of referendums’ changes the nature of EU debates.⁵ Paul Taylor calls on those who want to see Turkey in the EU to acknowledge the concerns of the sceptics as legitimate. “We do need to address issues of borders, history, ideology and human rights, not just preach about strategic benefits”, he says.

⁴ Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007 despite widespread public concerns about their readiness. The EU is unlikely to repeat what many people saw as a premature and unpopular decision.

⁵ Mark Leonard, ‘Democracy in Europe: How the EU can survive in an age of referendums’, CER essay, March 2006.

⁶ Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts and Heather Grabbe, ‘Why Europe should embrace Turkey’, CER pamphlet, September 2005.

For many politicians, journalists and think-tankers, the benefits of Turkish accession are plain to see. They range from the economic boost that would come from adding fast-growing and youthful Turkey, to the soft power the Union would gain from including a well-functioning Muslim democracy.⁶ But why have these arguments made no impact on public opinion across the EU?

One of the reasons could be that the pros and cons of enlargement are of a different nature. For most people, enlargement-related fears are immediate and personal: the loss of jobs, the threat of terrorism, the weakening of national culture. The benefits, meanwhile, are strategic, long-term and rather abstract: future economic growth, a stronger EU foreign policy, energy security. As a result, the supporters of Turkish accession and its opponents often talk past each other.

Nathalie Tocci from the Instituto Affari Internazionali suggests another reason why public opinion appears immune to clever arguments in favour of Turkish accession: in both the EU and Turkey, the debate about Turkish accession is really a proxy for a range of much wider, and often unrelated, issues. Within Turkey, the question of EU accession is intricately linked with debates about national identity. ‘Should we join the EU?’ is often synonymous with ‘What kind of Turkey do we want?’

In the EU countries, the questions raised by Turkey’s potential membership range from the future shape of the Union to the integration of existing immigrant communities. Countries that face similar issues do not necessarily arrive at the same conclusions about Turkey: some Poles, Czechs and Germans argue that Turkey does not have a place in an EU that they see as a Christian club. But for predominantly Christian Spaniards,

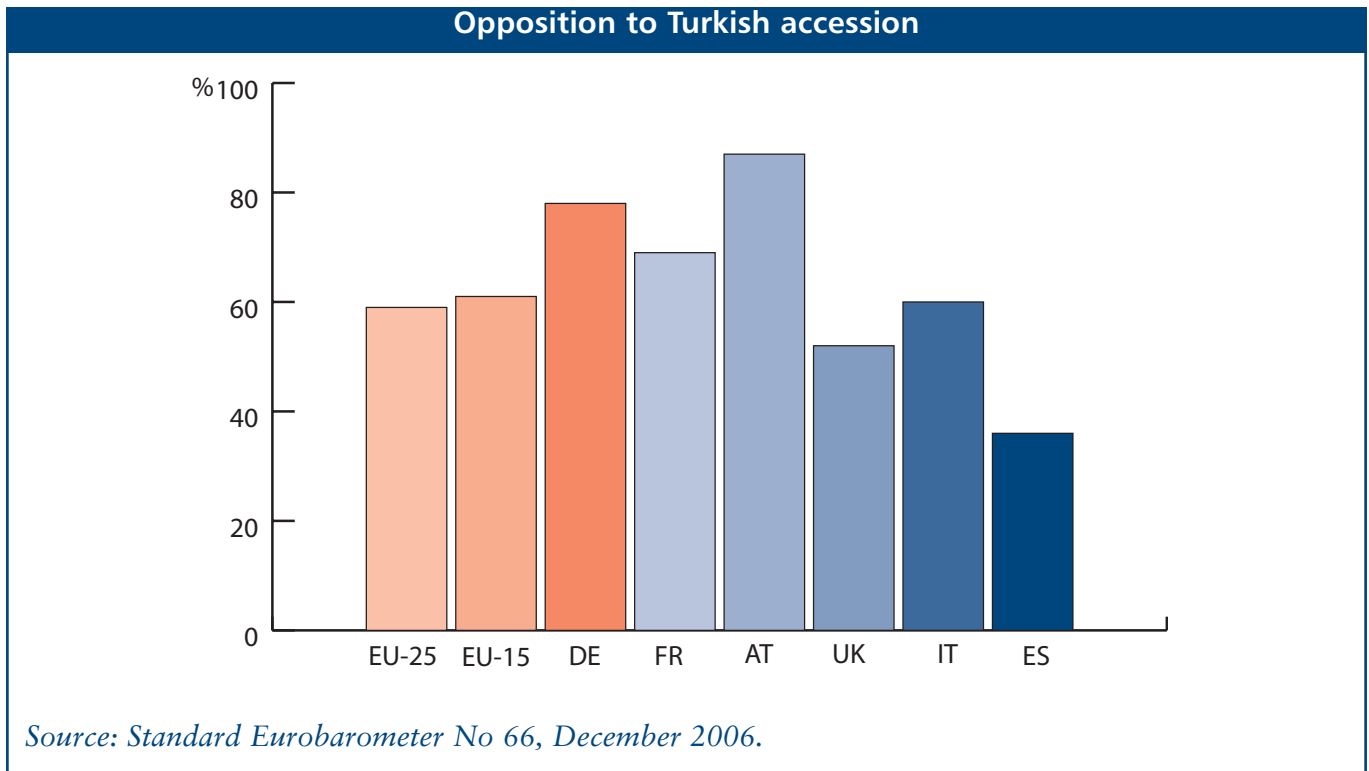
this does not seem to be a problem. While some Austrians and Hungarians are wary because of their country’s historical experience with Ottoman occupation, this does not seem to play a role in Slovenia or Italy. A large Muslim immigrant community has turned French people against Turkish accession. But the same has not happened in Britain.⁷

⁷ Jan Dirk Kemming and Özlem Sandikci, ‘Turkey’s EU accession as a question of nation brand image’, Place Branding, November 2006.

Nathalie Tocci argues that a country's attitude depends critically on whether it sees Turkish accession as a question of foreign policy (such as in Spain and the UK) or primarily a matter of internal EU or even national politics (such as in France or Germany).⁸ Opposition to Turkey is also related to a country's wider view of the future of the Union. Many people in Belgium, France, Germany and Italy fear that including Turkey would spell the end of the federalists' dream of a political union. In the UK, the Nordics and other countries that are less keen on political integration, further enlargement is viewed more positively.

⁸ See also Nathalie Tocci, 'Unpacking European Discourses: Conditionality, Impact and Prejudice in EU-Turkey Relations', IAI-Tepav Report, July 2007.

Given these national differences, a single, EU-wide communication campaign would hardly sway voters in the various member-states. The first step towards addressing public scepticism about Turkey must be to analyse the different national debates.



“In France, the real reasons for opposition to Turkey’s membership are not made explicitly in the accession debate, they are underlying the debate”, argues Nicolas Véron from Bruegel, a Brussels think-tank. He cites cultural differences and the future balance of power in the enlarged Union as examples. Many French people already worry that their country’s central role in the EU has been weakened by successive enlargements. For them, Turkey is a step too far. By the time Turkey is ready for EU membership, it could be the biggest country in Europe, with 80-90 million people. French politicians ask whether Turkey as an EU member would behave more like Germany (indebted to the European cause and instinctively pro-integrationist) or the UK (often eurosceptic and fiercely protective of its national sovereignty). “Of course”, says Véron “France itself is a large country with an ambiguous stance to pooling sovereignty. But it would not want another large eurosceptic country in the EU.”

Turkey also plays a role in debates about France’s political, economic and social developments. Turks had hoped that the fact that both France and Turkey are secular republics would work in their favour. But Turkey started to highlight its similarities with the French system at exactly the time when France plunged into a deep identity crisis, questioning whether this model was suitable for building a unified nation. So saying “look we are like you”, has not done a lot to endear Turkey to many of the French.⁹ Sinan Ülgen, from Istanbul’s Edam think-tank, uses this example to make a wider point: “We in Turkey believe that we know how to convince the Europeans of the merits of our membership application. But we

⁹ Dorothee Schmid, ‘The Franco-Turkish relationship in turmoil’, Edam Report, January 2007.

need to start by questioning our basic assumptions about public opinion in Europe. Only then can we have an effective communication campaign.”

Another specific ingredient of the French debate about Turkey is the country’s 400,000-strong Armenian minority. Vocal and well organised, it was instrumental in pushing through a draft law in 2006 aimed at

criminalising the denial of genocide. Although the draft did not make it onto the statute books, the episode caused outrage among many Turks who would prefer historians rather than foreign law-makers to pass judgement on the Armenian massacres in 1915-17.

The fact that France has struggled to integrate its sizeable Muslim minority has further burdened the accession debate. In fact, only 400,000 of France's five million Muslims are from Turkey. But "for the average Frenchman a Turk is an Arab", says French commentator Dominique Moïsi.¹⁰ Some politicians argue that having Turkey in the EU would facilitate the integration of Europe's Muslim immigrants. But for many French voters, riots in the suburbs are a reason against admitting Turkey.

¹⁰ *In evidence given to the House of Lords EU Select Committee, 'The further enlargement of the EU: threat or opportunity?', November 2006, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/lddeucom/273/273.pdf>.*

The wrong sort of immigrants?

Similarly in Germany, issues of immigration and integration are a key ingredient of the debate about Turkish accession. A country's *émigrés* can be a great asset: for example, people's perceptions of dynamic Ireland or colourful Brazil are closely linked to the Irish and Brazilians living abroad. But this has not been the case

for the three million or so Turkish immigrants living in Germany.¹¹ The majority of them do not come from Turkey's more modern cities and regions but from the backward south east. Like many immigrants around the world, they tend to stick with the traditions and values they brought with them

¹¹ *European Stability Initiative, 'The German Turkey debate under the grand coalition', October 2006.*

years, often decades, ago. While much of Turkey is becoming more open, modern and diverse, many Turkish emigrants remain traditionalist. Some Turkish families in Germany try to restrict the education of their daughters; and there have been 45 honour killings by Turks on German soil since 1996. More than 90 per cent of Germans now believe that Islam is hostile and aggressive to women, according to a survey cited by the European Stability Initiative (ESI).

Like the French, Germans also tend to be concerned about the impact that Turkish accession would have on the EU's balance of power, and its ability to move forward. Paul Taylor recounts how he once asked a German politician why he did not want Turkey in the EU. "100 MEPs", was his interlocutor's curt answer.¹²

¹² *The EU's new Reform Treaty caps the number of MEPs per country at 96.*

Unlike people in the other founding countries, the Dutch seem less concerned about the supposed contradiction between deepening and widening the EU. And although the Netherlands also hosts a sizeable Turkish immigrant

community, public opinion is somewhat more nuanced. Dutch people are evenly split when it comes to the question of Turkish accession. ESI puts this down to the fair and rational debate that Dutch politicians and journalists have conducted about the pros and cons of Turkish EU membership.¹³ But then again, when asked

¹³ *European Stability Initiative, 'Beyond enlargement fatigue? The Dutch debate on Turkish accession', April 2006.*

directly, the best thing Dutch people had to say about Turks was that they were not as bad as other Muslim immigrants.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Jan Dirk Kemming and Özlem Sandikci, 'Turkey's EU accession as a question of nation brand image', Place Branding, November 2006.*

Austrian opposition is fierce

In Europe-wide surveys on Turkish accession, Austria consistently comes out as the most sceptical country. The rather eurosceptic Austrians do not worry about the impact of further enlargement on the future of EU integration: most support further EU enlargement into the Balkans. They are just opposed to Turkey. Why? Although some Austrians still refer to the historical memory of Ottoman armies laying siege to Vienna, most seem to have more contemporary concerns. An internet survey conducted at the end of 2006 found that culture rather than religion was the main reason why Austrians did not want Turkey in the EU: almost 60 per cent said that religion should not be a criterion for EU accession but three-quarters insisted that Turkey

was not a European country.¹⁵ The impression that Austria's 200,000 Turkish immigrants do not integrate well appears to have reinforced these concerns. The survey also showed that Austrians were particularly concerned about the Cyprus question and about PKK terrorism.

¹⁵ *Türkei-Dialog, 'Ergebnis Report Basisfragebogen', euroSearch, January 2007.*

Most Austrian politicians tend to mimic these public concerns rather than seek to counter them. As a result, there simply are not enough positive voices in the Austrian debate, which allows the sceptics to set the tone. The two biggest political parties and much of the media are openly against Turkish accession. Austrian businesses have few links with Turkey, so they take little interest in the country. As long as this remains the case, Turkey-scepticism could remain the default position in Austria. This matters because successive governments have promised to hold a referendum on Turkish membership once the accession treaty has been signed.

A bad brand?

Since European voters seem to be largely immune to the elites' debates about the strategic and economic benefits of Turkish accession, what can be done to overcome their scepticism? Sinan Ülgen argues that the Turkish government and the EU should move away from selling Turkish membership outright. They should concentrate on improving Turkey's image in the West more generally. Waning opposition to EU membership, he hopes, will be a positive side effect of changing overall perceptions of his country. After all, few people in the EU would worry about Switzerland or Norway joining the EU. And Croatia – which enjoys the image of a sunny place with successful sportsmen – also encounters little opposition.

Turkey's image, on the other hand, is less positive. Simon Anholt, an independent government advisor, regularly conducts surveys of 'nation brands'. In these he asks people in 35 countries what they think of other nations in terms of their exports, people, government, culture and so on. Turkey tends to fare poorly. In early 2007, it ranked 34th out of the 40 countries included in the index, behind Russia, Mexico and Egypt.¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Anholt nation brand index 1st Quarter 2007*, http://www.nationbrandindex.com/documents/NBI_Q1_2007.pdf.

This negative underlying perception could mean that EU voters are simply not receptive to arguments about the benefits of Turkish accession. This hypothesis seems borne out by a more detailed analysis of public opinion on Turkey. Those people who are against Turkish accession do not seem to be sure why. They cite cultural, strategic and legalistic arguments in equal measure. Those who already think that Turkey is culturally and geographically European are also more likely to agree that Turkey will add to the EU's economic growth and security.¹⁷

¹⁷ Antonia Ruiz-Jiménez and José Torreblanca, 'European public opinion and Turkey's accession: Making sense of arguments for and against', EPIN working paper no. 16, May 2007.

However, it is not easy to change public perceptions of another country or nation. Countries that already enjoy a strong and positive reputation can manage their 'brand' because their audiences are willing. But countries that have weak or negative brands are simply not listened to or believed. If the Swedish government says 'we're a great country' it is rather unnecessary. If the North Korean government says the same, it is rather futile.

The image that people have of a country, although usually grounded in reality, is not necessarily accurate. Politicians, journalists, bankers and other professionals whose job it is to know about the world frequently update their images of different places. But the general public does not. Perceptions and prejudices, once formed, are useful for navigating an extremely complex world. People will not give them up easily, unless they have a good reason to do so. That is why people's images of other places are so often out of date. Turkey's enormous improvements over recent decades, and in particular since 2001, do not register with most Europeans. "In many ways, Turkey's brand image today in the West is in the same shape as if Atatürk had never lived."¹⁸

¹⁸ Simon Anholt quoted in Jan Dirk Kemming and Özlem Sandikci, 'Turkey's EU accession as a question of nation brand image', *Place Branding*, November 2006.

Given that Turkey's image abroad is rather poor, some glossy posters and upbeat slogans are unlikely to be enough. "Words do not change people's views", suggests Simon Anholt, "but events do, provided they are big and positive." That sounds good in theory, but in practice it is hard to think of something that the Turkish government could do to 'prove' that the country belongs in the EU. Moreover, some of the things that would positively surprise the West, say a unilateral withdrawal of Turkish troops from Cyprus or opening the border with Armenia, could be politically explosive within Turkey. The risk is that such a step would win some Europeans but lose the Turks.

Simon Anholt thinks that a 'big event' could be more effective if it was not directly connected with the political issues surrounding accession. A startling change in Turkish politics or, more likely, in culture, society or business, would allow the Europeans to momentarily glimpse 'the real Turkey' in its modern manifestation, rather than 'the Turkish problem'. In this window of opportunity, the government would then have to start addressing accession-related concerns directly.

¹⁹ Simon Anholt, 'Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions', Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

In the absence of a 'big event', Turkey needs a comprehensive and consistent strategy for gradually improving its international image.¹⁹ Such an image is made up of various ingredients including politics, tourism, culture and business. In Turkey's case there are positive aspects (most of the 20 million tourists who visit Turkey every year come back happy), negative ones (high profile political events that confirm people's prejudices, such as court orders against journalists and threats of army intervention) and neglected ones (the image of 'made in Turkey' does not reflect the country's many world-class businesses). Moreover, the government's PR activities are sometimes inconsistent: whereas the

investment agency sells modern and open Turkey, the tourism board highlights the country's ancient, mystic and exotic features. Forging these different elements into a consistent whole will be difficult, particularly since Turkey itself is still engaged in a fierce debate about its national identity. "But", warns Anholt, "if a country does not manage its own brand, someone else will do it for the country." President Bush's designation of three countries as the 'axis of evil' is a good example of how this can happen.

The Turkish government's communication has already improved significantly. Until recently, Turkish politicians often threatened that their country would descend into mayhem and nationalism if the EU rejected its application. But this 'I will self-destruct in three minutes' argument was counter-productive: it portrayed Turkey as inherently unstable and unsuitable for EU membership. Today, Turkish government officials are more likely to highlight their country's strengths, and the contribution that Turkey can make to the EU's economic growth, foreign policy and energy security. They are also drawing on the private sector to design and implement the country's PR strategy. Turkish business in particular has traditionally been a strong and effective supporter of EU accession.²⁰ Moreover, the Erdoğan government has argued for some time now that most of the reforms required for EU accession are good for Turkey anyway. In line with this argument, in April 2007 the government published a plan for adopting most EU laws by 2013, irrespective of the state of accession talks or the public's mood. Such determined optimism is encouraging.

²⁰ Sinan Ülgen, 'Turkish business and EU accession', CER essay, December 2006.

Europeans struggle with the last enlargement

On the EU side too, there are some reasons to be cheerful. The think-tanks analysing national debates about Turkish accession in France, Germany and the Netherlands have found that interest in what goes on in Turkey has picked up. At the same time, there are good reasons to assume that the EU's current bout of 'enlargement fatigue' will diminish over time. This is because much opposition to future accessions really reflects an inability to come to terms with the last rounds of enlargement in 2004 and 2007.

Through eastward enlargement, the EU has added tens of millions of low-cost workers to its single market at a time when many EU economies were already under strain because of globalisation, ageing populations and technological change. In 2004, more than 60 per cent of West Europeans thought that enlargement would threaten their job.²¹ No wonder that opposition to enlargement is correlated with a country's economic performance and its unemployment rate. As the EU economy started to recover in 2006, enlargement fears abated: in the spring of 2007, the share of those in favour of further enlargement rose to 49 per cent (from 45 per cent a year earlier), while

²¹ Katinka Barysch, 'Enlargement two years on: Economic success or political failure?', briefing note for the Confederation of Danish Industries, April 2006.

the share of opponents dropped to 39 per cent (from 42 per cent).²² It is reasonable to assume that if the European economy maintains momentum, people will become more relaxed about further widening of the EU.

²² Standard Eurobarometers No 65 and 67, July 2006 and July 2007.

²³ Standard Eurobarometer No 64, June 2006.

Another encouraging trend that emerges from the opinion polls is that attitudes towards Turkish accession are conditional on what happens in the EU and Turkey. In late 2005, Eurobarometer asked EU citizens about the prospects of Turkish membership, and found that 31 per cent were in favour of accession and 55 per cent were against.²³ A couple of months later, it asked whether people would support membership "once Turkey complies with all the conditions set by the EU"? This left Europeans more equally split, with 39 per cent coming out in favour and 48 per cent against.²⁴ The FT/Harris poll from 2007 shows a similar shift in answers once the question is phrased this way. These results suggest that if Turkey continues with its modernisation, many Europeans will be willing to re-think their position towards Turkish membership.

²⁴ Special Eurobarometer, 'Attitudes towards EU enlargement', July 2006.

Public opinion is a challenge for Turkish accession, but it does not appear to be an insurmountable obstacle. It can be turned around – provided Turkish politicians do not descend into gloom and instead continue to reform and to highlight their country's modern and appealing aspects; and provided EU politicians pluck up the courage to lead public opinion rather than follow it.

September 2007

Katinka Barysch is deputy director of the Centre for European Reform.

This essay is partly based on the CER seminar on 'Europe's public opinion on Turkish EU accession' in Brussels on June 19th 2007. The CER would like to thank the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation in Turkey for supporting its work on Turkish EU accession.

For further information, visit our website

www.cer.org.uk