

# Turkish Membership of the EU and the Fears of European Public Opinion

## **Eduard Soler i Lecha**

Coordinator of the Mediterranean Programme, Fundació CIDOB, Barcelona

A relevant part of the EU citizens observe with mistrust the possibility that Turkey may one day become a full member of the Union. This state of public opinion has had an impact on the progress of the membership negotiations begun by Turkey in October 2005. In order to judge what this impact has been, we need, first of all, to bear in mind the context. On a European, Mediterranean and global level the context is characterized by a retreat into communitarianism. A context in which the EU is immersed in a generalized sense of crisis or, maybe a feeling of *impasse*.

An EU in which both racist or xenophobic movements and protectionist attitudes are extending their influence is not especially inclined to welcome into its bosom a country that many see as too big, too poor and too different. Furthermore, this communitarianism is also making its mark in southern and eastern Mediterranean societies, no exception for Turkey. It takes shape through reactions of either a religious or a nationalistic nature, and the latter tendency is more pronounced in Turkey than in any other country in the region. This situation, with the risk of a widening gap between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, and with a Turkey on the defensive, is not particularly favourable to a quiet progression in EU-Turkish relations. If we also add that the EU and some of its main member states are not passing through a period of great political or economic enthusiasm, we can come to the conclusion that current con-

ditions are not ideal for those defending Turkish entry.

One of the most serious setbacks so far to the process of European construction has been the freezing of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty after the negative votes in the referenda in France (in May 2005) and the Netherlands (in June 2005). Once the results were known, some analysts were quick to establish a link between the rejection by a relevant part of European citizens of the possibility that Turkey might join the EU, and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty. It was said that there was a widespread discontent among EU citizens with regard to a process of enlargement orchestrated by the principal European leaders but ignoring the feelings (and fears) of European public opinion. It is in fact true that in France, for example, some political leaders campaigned against the referendum arguing that rejection of the Treaty would be interpreted as a rejection of the possibility of Turkish entry.

Nevertheless, subsequent opinion surveys demonstrated that the link between the two rejections was not so clear. Two Eurobarometer Surveys indicated that those who had voted against the Treaty because of the Turkish issue represented a tiny minority in both countries: no more than six per cent. Anyway, the situation that had been created gave strength to those who argue that the EU is suffering from "enlargement fatigue". They propose that the process should be halted so that there can be calm reflection on the way to reconcile on one hand, the deceleration in membership negotiations and, on the other hand the promises made and the expectations generated in recent years. It should be remembered that not only have Turkey

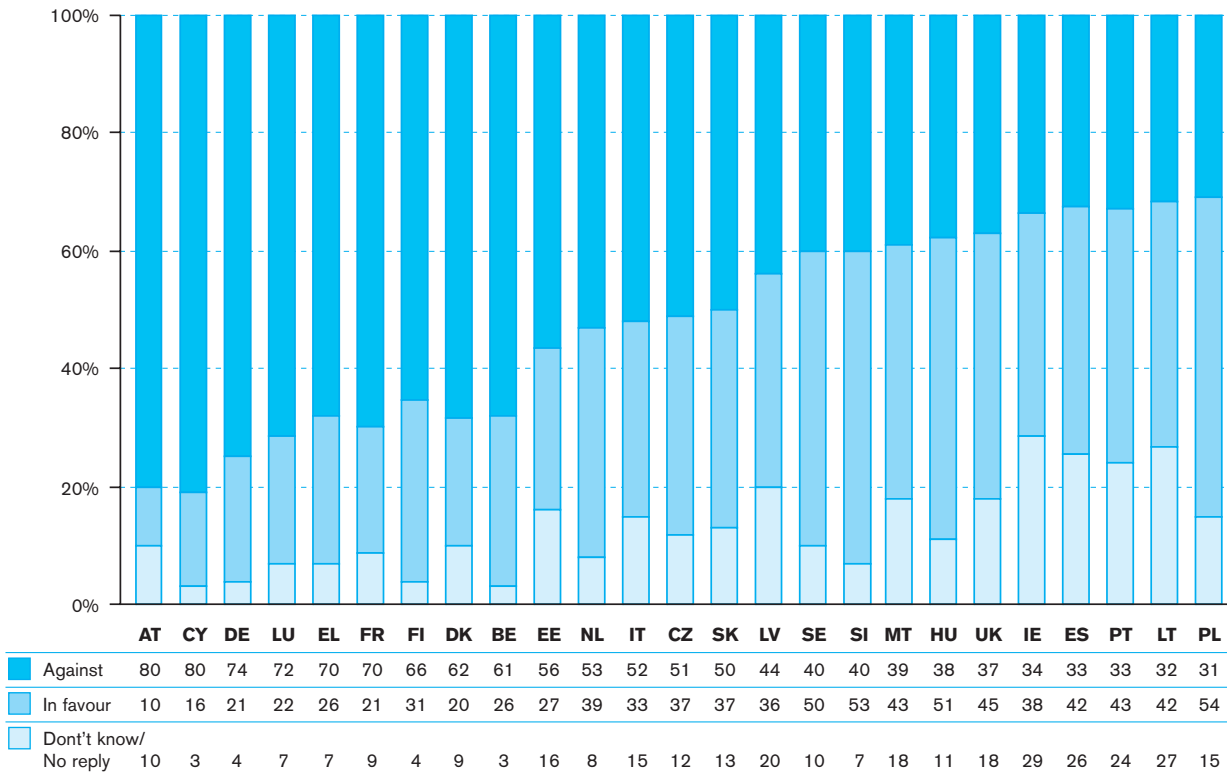
and Croatia began negotiations, but also to the western Balkan countries has been promised that they could form part of the EU in the future.

As we shall see, the fact that citizens' discontent has been attributed to the process of enlargement has caused damage to the negotiating context in which Turkey has to conduct its candidature. Before analysing these effects it would be useful to note a certain number of details concerning the state of European public opinion with regard to this question. First of all, it should be noted that it is not always explained to what extent European public opinion is divided on this subject. There are in fact notable variations when we compare the state of public opinion on a country-by-country basis. Whilst Turkish membership is rejected by more than 70% in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, France, Greece and Luxembourg, in other countries like Poland, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain or Ireland this is the case for less than 35% of the electorate. In general terms we can see that the rejection is strongest in the countries of central and Eastern Europe, which are those that receive the largest number of Turkish immigrants, whilst there is less opposition to Turkish candidature in the peripheral European countries, except in the case of Greece and Cyprus. In fact, in many of these countries it is not that there is enthusiastic support on the part of their citizens but rather a high degree of indifference.

Despite these differences, the latest Eurobarometer Surveys allow us to note certain common tendencies. The first of these is that the candidature of other countries generates less opposition than that of Turkey. This is obviously the case for rich countries like Norway, Switzer-

GRAPHIC 5

Would you be in favour of Turkey's membership in the future?



Source: Eurobarometer no.63, Spring 2005.

land or Iceland, but what is more intriguing is that those countries with a lower average income than Turkey, such as the Ukraine or the Balkan countries, also receive more support. Moreover, since 2005, the Eurobarometer Survey has included a question dealing with the feelings and impressions provoked by the question of Turkish entry. If we look at the results of Eurobarometer no.63 (Spring 2005) we can see that, strangely, there are more people who consider that Turkey is geographically (55%) and historically (42%) European than who are attracted by arguments such as Turkey's contribution to European security (38%) or to the rejuvenation of Europe (29%), topics so frequently raised by European leaders and by their Turkish counterparts. On the other hand, these sources also show us that the point creating much consensus is that Turkey must make significant progress in the next few years in terms of respect for human rights (84% of those polled). More than half of those that were surveyed also showed anxiety about a possible increase of immigrant flows that could be caused by Turkish entry (63%), as well

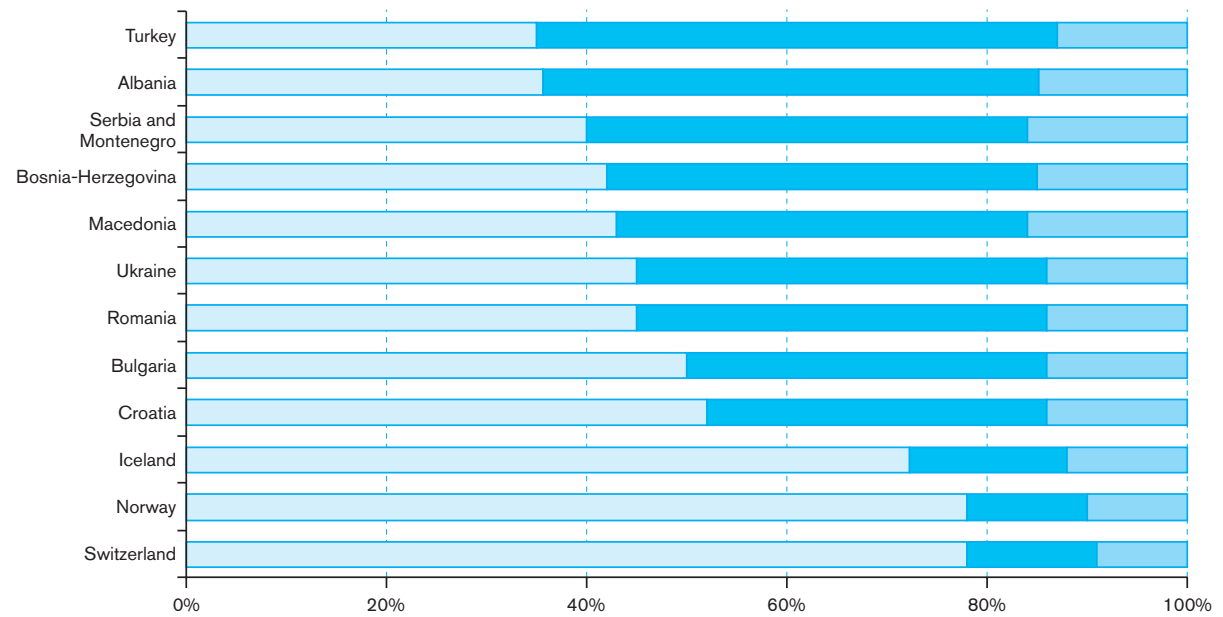
as about cultural differences between Turkey and the EU (54%). There is no doubt that these concerns are likely to be exploited in electoral contexts, and in fact this has already been the case in different elections such as those for the European Parliament in 2004, the legislative and regional elections in Germany, the constitutional referendum in France, etc.

As indicated above, this state of public opinion had an effect on the negotiating context in which Turkey started membership negotiations, whose most controversial aspects had already been announced at the conclusion of the European Council meeting on December 17th 2004. We can see its impact on two remits. Firstly, in the insistence on the part of the EU that it cannot guarantee the satisfactory outcome of the negotiations. Secondly, in the announcement that Turkey would be excluded from certain EU policies. Let's give a more detailed look,

The defining framework for the negotiations states explicitly that, although the common objective of the negotiations is Turkish membership, there is no fixed

time limit for the negotiations to be completed, and, furthermore, a positive outcome cannot be taken for granted. It is further declared that "if Turkey is not able to assume completely the responsibilities that its membership would involve, it should be ensured that Turkey is fully linked to European structures". This veiled reference to the possibility that in the end Turkey could be offered the status of privileged partner was the result of the insistence of certain countries, and especially of Austria, which threatened right up to the last moment to prevent the initiation of negotiations. This is not an accident, since as we have just seen it is the country where there is the smallest support for Turkish membership, with only ten per cent of citizens in favour. The negotiating framework also covers the possibility that the EU may break off membership negotiations unilaterally, at the request of the Commission or of a third of the states member, if there should be serious and persistent violation of the principles of freedom, democracy, the respect of human rights, of fundamental freedoms or of the rule of law. This clause shows

**GRAPHIC 6** In the case of each of these countries, are you in favour of or against its membership of the EU?



	Switzerland	Norway	Iceland	Croatia	Bulgaria	Romania	Ukraine	Macedonia	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Serbia and Montenegro	Albania	Turkey
Against	13	12	17	34	36	41	41	41	43	44	50	52
In favour	78	78	78	52	50	45	45	43	42	40	36	35
Don't know/No reply	9	10	13	14	14	14	14	16	15	16	15	13

Source: Eurobarometer no.63, Spring 2005.

that European leaders, like European citizens, consider that Turkey still needs to perfect the democratic nature of its political system, and that there is a risk that there could be a regression. Finally, although this does not enter into the negotiating framework, we should point out that another effect of the negative state of public opinion was the announcement in France and in Austria that they would hold a referendum so that citizens could make their voices heard before Turkish membership took place. We can also see the consequences of this climate of opinion when it is mentioned that permanent safeguards could be applied against Turkey in connection with certain policies, such as agriculture or structural policy (i.e., those that receive most money), or the free circulation of people. Many observers doubt that these permanent safeguards could really be applied, since they would be equivalent to a violation of the guiding principles of the EU, and the Commission, as guarantor of the treaties, would

have to prevent this. It can be interpreted, then, as a way for governments to reassure public opinion, especially in the case of those countries in a more fragile economic situation and which are already host to a larger number of workers of Turkish origin. In short, the fear that the Turkish candidature provokes for a significant proportion of European citizens has given arguments to those member states which are not enthusiastic supporters of Turkish membership, and has manifested itself in the framework that regulates the context of the negotiations for membership that Turkey initiated in 2005. As we have seen, there are also countries which have promised to consult their citizens before Turkey joins the EU. Thus, if we wish successfully to conclude a process which commenced more than four decades ago, it is necessary to take into account the state of public opinion that we have described above and act accordingly. Turkey and those in the EU who support its membership must con-

vince, persuade and even seduce at least a part of those who are currently reluctant. The Commission has announced the launching of a financial programme to increase mutual contacts and awareness. Although this is a positive step, this type of action cannot in itself produce a significant change of tendency. To achieve this we would need to take action on the one hand against structural elements such as Islamophobia or the rejection of immigration. Turkey on the other hand should make an effort to improve its image, through a campaign of public diplomacy stressing the potential for change in the political, social and economic aspects that the entry negotiations and ultimate membership would bring about. Finally, a revival of the economic expectations of some EU countries would be of crucial importance, since this would allow them to look with greater ambition and optimism towards the future, and at the same time the future construction of Europe.