

Unwavering aspirations: An exploratory analysis of the resilience of Turkish public support for EU membership*

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Abstract

This article explores the resilience of Turkish public support for European Union (EU) membership, despite significant political, economic, and diplomatic challenges in Türkiye-EU relations. Using secondary survey data, the study provides an exploratory analysis of trends and underlying determinants of public sentiment, examining three main hypotheses: (H1) Feasibility, (H2) Positive Historical Experience, and (H3) Ideological Entrenchment. The findings reveal that while feasibility and historical experience contribute to public support, it is the deep-rooted ideological commitment to democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law that sustains positive attitudes towards EU membership. The study argues that Turkish public opinion acts as an internal anchor, sort of a north star for the country's European aspirations, even as political divergence and skepticism from EU member states persist. Limitations of the study are noted, highlighting the descriptive nature of the analysis and the absence of advanced statistical techniques. The article concludes with a call for future research integrating more sophisticated methods to further explore the complex factors influencing Turkish public opinion on EU membership.

Key words: Turkish Public Opinion; European Union Membership; Ideological Entrenchment; Türkiye-EU Relations.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Türkiye and the European Union (EU) has evolved through decades of complex political, economic, and social developments, marked by phases of optimism, setbacks, and prolonged stagnation. While Türkiye has held EU candidate status since 1999, recent political shifts within both Türkiye and the EU have led to significant tensions and stalled negotiations. The membership process, once symbolizing a pathway toward greater alignment with European standards in democracy, human rights, and economic prosperity, has encountered considerable roadblocks. Amid rising skepticism from EU member states and domestic challenges in Türkiye, the accession process appears indefinitely delayed.

Turkish public opinion on the European Union (EU) and Turkey's potential membership has been extensively studied, particularly since the 2000s. Seminal works, such as Şenyuva's *State of the Art* article and Çarkoğlu and Kentmen's (2011) detailed analyses, have examined the determinants of public support using available public opinion data. For instance, Çarkoğlu's pioneering study, "Who Wants Full Membership?" (2003), tested hypotheses to understand the characteristics of Turkish support for EU membership. Respondents aged 20 at the time of his survey are now 42 years old, and those who were 42 are now 64. Despite the passing decades, Turkey remains far from EU membership. However, the remarkable reality persists: Turkish public opinion continues to favor Turkey's full membership in the EU.

Eurobarometer data since 2002 consistently show that, despite fluctuations, a clear majority of Turkish citizens—across generations—support EU membership. This enduring support within Turkish public opinion poses a compelling question: why does support for EU membership persist despite the mounting political and practical obstacles? In short: *Why do the Turkish public still support Turkey's EU membership?*

Answering this question comprehensively requires longitudinal data, a coherent merged dataset, and the investment of significant time, effort, and mixed-methodological approaches. Such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this study seeks to highlight the resilience and enduring commitment of Turkish public opinion toward EU membership. Its goal is to initiate a broader debate on the next stage of public opinion studies within the context of Türkiye-EU relations.

To address this, the article offers three alternative explanations grounded in Türkiye-EU relations that may guide future research. These hypotheses aim to serve as a foundation for more robust data collection and analysis, exploring the deeper dynamics underlying Turkish public support for EU membership and offering insights into its long-term resilience. First, the **Feasibility Hypothesis** (H1) suggests

that Turkish citizens maintain hope for future EU membership, viewing it as a feasible and attainable long-term objective. Despite the complexities surrounding the accession process, proponents of this view may see Türkiye's membership to the EU as part of a gradual trajectory, an eventual outcome, motivating sustained public support.

Second, the **Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis** (H2) posits that favorable past experiences and achievements in the EU accession process create a reservoir of positive sentiment towards membership. This explanation rests on the notion that the Turkish public draws on periods of successful negotiations and reforms that resulted in significant economic and political gains, fostering a sense of loyalty and optimism about future prospects, even amid recent downturns in relations.

Third, the **Ideological Entrenchment Hypothesis** (H3) argues that Turkish public support for EU membership endures due to deeply held political values, such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law, which align with core principles of the EU and the expected utility. This hypothesis is grounded in the idea of "ideological entrenchment," suggesting that fundamental political beliefs remain stable and resilient, even in times of political crises or external challenges. The Ideological Entrenchment Hypothesis (H3) is framed to address both the aspirational and utilitarian dimensions of Turkish public support for EU membership, emphasizing the EU's role as a "North Star" guiding societal aspirations. This hypothesis posits that support for EU membership is sustained by the EU's dual function as an aspirational model for democratic governance, human rights, and rule of law, as well as a practical promise of economic prosperity. This synthesis of ideological and utilitarian perspectives highlights a complex alignment between long-term societal ideals and pragmatic considerations.

From an ideological perspective, Turkish citizens have historically viewed EU standards as a benchmark for improving governance, safeguarding human rights, and reinforcing the rule of law. These ideals have become deeply embedded in public opinion, even amid domestic political turbulence and international skepticism about Türkiye's membership prospects. However, this support is not purely ideological; it is also rooted in utilitarian expectations. According to the utilitarian expectations model, Turkish citizens perceive EU membership as a pathway to tangible economic benefits, including increased investment, enhanced trade opportunities, job creation, and economic stability. These economic incentives resonate strongly, especially during periods of domestic economic uncertainty and global financial instability.

The integration of ideological and economic considerations strengthens the hypothesis by acknowledging the interplay between values and material benefits. For many Turkish citizens, EU membership represents not just an idealistic goal but

a pragmatic strategy for improving their quality of life and securing economic opportunities. The EU's perceived capacity to deliver economic growth and enhance social welfare complements its symbolic role as a normative anchor, thereby sustaining support across diverse demographic and socio-economic groups.

This reframing also considers the absence of compelling alternatives to EU membership since the early 2000s. Successive Turkish governments and the Erdoğan presidencies have failed to construct a credible vision of economic and political independence that surpasses the perceived benefits of EU integration. Unlike Brexit, where the United Kingdom chose to leave a functional membership framework, Türkiye's persistent aspiration for EU membership reflects the lack of a similarly viable "exit option." The EU's sustained appeal lies in its dual promise of normative alignment and material prosperity, underscoring its role as both a beacon of values and a foundation for economic progress. However, the aspiration-expectation gap persists, as citizens support the idea of membership while doubting its feasibility. This study reconsiders the ideological underpinnings of support, suggesting that public opinion is shaped by a combination of aspirational alignment and pragmatic concerns. As no compelling alternative to EU membership has emerged since the early 2000s, the EU retains its position as the most attractive framework for Türkiye's political, social, and economic development.

The three hypotheses introduced in this article are derived from an extensive analysis of Turkish public opinion and the determinants of support for EU membership. Their development stems from an effort to address a gap in the existing literature, which predominantly examines these determinants through a snapshot perspective, relying on single-survey data to analyze support at a specific point in time. Such an approach overlooks the importance of temporal dynamics in shaping public attitudes. In contrast, the hypotheses here aim to incorporate an over-time perspective, factoring in both historical experiences and future expectations. H1 and H2 are designed to explore questions that require longitudinal consideration, reflecting how past achievements and the perceived feasibility of membership influence enduring support. Meanwhile, H3 combines ideological and utilitarian explanations—key themes in the Turkish public opinion and EU literature—to capture the complex interplay of values and material considerations that underpin the resilience of public support for EU membership.

Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of public opinion in Türkiye and the interplay between long-term ideological commitments and evolving political contexts. It sheds light on how enduring political values and historical narratives can shape and sustain public support, offering insights into the complex dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations and the role of public opinion in foreign policy aspirations.

In outlining the scope of this study, it is important to note its exploratory and descriptive nature. The analysis is based exclusively on secondary survey data, employing descriptive statistical methods without delving into advanced statistical techniques or controlling for confounding factors such as age, gender, education, and political affiliation. This methodological choice was deliberate, as the study aims to provide an initial, broad examination of the resilience of Turkish public support for EU membership and to spark a wider discussion on this topic. By focusing on general trends and key patterns, the study seeks to highlight the underlying dynamics of public opinion. However, the findings also indicate the need for more comprehensive future research. Advanced data analysis methods, including time series analysis, multivariate regression, and structural equation modeling, would offer deeper insights into the complex factors influencing Turkish public attitudes towards the EU in a longitudinal frame, potentially uncovering the specific pathways through which ideological commitments play a role.

1.1. Nothing is free of Time and Space: Why temporality matters?

The trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations has been complex and marked by distinct phases of convergence and divergence. As Eralp (2009) argues, the interaction between Türkiye and the EU has not followed a straightforward path, but rather had a "cyclical nature" shaped by historical contingencies and shifts in both Turkish and European political landscapes. Early relations, particularly from the 1950s through the 1970s, reflected a period of alignment due to shared geopolitical concerns during the Cold War, when Türkiye's westernization efforts and security needs aligned with the European Community's (EC) strategic interests. However, this initial convergence gave way to significant divergence beginning in the late 1970s. Türkiye faced internal economic struggles and political turbulence, including the 1980 military coup, which disrupted its Europeanization process. Simultaneously, the European Community began focusing on deepening and expanding its integration project, prioritizing democratic governance and economic cohesion among its member states (Eralp 2009: 152). The result was a growing disconnect between Turkish and EU priorities, as the EC became increasingly selective about candidate countries, emphasizing criteria that Türkiye struggled to meet.

The Helsinki Summit of 1999 marked a pivotal moment, offering Türkiye official candidate status and sparking renewed optimism for EU accession. This period of convergence was largely facilitated by the EU's adoption of a more inclusive approach, recognizing Türkiye's geopolitical importance and its potential contribution to regional stability. However, Eralp points out that after 2004, the relationship again entered a phase of divergence, driven by the EU's "enlargement fatigue" and concerns over Türkiye's domestic reforms (Eralp 2009: 161). EU

skepticism intensified as Türkiye's progress on democratic reforms stalled, and contentious issues, such as the Cyprus dispute, resurfaced. The period after 2004 saw a shift from a previously favorable integration climate to a more complex and challenging environment for Türkiye's accession. Eralp notes, "as the EU turned inward and focused on institutional consolidation, the enthusiasm for Turkish membership waned," creating an asymmetry in the priorities of Türkiye and the EU (Eralp, 2009, 159).

Eralp's concept of temporality forms the basis of this article's theoretical framework, providing a lens to analyze the Turkish public's support for EU membership. Despite ongoing challenges and the EU's increasingly critical stance, Turkish public opinion has remained remarkably resilient in favor of EU membership. This article examines several hypotheses to explain this phenomenon, drawing on Eralp's observation that "temporality and interaction are crucial for understanding the fluctuations in Türkiye-EU relations" (Eralp 2009: 150).

Damla Cihangir Tetik and Thomas Diez's recent article, "Talking Past while Needing One Another: The Complex and Ambiguous Relationship between the EU and Türkiye" (2024), offers a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of Türkiye-EU relations. It extends Eralp's periodization and offers an analysis that aim to go beyond a unidirectional movement. The authors provide a thorough chronological account, pinpointing pivotal moments that have shaped the legal, political, and societal dimensions of this multifaceted relationship. Their argument rejects binary interpretations and they analyze different aspects of the relationship. The main argument offered is that there is a situation of both entanglement and estrangement rather than a clear unidirectional movement between Türkiye and the EU (Tetik and Diez 2024: 202). They argue that, Türkiye-Europe relations are neither linear nor inevitable; they emerge from constant struggles among diverse actors, resulting in a complex web of entanglements and ruptures that defies simplistic labels of 'pro-' or 'anti-European.' To truly understand this dynamic, one must study it across policy fields, avoiding biases tied to the idiosyncrasies of any single domain (Tetik and Diez 2024: 188-189). By framing this dynamic as one of radical interdependence and liminality, the authors highlight the absence of a "natural" trajectory for Türkiye's place within or outside Europe.

This insight complements the argument presented in this article, particularly the enduring resilience of Turkish public support for EU membership. Both studies underscore the necessity of embracing complexity and ambiguity while critically assessing the shifting currents of Türkiye-EU relations.

2. Turkish public opinion: State of art on the trends and determinants

Turkish public opinion on EU membership has undergone significant changes, characterized by fluctuating support levels and a growing skepticism towards the EU's commitment to Türkiye's accession. This paradoxical situation—enduring support coupled with deepening distrust—reflects broader socio-political dynamics within Türkiye and the evolving nature of Türkiye-EU relations.

The evolving political dynamics between the two sides, particularly the stalled negotiations and formal relations, have been the subject of extensive academic research in recent years. Notably, the (largely negative) public opinion toward Türkiye's prospective EU membership—both within key member states and among the Turkish population—has garnered significant attention. Analysts frequently highlight the declining levels of support for Türkiye's accession across various European countries, as well as in Türkiye itself. These trends are often cited as evidence supporting broader arguments about the likely future trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations. However, the link between these political developments and the shifts in public opinion has not been thoroughly explored. While many studies focus on statistical trends, few delve into the underlying factors that influence these changes in sentiment.

Rather than relying solely on quantitative analysis, this article aims to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the indicators that either shape or reflect the current state of public opinion statistics. In essence, the approach taken here seeks to discuss and interpret the available data, rather than conduct original statistical analysis. This section presents the findings of various public opinion studies, followed by a discussion of the indicators revealed through these analyses.

The central argument presented in this section is that Turkish public opinion on EU membership is highly volatile, exhibiting significant shifts over time. The analysis suggests that this volatility, although underexamined in the existing literature, is neither random nor incoherent. Instead, Turkish public opinion is highly responsive to political developments in Türkiye-EU relations, reacting either positively or negatively depending on the context. The findings also indicate that public support for EU membership is likely to remain skeptical on the eventuality of membership in the foreseeable future, barring a substantial breakthrough in Türkiye-EU relations. This trend is closely linked to a severe decline in trust toward EU institutions among the Turkish public. Trust, as a key indicator, has shown a steady downward trajectory over the past decade, suggesting a deep-seated erosion of confidence. Therefore, it can be argued that the pervasive mistrust of the EU among Turkish citizens is likely to be a significant obstacle in any future scenario of cooperation or convergence.

Survey data remains the predominant method for examining public opinion on EU integration. There is a long-standing tradition of systematic data collection on public attitudes toward European integration across various European countries, which has enabled scholars to conduct comprehensive, longitudinal analyses and identify trends and determinants. However, as noted by Çarkoğlu and Kentmen, “Although Türkiye has a long and troubled relationship with the EU, there are only a few empirically informed studies analyzing the determinants of Turkish public support for membership of the EU” (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen, 2011: 365). Much of the existing research has focused on intergovernmental politics and high-level economic and political issues, rather than on empirical analyses of public opinion trends.

The limited number of empirical studies on Turkish public opinion regarding EU integration and potential membership can be attributed to the historical lack of systematic data collection in Türkiye. Reliable and scientifically gathered data only emerged in the early 2000s (Şenyuva, 2006). Prior to this, the available data were often sporadic and collected by various institutions or individual researchers, making over-time analysis challenging and raising concerns about the reliability and validity of the findings. Türkiye’s inclusion in the Eurobarometer studies from 2001 onwards marked a significant improvement in data quality, allowing for the generation of public opinion data with strong reliability and validity. Furthermore, this data became comparable with public opinion metrics from other European countries, facilitating over-time analyses and cross-national comparisons.

The integration of Türkiye into major international surveys, such as the Eurobarometer, Transatlantic Trends, and PEW Global surveys, significantly expanded the scope of research on Turkish public opinion toward the EU. These surveys included specific questions on Türkiye-EU relations, providing a rich dataset for scholars both within Türkiye and internationally to explore the determinants of support and track changes over time. Concurrently, research teams based in Türkiye also began producing their own reliable survey data, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of public attitudes.

An examination of the survey data on Turkish public opinion toward the EU reveals a strong correlation between the state of Türkiye-EU relations and public sentiment. Poll results are often influenced by the broader political context, especially during periods of divergence or heightened tensions. Notably, there is a discernible pattern of shifts in the phrasing of key questions over time, such as “Türkiye’s membership would be a good thing/bad thing” or “Do you support Türkiye’s membership?” At times of significant backlash or opposition, particularly during contentious negotiations, these questions have been either minimized or omitted from surveys like the Eurobarometer to avoid highlighting negative sentiments and strong objections.

While there has been a significant increase in the availability and quality of public opinion data since the early 2000s, the analysis of this data reveals a complex picture of Turkish attitudes toward EU membership. Trust in EU institutions has been consistently declining, indicating a growing disillusionment among the Turkish public. This lack of trust, coupled with the volatility of public support, underscores the importance of understanding the socio-political factors that drive these trends. Without addressing the underlying issues of trust and political alignment, efforts to foster support for EU integration in Türkiye are likely to face significant challenges.

Historically, Turkish public opinion was strongly in favor of EU membership, especially during the early 2000s, when support peaked at around 70%. This period, often referred to as the "golden age" of Europeanization, was marked by optimism about Türkiye's accession prospects following the 1999 Helsinki Summit, where Türkiye was officially recognized as a candidate country. The momentum for reform, driven by the perceived benefits of EU membership, aligned with Türkiye's broader modernization agenda. Citizens anticipated economic gains, including increased foreign investment and improved access to European markets, which underpinned widespread support across different segments of society. However, this enthusiasm began to decline significantly after the mid-2000s. The initial optimism was dampened by several political and economic setbacks that revealed deep structural issues in the accession process. One of the critical turning points was the EU's handling of the 2004 Cyprus Referendum, where the Turkish public perceived the EU's actions as biased and unfair. Despite Turkish Cypriots voting in favor of the Annan Plan, which aimed at reunification, the Republic of Cyprus—represented by the Greek Cypriot administration—was admitted into the EU without resolving the ongoing dispute. This event was seen as a clear example of the EU applying double standards, which led to a rapid decline in public support for membership and a growing sentiment of disillusionment.

By the time formal accession negotiations began in 2005, public support had already dropped significantly, reflecting a broader disillusionment with the EU's perceived reluctance to embrace Türkiye fully. The Eurobarometer data from this period highlight the volatility of Turkish public sentiment, showing a steep decline in trust towards EU institutions. While support for the *idea* of membership remained relatively stable, confidence in the EU as a trustworthy partner eroded rapidly. Şenyuva (2018) notes that this trend was particularly evident in surveys from 2004 to 2015, where the net trust in EU institutions shifted from a positive outlook to a deeply negative perception, with trust levels falling by almost 50 %.

Özgehan Şenyuva's 2009 article, *Türkiye Kamuoyu ve Avrupa Birliği 2001-2008: Beklentiler, İstekler ve Korkular*, provides an early and comprehensive analysis of Turkish public opinion on EU membership, using Eurobarometer data

from 2001 to 2008. The study identifies key trends, including strong initial support peaking in 2004, driven by political reforms and accession talks, followed by a decline after 2005 as skepticism about the EU's intentions grew alongside political tensions.

A major finding is the erosion of trust in EU institutions, exacerbated by political rhetoric and negative media narratives. Şenyuva (2018) highlights the role of national identity in fostering skepticism, with strong attachment to sovereignty correlating with concerns over cultural incompatibility. These dynamics reflect broader fears of losing autonomy and distinctiveness within the EU framework. Methodologically, the study's longitudinal approach tracks shifts in sentiment over time, offering valuable insights into how political, economic, and identity-related factors interact to shape Turkish attitudes toward EU membership.

A notable aspect of Şenyuva's findings (2009) is the fluctuation in public attitudes, characterized by phases of enthusiasm followed by periods of disillusionment. For instance, the Eurobarometer surveys from 2001 to 2004 indicate increasing public approval of EU membership, reaching a high of 71% in favor by 2004. This rise was linked to positive political developments, such as the Turkish government's reform initiatives and the EU's decision to start accession talks. However, from 2005 onwards, public support began to decline sharply, coinciding with mounting skepticism about the EU's intentions and increasing political tensions between Türkiye and the EU. By 2007-2008, support for EU membership had fallen below 50%, highlighting a significant shift in public sentiment.

One of the central arguments of the article is the growing disillusionment among the Turkish public towards EU institutions. The study emphasizes the role of political messaging and media narratives in shaping public perceptions, pointing out that anti-EU rhetoric from political elites, particularly after the start of formal negotiations, contributed to a decline in trust. This decline in institutional trust is reflected in the Eurobarometer data, which show a steady drop in the perceived credibility of EU institutions. The net trust level, which was positive in the early 2000s, turned sharply negative by 2007, indicating a substantial erosion of confidence among Turkish citizens.

Şenyuva also explores the role of national identity and cultural factors in shaping public attitudes. The study finds that a strong attachment to national identity correlates with increased skepticism towards EU membership. This finding aligns with broader literature suggesting that individuals who prioritize national sovereignty are more likely to view EU integration as a threat to cultural distinctiveness and autonomy. The analysis of survey responses reveals a deepening perception of cultural differences between Türkiye and the EU, with many Turkish

citizens expressing concerns that these differences are too significant to bridge, potentially hindering Türkiye's full integration into the European bloc.

From a historical perspective, Şenyuva's findings provide a valuable baseline for understanding the dynamics of Turkish public opinion on EU membership. The article's emphasis on the volatility of support and the decline in institutional trust lays the groundwork for subsequent research, including the current study's focus on the resilience of public support despite growing skepticism. In particular, Şenyuva's analysis of the role of national identity and cultural perceptions resonates with the **ideological entrenchment hypothesis** (H3) proposed in this article, which posits that deeply held political values related to democracy, human rights, and economic prosperity aspirations underpin consistent public support for EU membership, even in the face of political obstacles and declining trust in EU institutions.

The early identification of trends in public skepticism, as well as the emphasis on the interplay between economic expectations and identity concerns, aligns closely with the arguments made in the present research. Şenyuva's work underscores the importance of considering both the instrumental and ideational dimensions of public support, highlighting how shifts in political context and elite rhetoric can influence broader public attitudes. This historic analysis provides a critical foundation for understanding the resilience of Turkish public opinion and supports the argument that ideological entrenchment, rather than merely economic or political calculations, plays a significant role in sustaining public support for EU membership over time.

The decline in trust can be attributed to several factors, including the EU's inconsistent stance on Türkiye's accession and the influence of domestic political narratives. Political elites in Türkiye, particularly from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), have played a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Initially, the AKP government was a strong proponent of EU membership, using the reform agenda to consolidate its power and weaken the Kemalist-bureaucratic establishment. However, as the party's domestic position strengthened, the EU's strategic importance in the AKP's political calculus began to diminish. By the late 2000s, the tone of government rhetoric had shifted, reflecting a more confrontational stance towards the EU, which resonated with a public increasingly disillusioned by what they perceived as European hypocrisy and reluctance to treat Türkiye as an equal partner (Arkan, 2016).

The analysis by Yaka (2016) further elaborates on this shift, highlighting the role of Gramsci's concept of "common sense" in understanding the changes in Turkish public opinion. Yaka (2016) argues that the public's initial enthusiasm for EU membership was rooted in a pragmatic, instrumental view of the EU as a means to achieve economic stability and political reform. However, as the EU's reluctance to progress with accession negotiations became more apparent, this pragmatic

support transformed into a more skeptical and even hostile stance. The Gramscian framework helps explain the contradictions in public attitudes: while there is a desire for the economic benefits associated with EU integration, there is also a deep-seated mistrust rooted in historical grievances and cultural differences. Yaka's (2016) study reveals that Turkish common sense about Europe has always been ambivalent, combining admiration for European modernization with a historical resentment of Western dominance and perceived cultural arrogance.

The generational divide in attitudes towards the EU is also noteworthy. Younger, university-educated individuals tend to have a more favorable view of the EU, often seeing it as a symbol of democratic values and human rights. This segment of the population, exposed to EU-funded educational programs and cultural exchanges, views European integration as a pathway to broader opportunities. In contrast, older generations and more conservative segments of the population exhibit higher levels of skepticism, shaped by nationalist narratives and concerns over cultural sovereignty. (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen, 2011). However, the youth perceptions are not free of and above the current negative situation of the Türkiye-EU relations and even the most educated youth groups voice their criticisms of the EU and shared belief that Turkey is not treated fairly, thus believing that eventual membership is unlikely (Bedir and Şenyuva, 2024).

Despite fluctuations in support, Turkish public opinion continues to exhibit a certain level of aspiration towards EU membership, albeit more symbolic than practical. Surveys indicate that while many citizens doubt the feasibility of full membership, they still regard the EU as a benchmark for democratic governance and human rights standards. This suggests that the underlying desire for Europeanization, rooted in Türkiye's long-standing modernization project, has not entirely faded, even if confidence in the EU's commitment to Türkiye's accession has waned. The decline in support and trust towards the EU can be seen as a response to the perceived double standards and inconsistency in the EU's approach, combined with a growing domestic narrative that emphasizes national sovereignty and self-reliance. Understanding these nuanced attitudes requires a comprehensive analysis that considers both the evolving political dynamics and the deeper socio-cultural context that shapes public perceptions.

The article *Diagnosing Trends and Determinants in Public Support for Turkey's EU Membership* by Ali Çarkoğlu and Çiğdem Kentmen (2011) offers a comprehensive examination of Turkish public opinion on EU membership. It stands out as one of the most thorough analyses in the field, integrating findings from multiple large-scale surveys and testing a variety of theoretical models to explain the determinants of support. The authors draw on data from the Turkish Election Surveys (TES), Eurobarometer (EB), and the International Social Survey

Programme (ISSP) to explore cross-sectional and temporal trends, making this work a seminal contribution to understanding Turkish attitudes towards EU membership.

The article begins by addressing a notable gap in the literature: while there is extensive research on EU-Türkiye relations from an institutional and policy perspective, fewer studies have empirically analyzed the determinants of Turkish public opinion. Çarkoğlu and Kentmen's (2011) approach is methodologically rigorous, using a combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses to offer a nuanced picture of how support for EU membership has evolved over time. Their study covers a period from 2001 to 2009, capturing significant shifts in public sentiment during key phases of Türkiye's EU accession process.

The authors identify three primary models to explain public opinion trends: the utilitarian expectations model, the democratic satisfaction model, and the identity-based model.

The **utilitarian expectations model** posits that individuals' support for EU membership is primarily shaped by their economic perceptions. According to this model, Turkish citizens who believe that EU accession will lead to positive economic outcomes—such as increased investment and job creation—are more likely to support membership. Çarkoğlu and Kentmen's (2011) analysis confirms this hypothesis, showing a significant correlation between positive economic evaluations and higher levels of support for EU membership. However, their findings also suggest that this relationship has weakened over time, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, which led to growing skepticism about the EU's economic stability and benefits.

The **democratic satisfaction model** examines the link between support for democracy and positive attitudes towards EU membership. The EU has historically been seen as a promoter of democratic norms and human rights, and Çarkoğlu and Kentmen (2011) argue that satisfaction with the democratic functioning of the Turkish political system is positively associated with support for EU membership. Their results indicate that Turkish citizens who are satisfied with the state of democracy in Türkiye tend to favor EU accession, viewing the EU as a guarantor of democratic values and good governance. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that the EU's role in promoting democratic reforms during Türkiye's candidacy process initially boosted public support.

The **identity-based model** explores the impact of national identity and religiosity on public attitudes towards EU membership. The authors find that strong attachment to national identity negatively correlates with support for EU accession, as individuals who prioritize national sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness perceive the EU as a threat to Türkiye's autonomy. Interestingly, the analysis reveals that religiosity does not have a significant direct effect on EU attitudes, contradicting earlier research that suggested strong Muslim identity might foster Euroscepticism.

Instead, Çarkoğlu and Kentmen (2011) highlight the importance of political attitudes shaped by religious beliefs, such as preferences for a Shari'a-based regime, which are linked to lower support for EU membership.

A key strength of this article is its comprehensive review of previous studies on the topic, including the works of Çarkoğlu (2003), Kentmen (2008), and other scholars who have examined the relationship between economic perceptions, political satisfaction, and identity factors. The authors critically engage with these earlier findings, providing a systematic comparison of different datasets and measures used in previous research. They argue that inconsistencies in past studies are often due to variations in survey design and question wording, which affect the comparability of results. To address this issue, Çarkoğlu and Kentmen (2011) employ a consistent measure of support based on a hypothetical referendum question, which allows them to provide a more reliable assessment of trends in public opinion. The empirical results presented in the article underscore the complexity of Turkish public attitudes towards the EU. While utilitarian and democratic considerations play a role in shaping support, the influence of national identity appears to be increasingly dominant. The authors suggest that rising nationalism and the backlash against EU-driven reforms targeting minority rights have contributed to a more polarized public opinion. By 2009, support for EU membership had fallen below 50%, reflecting a significant shift in public sentiment from the early optimism of the 2000s.

In discussing the implications of their findings, Çarkoğlu and Kentmen (2011) emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of the determinants of support for EU membership in Türkiye. They argue that while economic and democratic factors are important, the growing salience of identity-based concerns suggests that future analyses should pay closer attention to the interplay between national identity, political ideology, and perceptions of sovereignty.

This article's detailed exploration of the factors influencing Turkish public opinion provides valuable insights that align closely with the arguments put forward in the current study on the resilience of Turkish public support for EU membership. Specifically, the analysis by Çarkoğlu and Kentmen (2011) complements the **ideological entrenchment hypothesis** proposed in this article, which posits that deeply held political values, rooted in democratic norms and aspirations for economic advantages, underpin persistent support for EU membership despite increasing skepticism about its likelihood. Their findings on the enduring significance of identity-based concerns, even as economic and political considerations fluctuate, lend support to the notion that ideological commitments play a critical role in shaping public attitudes towards the EU.

3. Resilience of Turkish public opinion: Support for EU membership is always there

Turkish public opinion on EU membership has shown itself to be highly dynamic and responsive, fluctuating significantly over the years. By examining various public opinion surveys conducted since the early 2000s, it is possible to discern several key trends.¹

One prominent characteristic of Turkish public opinion towards EU membership is its volatility, with periods of strong support followed by notable declines. For example, data from the Transatlantic Trends Survey indicates a substantial drop in the percentage of Turkish citizens who believed that EU membership would be beneficial—from a peak of 73% in 2004 to just 38% by 2010. Interestingly, this figure rebounded to 53% by 2014 (Transatlantic Trends Survey, 2014). Similar patterns are evident in other surveys as well. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey reflects this volatility, illustrating fluctuations in public sentiment. For instance, in 2005, 31% of respondents strongly favored EU membership, but this figure decreased by 2011 and 2014, with rising opposition and a significant proportion of respondents remaining undecided.

The fluctuations in support are not arbitrary but rather closely linked to the broader political context, both domestically and internationally. High levels of support in 2004 and 2005 coincided with significant developments in Türkiye-EU relations. The reform packages passed in the Turkish Parliament during 2002-2004, alongside positive signals from European political leaders and a favorable assessment in the EU's Progress Report of October 2004, culminated in the decision at the EU summit in December 2004 to start formal negotiations by October 2005. These concrete advancements were mirrored in public sentiment, with support levels peaking at 74% in the Transatlantic Trends Survey and 71% in the Eurobarometer data. However, following this peak, support steadily declined, reflecting the stagnation in negotiations and increasing political tensions.

A similar shift in public sentiment was observed in 2014, as noted in the Transatlantic Trends Survey data. Support for Türkiye's EU membership rose significantly from 45% to 53%, marking the highest level of approval since 2006. This increase was accompanied by a drop in the percentage of respondents who viewed EU membership negatively, decreasing from 36% to 29%, the lowest level since 2009. The June 2014 Eurobarometer findings were consistent with this trend, showing a sharp rise in the proportion of respondents with a positive image of the

¹ This article is primarily descriptive and argumentative, focusing on broader trends and theoretical considerations rather than presenting detailed secondary public opinion data. For an in-depth analysis and comprehensive presentation of Turkish public opinion and survey findings on EU membership, readers are encouraged to consult Şenyuva's study on mistrust in Turkish-EU relations (Şenyuva, 2018).

EU, from 20% in late 2013 to 43% in mid-2014. This surge in support was largely driven by center-left voters, who, disillusioned with domestic political developments, viewed closer ties with Europe as a safeguard against perceived infringements on democratic freedoms and civil liberties (Şenyuva 2014: 3).

Conversely, the fall of support to 28% in the 2016 survey marks a significant downturn, coinciding with the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July 2016. During this period, negative perceptions reached a record high, with 39% of respondents viewing Türkiye's EU membership as a "bad thing." The political climate following the coup attempt, coupled with disappointment over the EU's muted response and perceived lack of solidarity with Türkiye, contributed to this steep decline. However, subsequent data suggest a gradual recovery in support, indicating a potential shift back towards favoring EU integration. This trend may be attributed to certain societal groups reconsidering the EU as a stabilizing force amid concerns over deteriorating democratic standards and rule of law during Türkiye's state of emergency.

The analysis of these survey results highlights several key insights. First, Turkish public opinion on EU membership is highly sensitive to political developments and reflects the broader state of Türkiye-EU relations. The timing of notable increases and decreases in support aligns with specific events and changes in diplomatic relations. Secondly, radical shifts between strong support and strong opposition are not typical. Instead, many respondents tend to move to more neutral positions, such as "Don't Know" or "Neither Good nor Bad," before expressing firm opposition. However, the space for neutral responses has narrowed in recent years, particularly after the political disruptions of 2016, suggesting a consolidation of attitudes into more distinct camps of support and opposition.

In addition to international surveys like the Eurobarometer and Pew Global Attitudes, the Kadir Has University's *Turkish Foreign Policy Perceptions Survey* provides a critical, longitudinal dataset on Turkish public opinion regarding EU membership. Since 2013, this survey has consistently asked respondents, "Do you support Türkiye's membership in the European Union?" (*Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği'ne üye olmasını destekliyor musunuz?*). The data from this survey offer a comprehensive overview of the resilience of Turkish public opinion on the issue. The percentage of respondents who support EU membership has generally remained positive, except during notable declines in 2013, 2015, and 2017. In 2013, only 47.5% supported EU membership, dropping further to a low of 42.4% in 2015. The year 2017 also witnessed a brief dip, with support at 48.4%, while opposition surpassed support at 51.6%. However, this trend reversed in subsequent years, with a notable peak in 2019 when support rose to 61.1%, while only 38.9% opposed. By 2021, support reached 59.3%, with a corresponding decline in opposition at 40.7%. Although there was a slight decrease in support to 54.2% in 2022, it still remained

above the opposition level of 45.8%. The results indicate fluctuating, yet overall positive attitudes towards EU membership, underscoring the enduring aspiration for European integration despite political challenges (Aydm et al, 2022). This consistent pattern of responses demonstrates that the Turkish public remains open to EU membership, highlighting a resilient and sustained level of support over time.

Despite the fluctuating levels of support, one significant trend stands out: Turkish public opinion has not shifted decisively towards Euroscepticism or outright rejection of EU membership. Instead, even during periods of heightened tension and disillusionment, a substantial portion of the population continues to favor accession, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. This enduring support indicates that the Turkish public remains attuned to political changes and developments, both positive and negative, and continues to view EU membership as a desirable, if challenging, objective. The resilience of this support suggests that the idea of European integration remains an influential aspect of Türkiye's political identity, driven by deep-rooted aspirations for democratic values, economic prosperity, and international alignment.

4. Feasibility or reservoir of positive history? An initial look into H1 and H2

This section explores two key explanations for the sustained, yet paradoxical, support among the Turkish public for EU membership: the **Feasibility Hypothesis (H1)** and the **Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis (H2)**. According to the Feasibility Hypothesis, Turkish citizens still hold onto the hope that EU membership remains a realistic, achievable goal, viewing it as part of a broader trajectory of gradual alignment with EU standards. This belief is seen as a driver of public support, suggesting that many still perceive accession as a viable long-term objective. In contrast, the Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis posits that favorable experiences and milestones in Türkiye-EU relations, particularly during successful negotiation periods, have built a lasting reservoir of positive sentiment. This perspective assumes that Turkish citizens draw upon these historical moments of progress, fostering a sense of optimism and loyalty toward the idea of EU membership, even during periods of stagnation and setbacks.

A significant factor contributing to the growing mistrust in EU membership prospects is the issue of **eventuality**—whether Türkiye will ever be allowed to join the EU as a full member. Public concerns have been amplified by the repeated blocking of key negotiation chapters by certain EU member states, often driven by domestic political interests or identity-related concerns. The perception that some EU politicians openly oppose Türkiye's accession based on anti-Turkish rhetoric has further eroded confidence in the process. This sentiment is reinforced by Turkish

political leaders, especially from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), who frequently emphasize Türkiye's commitment to full membership while simultaneously criticizing the EU for unfair treatment and the prioritization of member states' national interests over legal and technical criteria. Such political messaging, oscillating between commitment to EU goals and accusations of exclusion, has heightened skepticism about the eventual success of the membership bid.

This ongoing narrative of exclusion and unfair treatment has led to a significant questioning of EU membership's feasibility within Turkish public opinion, affecting levels of support. While many Turks continue to express a desire for EU membership, there is widespread wariness about the likelihood of this goal ever being realized. For instance, the 2009 Transatlantic Trends Survey revealed that 65% of respondents believed that Türkiye's membership in the EU was unlikely to happen, reflecting a profound skepticism about the EU's genuine willingness to accept Türkiye.

The Kadir Has University's *Turkish Foreign Policy Perceptions Survey* consistently includes a question on the likelihood of Türkiye becoming a member of the European Union, asking respondents, "Do you believe that Türkiye can become a member of the EU?" (*Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği'ne üye olabileceğini düşünüyor musunuz?*). The results from the 2022 survey, indicate a persistent and significant skepticism among the Turkish public. In 2022, only 38.8% of respondents believed that EU membership was achievable, while a substantial 61.2% expressed disbelief. This skepticism is not a recent development but has been a consistent trend over the years. For instance, the negative response peaked in 2017, with 81.3% of respondents doubting the possibility of EU accession, and similar high levels of disbelief were recorded in subsequent years: 71.5% in 2018, 68% in 2019, and around 66% in both 2016 and 2020. Although there was a slight improvement in 2021, with 44.7% expressing optimism, the overall trend remains pessimistic. These findings highlight a deep-seated mistrust and a widespread belief that Türkiye's membership in the EU is unlikely, reflecting the broader disillusionment with the accession process (M. Aydın et al., 2022). This strong and consistent disbelief among the Turkish public underscores a critical challenge for future Türkiye-EU relations, as it signals a lack of faith in the feasibility of full membership, irrespective of ongoing negotiations or diplomatic efforts.

Turkish Foreign Policy Perceptions Survey also investigates public preferences regarding the type of relationship Türkiye should pursue with the EU, specifically asking, "Should Türkiye establish a different model of relationship with the EU instead of full membership?" (*Sizce Türkiye ve AB arasında üyelik yerine farklı bir modelde ilişki kurulmalı mıdır?*). The 2022 findings clearly indicate that the majority of Turkish respondents remain opposed to alternative models of

association, with 68.4% rejecting the idea. This resistance to considering alternatives has been a consistent trend over recent years. In 2021, 68.3% opposed an alternative model, similar to 2020, when opposition peaked at 73.1%. Even in 2018 and 2019, around 70% of respondents preferred full membership over any other relationship model. The data reveal a strong preference for the traditional goal of full EU membership, rather than settling for a lesser form of partnership. This consistent opposition underscores the Turkish public's clear aspiration for comprehensive integration and signals a reluctance to accept what might be perceived as a "second-tier" status within the European framework (M. Aydin et al., 2022). The findings suggest that any attempt to propose alternative models would likely face significant resistance from the Turkish public, as the majority remains steadfast in their support for the original objective of full membership. Those who did support alternative forms of cooperation primarily favored economic collaboration through customs union or partnerships focused on security and counter-terrorism, highlighting a clear reluctance to settle for less than full membership (Aydin et al., 2022).

The broader debate on alternative relationship models between Türkiye and the EU has been discussed at length by Akgül Açıkmeşe and Şenyuva (2018). In their analysis, the authors argue that in Türkiye, both political leaders and the general public view alternative proposals, such as privileged partnership or strategic partnership, with deep skepticism. There is a widespread perception that these models are merely stalling tactics designed to avoid granting full membership. As Akgül Açıkmeşe and Şenyuva argue, discussions on non-membership alternatives would face significant obstacles, requiring a comprehensive and transparent public communication strategy from the outset. Without a clear and inclusive dialogue involving various opinion leaders, any attempt to negotiate an alternative framework would likely be met with categorical opposition from the Turkish public, who remain steadfast in their preference for full EU membership over any lesser form of integration.

The preference for full membership can be partly explained by its clarity and concreteness compared to other vague, undefined and also unprecedented models of cooperation. For many respondents, alternative forms of association might be seen as an acceptance of failure in achieving the ultimate goal of full membership, creating a psychological barrier against settling for less. Niedermayer and Westle's framework on Eastonian conceptualization of support suggests that in contexts where there is no strong reservoir of positive achievements, public opinion is more volatile and tends to rely heavily on short-term cost-benefit calculations (Niedermayer and Westle, 1995). This perspective appears relevant to the Turkish case.

The skepticism surrounding eventual membership is frequently echoed in Turkish political discourse, where the narrative often combines criticism of EU institutions with declarations of continued commitment to the accession goal. As illustrated by the narrative analysis conducted by the FEUTURE project, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other political leaders have adopted a dual strategy: on the one hand, they criticize the EU for its perceived biases and hostile treatment of Türkiye; on the other hand, they emphasize Türkiye's ongoing dedication to achieving full membership (Hauge et al. 2019). Üstün's (2018) analysis of populist rhetoric towards Europe highlights these mixed signals, noting that within a single speech, government representatives may shift between condemning the EU's approach and reaffirming their commitment to European integration. This duality, evident since the early days of AKP rule, reveals a pattern of strategic framing that uses EU relations as a tool for domestic political mobilization and polarization (Akşit and Şenyuva, 2016).

The survey data from the *Attitudes of Turkish Citizens to Domestic Politics and EU Relations* by JETRO Institute of Developing Economies (Imai 2023) provides valuable insights into Turkish public opinion on the state of Türkiye-EU relations. Respondents were asked to evaluate Türkiye-EU relations in 2022 on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). The results indicate a predominantly negative assessment, with a substantial proportion of the respondents (16.7%) rating the relationship as "very negative" (1). In total, over one-third of the respondents (30.5%) rated the relations at 3 or below, reflecting a highly critical perception. The median response was around the midpoint (5), which was selected by 17.7% of respondents, indicating a general ambivalence or mixed feelings. Positive evaluations (scores of 8 or higher) were scarce, with only 9.8% of respondents offering such a rating. Furthermore, 16.5% of respondents indicated that they had no opinion, reflecting a degree of uncertainty or disengagement.

When respondents were asked to compare the current state of Türkiye-EU relations to that of 2012, the majority view was similarly pessimistic. Nearly 39% of the respondents believed that relations had deteriorated ("daha kötü"), while only 14.7% thought they had improved ("daha iyi"). A notable 25.7% indicated that they saw no change ("aynı"), and 20.9% expressed no opinion. The predominant view that relations are worse than they were a decade ago challenges the idea proposed in the Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis (H2), which assumes that favorable past experiences continue to foster optimism about the relationship. Instead, these findings suggest that Turkish public opinion reflects a consistent narrative of dissatisfaction and skepticism, underpinned by negative assessments of both past and current interactions between Türkiye and the EU.

The overall trend indicated by these survey results reveals that the Turkish public does not perceive the past decade of Türkiye-EU relations positively, nor do

they see significant improvements over time. This suggests a fundamental challenge to H2: the reservoir of positive historical sentiment appears to be either depleted or outweighed by more recent negative experiences. Rather than drawing on a legacy of successful interactions to maintain optimism, the prevailing public sentiment acknowledges a continuity of problematic relations, reinforcing a broader sense of disillusionment with the EU accession process.

While both the Feasibility Hypothesis and the Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis offer insights into why support for EU membership persists among the Turkish public, they seem insufficient to fully explain the current sentiment. Despite some optimism about alignment with EU standards, there is a prevailing belief that full membership is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the notion of a reservoir of positive historical experiences is increasingly overshadowed by a sense of betrayal and disappointment in the EU's approach. The Turkish public's mistrust of EU institutions, coupled with negative perceptions of past interactions, suggests that neither hypothesis adequately captures the deep-seated skepticism now prevalent. Rather, it appears that support for EU membership is sustained more by ideological and aspirational factors than by genuine belief in the likelihood of accession or fond memories of past relations.

5. Ideological entrenchment: Value and interest driven support

The resilience of Turkish public support for EU membership, despite political and practical setbacks, can be best understood through the lens of ideological entrenchment. While individual determinants such as political preferences, and historical experiences offer partial explanations, it is the alignment with core democratic values and economic expectations that appears to sustain positive sentiment. The *Attitudes of Turkish Citizens to Domestic Politics and EU Relations* survey conducted by Imai (2023) provides important insights into this phenomenon, highlighting the enduring belief among Turkish citizens in the EU's role as a promoter of democracy.

According to the survey's findings, respondents were asked to evaluate the European Union's role in promoting and strengthening democracy in non-member countries. The results show that a substantial portion of the Turkish public views the EU's efforts positively. Specifically, 20.3% of respondents rated the EU's role as "positive," and an additional 7.1% described it as "very positive," totaling 27.4%. This favorable perception is noteworthy, especially given the broader skepticism towards EU institutions in other aspects of the relationship. While a combined 22.5% of respondents viewed the EU's involvement negatively (6.8% "very negative" and 15.7% "negative"), the largest group (35.3%) remained neutral, indicating neither a strongly positive nor negative stance. The fact that a significant

proportion (47.7 %) of the public perceives EU actions as beneficial for democracy promotion suggests a deep-seated alignment with the democratic values associated with European integration.

Further supporting this trend, the survey asked respondents whether the EU should continue its involvement in promoting and developing democracy in non-member states. The responses indicate a clear preference for continued EU engagement, with 26.8% agreeing that the EU “should continue,” and an additional 13.5% expressing strong support (“definitely should continue”). Together, these positive responses account for 40.3% of the sample, reflecting a robust endorsement of the EU’s role in fostering democratic norms. Only a small minority, 13.9%, opposed the idea of continued EU involvement (5.9% “definitely should not continue” and 8.0% “should not continue”). Notably, a considerable segment of respondents (30.7%) expressed uncertainty, indicating that while there is some ambivalence, the overall sentiment leans towards favoring EU engagement in democracy promotion.

The Kadir Has University’s *Turkish Foreign Policy Perceptions Survey* (Aydin et al., 2022) further illustrates the multi-dimensional support for EU membership among the Turkish public. While economic benefits remain a prominent driver, there is substantial recognition of the value-based advantages, underscoring the ideological alignment with core EU principles. According to the survey data, 42.9% of respondents believe that EU membership would lead to the widespread promotion of human rights in Türkiye (*İnsan hakları yaygınlaşır*), and 39.4% anticipate an improvement in democracy (*Demokrasi gelişir*). These figures reveal that the Turkish public perceives EU membership not only as a pathway to economic prosperity—indicated by the 65.5% who believe that the country’s economic level would rise—but also as an opportunity for advancing democratic norms and human rights.

The data suggests that the public’s expectations go beyond mere financial gains; there is a strong appreciation for the ideological and normative aspects of EU integration. The fact that human rights and democracy are cited as significant expected benefits directly following economic improvement signals an understanding of the EU as a value-driven project. This alignment with democratic and human rights values lends support to the Ideological Entrenchment Hypothesis, which posits that Turkish public support for EU membership is rooted in shared political and normative beliefs. Thus, while economic motivations remain strong, the sustained public backing for EU membership is also significantly influenced by an appreciation for the potential improvements in Türkiye’s democratic landscape and human rights standards, reflecting a deeper ideological commitment beyond material interests.

These findings highlight a critical aspect of the ideological entrenchment hypothesis: Turkish public support for EU membership is not solely rooted in pragmatic considerations but is also driven by the perceived alignment with fundamental democratic values. Despite widespread disillusionment with the accession process and skepticism about the feasibility of full membership, there remains a core belief that the EU represents an important standard-bearer of democracy and human rights. This ideological commitment helps explain why support for EU membership endures, even in the face of significant political and diplomatic challenges.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored Turkish public opinion on EU membership through analysis of secondary survey data, focusing on trends, shifts, and underlying determinants of support. The findings indicate a clear and persistent pattern: Turkish citizens have historically supported, and continue to support, Türkiye's bid for EU membership. To explain this enduring resilience, the study examined three key hypotheses. The Feasibility Hypothesis (H1) suggested that public support is sustained by a belief in the long-term possibility of EU accession, yet the data show increasing skepticism about the likelihood of membership ever materializing. The Positive Historical Experience Hypothesis (H2) posited that favorable past interactions with the EU create a reservoir of positive sentiment; however, findings from recent surveys reveal that historical grievances and disillusionment with the accession process undermine this explanation.

The most compelling explanation emerges from the Ideological Entrenchment Hypothesis (H3), which argues that the support for EU membership is grounded in deeply held political values, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law coupled with utilitarian aspirations. The European Commission's 2024 report offers a stark critique of Türkiye's progress in these fundamental areas, highlighting systemic issues that continue to hinder alignment with EU standards. The report points out the significant shortcomings in judicial independence and the persistent political interference that undermines the impartiality of the legal system. Despite the introduction of judicial reform packages, deep-rooted problems remain unaddressed, and Türkiye's reluctance to implement European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings exacerbates concerns over the rule of law. Additionally, the report notes a decline in fundamental rights, marked by increasing restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and the activities of civil society organizations. This critical assessment underscores the widening gap between Türkiye's domestic political environment and the normative framework upheld by the European Union.

In this light, the Ideological Entrenchment Hypothesis (H3) gains even greater significance. Amidst the critical state of democracy and human rights in Türkiye as outlined in the Commission's report, Turkish public opinion remains firmly supportive of EU membership. This suggests that the public's desire for EU integration is not merely based on pragmatic economic considerations but is deeply rooted in an ideological alignment with European democratic values. The steadfast public support reflects a continued aspiration for the normative benefits associated with EU membership, including stronger rule of law, protection of human rights, and adherence to democratic principles. While feasibility and historical experience offer partial explanations, the enduring support appears to be sustained by the EU's role as a "North Star," symbolizing democratic values, human rights, and economic opportunity. However, this ideological alignment is tempered by an acute awareness of the aspiration-expectation gap, wherein the public values EU standards while doubting the likelihood of membership.

As Eralp's (2009) cyclical conceptualization of Türkiye-EU relations suggests, the current phase is one of pronounced divergence, exacerbated by the critical findings of the European Commission. However, the enduring support from the Turkish public highlights a potential avenue for convergence in the future. If the EU was once seen as a potential external anchor for Türkiye's democratic consolidation, the current analysis indicates that the internal anchor is now the ideological commitment of the Turkish public. Despite the severe criticisms and lack of tangible progress noted by the European Commission, the Turkish public's unwavering support for EU membership serves as a reminder of the deep-seated values driving their preferences. It suggests a resilient commitment to democracy and human rights that persists even in the face of adverse political developments. The study also notes down the absence of credible alternatives to the EU as a significant factor in maintaining support. Successive Turkish governments have not demonstrated an ability to establish an economic or political framework capable of surpassing the perceived benefits of EU integration. This failure to "outperform" the EU has left the public reliant on the EU as both an aspirational model and a safety net against domestic challenges.

However, the study also acknowledges its limitations. It relies exclusively on secondary data and employs only descriptive statistical analysis without exploring advanced statistical techniques or controlling for potential confounding variables, such as age, gender, education, and political affiliation. Future research should employ advanced statistical methods, such as time-series analysis and structural equation modeling, to investigate the dynamics between institutional trust and aspirations for EU membership. By integrating these approaches, scholars can better understand how Turkish public opinion evolves in response to domestic and

international developments, offering deeper insights into the resilience and adaptability of Türkiye's European aspirations.

This approach was intentional, aiming to provide an exploratory analysis that sparks a broader discussion on the resilience of public support over time. Future research would benefit from integrating advanced data analysis methods, including time series analysis, multivariate regression models, and structural equation modeling, to better understand the complex interplay of factors influencing public opinion. Such an effort would not only offer deeper insights but also help delineate the pathways through which ideological commitments continue to shape Turkish attitudes towards the European Union.

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Özet

Sarsılmaz umutlar: Türkiye kamuoyunun AB üyeliğine yönelik desteğinin dirençliliği üzerine keşifsel bir analiz

Bu makale, Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği (AB) ilişkilerindeki siyasi, ekonomik ve diplomatik zorluklara rağmen, Türkiye kamuoyunun AB üyeliğine olan desteğinin dirençli yapısını incelemektedir. İkincil anket verileri kullanılarak yapılan bu keşifsel analizde, kamuoyunun eğilimleri ve destek nedenleri üç temel hipotez üzerinden değerlendirilmiştir: (H1) Gerçekleşebilirlik, (H2) Olumlu Tarihi Deneyim ve (H3) İdeolojik Yerleşmişlik. Bulgular, kamuoyu desteğinin gerçekleşebilirlik ve tarihi deneyimlerle bağlantılı olsa da, demokratik değerler, insan hakları ve hukukun üstünlüğüne olan ideolojik bağlılığın, olumlu tutumların devam etmesini sağladığını göstermektedir. Çalışma, Türk kamuoyunun, AB üyeliği sürecinde ülkedeki Avrupa hedeflerine içsel bir dayanak noktası, bir nevi kutup yıldızı oluşturduğunu savunmaktadır. Çalışmanın kısıtları belirtilmiş olup, analizde gelişmiş istatistiksel tekniklerin kullanılmadığına dikkat çekilmiştir. Makale, gelecekteki araştırmalara, Türk kamuoyunun AB üyeliğine yönelik tutumlarını etkileyen karmaşık faktörleri daha detaylı incelemek için daha sofistike yöntemlerin entegrasyonu çağrısında bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Türkiye Kamuoyu; Avrupa Birliği Üyeliği; İdeolojik Yerleşmişlik; Türkiye-AB İlişkileri.