
Attitudes Towards the European Union in Turkey: The Role of Perceived Threats and Benefits

Gizem ARIKAN*

Abstract

Public opinion towards the European Union in Turkey is a relatively understudied area. Although previous studies have identified some important factors that influence individual support for the European Union, such as material expectations and democratic attitudes, the role of other factors, such as the perceived political benefits and threats, have not been addressed. The purpose of this paper is to test group-centricism arguments, which suggest that identity, group-based interests, and perceived threats are important determinants of attitudes. An analysis of data from the latest available Eurobarometer Survey shows that symbolic politics and perceived benefits play an important role in shaping individual attitudes towards the EU in Turkey. While subjective material and political expectations increase pro-EU attitudes, the strength of national identity and perceived material and cultural threats to the nation are crucial in decreasing support for the EU.

Key Words

Attitudes towards the European Union, Euroscepticism, perceived threat, utilitarianism, national identity, social identity theory, symbolic politics.

Introduction

Public opinion towards the European Union (EU) in Turkey is a relatively understudied area, with studies that utilise quantitative methods to explore the sources of attitudes towards the EU particularly lacking. As a result, we know very little about the factors that affect Turkish citizens' attitudes towards European integration.¹ While existing studies have identified a number of important factors that influence individual attitudes towards EU membership, they have not addressed some other important elements that affect attitudes, such as the perceived threats from integration.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by focusing on some of the key but unaddressed factors that affect attitudes towards the EU, such as

* Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Yaşar University, Izmir, Turkey. The author would like to thank Cengiz Erişen and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments. All remaining errors are the author's responsibility.

perceived material and cultural threats and benefits, using survey data from Eurobarometer. Although the importance of threat perception is well known, it is a relatively under-explored factor in EU public opinion studies. While Lauren McLaren² addresses the importance of perceived cultural threats in generating rejection of the EU in a number of member states, this has not yet been applied to a candidate country context. Similarly, Ebru Canan-Sokullu³ has shown that the perceived cultural threat is an important determinant of Turcoscepticism among the mass public in member states. Thus, by exploring the role of perceived threats and benefits and comparing their explanatory power with other alternative explanations, this paper contributes to the literature on Turkish citizens' attitudes towards the EU.

Attitudes towards the EU are mostly motivated by perceived group benefits and symbolic concerns. The implications of these findings are discussed in the conclusion.

The next sections discuss the two major theories on factors that affect individual attitudes.⁴ I first discuss the self-interest arguments and explain how and why these arguments fall short in explaining attitudes towards the EU in

the Turkish context. Next, I examine the group-centricism arguments, and argue that both perceived benefits and threats to society are important in predicting attitudes towards the EU. More specifically, I claim that perceived material and political benefits enhance pro-EU attitudes while perceived material and cultural threats lead to a negative assessment of the EU. Hypotheses derived from these discussions are then tested using survey data from the latest available Eurobarometer survey. Results show that rather than being determined by rational calculations of costs and benefits to the self, attitudes towards the EU are mostly motivated by perceived group benefits and symbolic concerns. The implications of these findings are discussed in the conclusion.

Attitudes Towards the European Union: The Role of Self- Interest

One of the most frequently debated factors influencing political attitudes is individual self-interest.⁵ It is argued that in forming opinions on political matters, citizens consider what is in it for them.⁶ For example, working-class citizens may support social welfare policies because they are the primary beneficiaries of these policies,⁷ or working women may be more favourable towards antidiscrimination laws that bolster women's rights.⁸ To test the effect of material self-interest

on individual attitudes, researchers usually consider demographic and socioeconomic variables, such as age, income, or education, as indicators of individual self-interest.⁹

This rational cost-benefit approach is also relevant for understanding attitudes towards the EU. Commonly referred to as the utilitarian approach, this perspective holds that citizens in different socioeconomic positions expect different gains or losses from European integration. Their attitudes towards integration will therefore be shaped by whether they believe they are likely or not to make material gains from an integration policy.¹⁰ For example, those who possess higher-level skills, such as white-collar employees and high-income citizens, are likely to gain more from integration since their skills make them more competitive in a liberal European market. Thus they tend to be more supportive of the EU compared with low-skilled workers or those with less education.¹¹

Evidence from various existing studies is generally supportive of the utilitarian perspective for both member states and candidate countries¹² but not for Turkey.¹³ This could be because utilitarian explanations assume that objective conditions also coincide with *perceived* gains from integration. However, it could be that rather than their objective material position in the society, people's *belief* that they will

benefit from integration may be the decisive determinant of EU-related attitudes.¹⁴ This perspective finds support with comparative analyses of data from various EU member states¹⁵ as well as analyses of public opinion towards the EU in Turkey. For example, Ali Çarkoğlu's analysis of public opinion data from a national survey conducted in 2002 shows that those who believe that their personal life will be positively affected if Turkey becomes a member of the EU are much more likely to support Turkey's EU membership.¹⁶

In addition, the utilitarian approach assumes that the material gains from EU membership are clear and that individuals possess adequate information about their prospective gains and losses from the EU.¹⁷ Yet, as previous research has shown, Turkish citizens' knowledge of issues concerning EU membership is very limited,¹⁸ suggesting that they may not be adequately informed about the personal costs and benefits of EU accession. Turkey's lengthy and complicated accession process, in addition to the Turkish media's representation of Europe as being openly and consistently hostile to Turkey's candidacy,¹⁹ possibly limit the flow of information about material benefits, while also bringing symbolic concerns and threat perceptions to the fore during the attitude formation process. Therefore, while self-interest variables have explanatory power concerning pro-

integration attitudes in other states, I do not expect this to be the case for Turkey due to these circumstantial factors.²⁰ In the next section, I discuss group-centricism and symbolic politics theories in order to demonstrate why they are crucial in understanding attitudes towards the EU in Turkey.

Attitudes Towards the European Union: Group-Centricism and Symbolic Politics

While perceived material benefits may be influential in shaping attitudes, individuals do not make decisions or form opinions based solely on utilitarian calculations. Symbolic politics or group-interest theories are the most important alternative explanations that have been developed in place of self-interest explanations. In most cases, they offer more explanatory power regarding political attitudes than self-interest variables.²¹ In the Turkish context, where most of the accession debate revolves around national identity, we can expect variables that measure group interests to have especially high explanatory power. Two main theories concerning the role of group membership are considered below. First the *realistic interest approach* focuses on the short- or long-term tangible gains and losses and the protection of group interests in

the formation of individual attitudes.²² The gains or losses and group interests may be objective or subjective, as well as direct or indirect. Public opinion studies usually find that individual attitudes are more affected by societal interest than private personal interest. For example, in the USA and other major Western democracies, sociotropic rather than pocketbook economic considerations are found to affect evaluations of presidents or prime ministers as well as voting behaviour.²³ Similarly, personal economic circumstances play little role in the formation of immigration attitudes in the USA, whereas sociotropic economic evaluations have a greater impact.²⁴

That individual attitudes are more affected by societal interest than private personal interest.

Perceived material benefits to the nation from further integration are also found to have an impact on support for the EU in member states.²⁵ This is the case for Turkey where subjective sociotropic expectations or perceived economic benefits to the nation have a strong effect on support for EU membership.²⁶ Therefore, in line with this theory and previous evidence, perceived gains to society, economic as well as political, can be expected to lead to more positive assessments of the EU. While we expect most citizens to associate the EU with

material benefits to the nation, they may also associate the EU with potential positive benefits to the country in terms of democracy and peace because the EU demands greater democratisation and respect for human rights.²⁷ Accordingly, we can hypothesize that *the perceived material as well as political benefits of EU accession should lead to greater support for the EU in Turkey.*

The perceived material as well as political benefits of EU accession should lead to greater support for the EU in Turkey.

Another way through which group membership influences opinion formation is through symbolic concerns surrounding group status, as considered by *social identity theory*.²⁸ This perspective suggests that group identity is the source of individual self-esteem. Therefore, people are motivated to achieve a positive identity by differentiating their group positively from others.²⁹ Identity politics plays a crucial role in attitudes concerning the EU. Many people see the nation as the appropriate point of reference for identity.³⁰ In particular, those with strong national identities tend to see the EU as undermining the integrity of the nation state and therefore reject further integration.³¹ In some multivariate models, national identity emerges as

a key explanatory variable concerning rejection of Turkey's EU membership,³² though not in others.³³ Yet, given the rise in nationalist sentiments in the discussion of Turkey's relations with the EU, especially in the post-Brussels summit period,³⁴ we can hypothesise that *stronger national attachments are an important factor generating opposition to the EU in Turkey.*

One consequence of the group-centrism that influences political attitudes is the *perceived threat* from out-groups. Both the realistic interest and social identity approaches mention the importance of perceived threats from out-groups in shaping individual attitudes towards political issues. While the realistic interest theory developed by Lawrence Bobo³⁵ argues that *real* competition between groups for material resources must exist, the mere *perception* that an out-group threatens an in-group's resources may be enough to produce a material threat.³⁶ Another type of perceived threat is the symbolic or cultural threat. According to social identity theory, individuals may perceive a threat due to symbolic concerns, such as a threat to their identity or values from out-groups.³⁷ Perceived threats have previously been found to have a large influence on attitudes towards other ethnic groups, towards immigration policy and immigrants, as well as on racial policies in the USA. While perceived

material and symbolic threats are both strong predictors of anti-immigration attitudes, the latter is a much stronger predictor.³⁸ Just as immigrants or different ethnic groups raise threat perceptions, issues concerning integration may also heighten perceived threats as people may fear a threat to their country's economic well-being, its national security or to the cultural integrity of the nation. Lauren McLaren finds both types of threats lead to opposition towards further integration in EU member states.³⁹ Therefore, we can hypothesise that in recent years when the EU has increasingly been demonstrated as being a “Christian club”,⁴⁰ *perceived material and symbolic threats are expected to negatively affect pro-EU attitudes in Turkey, with the latter having a greater effect than the former.*

Attitudes towards the EU in Turkey: Evidence from the 2009 Eurobarometer Survey

As outlined above, based on existing theories and past findings, sociotropic and personal material factors, as well as perceived political benefits, are expected to promote pro-EU attitudes, while perceived threats and strength of national identity should lead to more negative attitudes towards the EU. Meanwhile, objective personal conditions are expected to have weaker effects on EU attitudes. To test these hypotheses,

I used data from the latest available Eurobarometer dataset (Eurobarometer 2009-2, 71.3).

Perceived material and symbolic threats are expected to negatively affect pro-EU attitudes in Turkey, with the latter having a greater effect than the former.

Previous studies have usually operationalised support for the EU as support for Turkey's EU membership in a referendum setting. Standard Eurobarometer questions asked the respondents “If there were to be a referendum tomorrow on the question of Turkey's membership of the European Union, would you personally vote for or against it?” Since recent Eurobarometer surveys have stopped asking this type of question in preference to using different wording to gauge EU support, this study uses data from other questions that measure attitudes towards the EU. In what follows, these items are usually referred to as “pro-EU attitudes” or “attitudes towards the EU”.

Table 1 shows the level of public support for the EU. According to the survey, 48 % of Turkish respondents believe that EU membership would be a good thing for Turkey. Although this is much lower than the figures in the

early 2000s,⁴¹ those who oppose Turkey's membership still do not constitute the majority: only about 26 % of respondents believe that EU membership would be a bad thing, while 17 % believe it would be neither good nor bad for Turkey to become an EU member. Even when these two categories are combined, the percentage of those who are supportive of Turkey's EU membership remains greater than the percentage against membership. In addition, about 57 % of respondents believe that Turkey would benefit from being an EU member, as opposed to 31 % who believe that EU membership would not benefit Turkey.

Therefore, despite declining support for EU membership, no major opposition to Turkey's membership has emerged over the years.

Moreover, the Turkish public still seems to have a relatively positive image of EU. The EU has a "fairly positive" or "very positive" image for roughly 45 % of the respondents, while 20 % feel "neutral" about the European Union. About 28 % of the sample, on the other hand, has a negative image of the EU. Overall, the Turkish public could be said to be pro-EU, or at least not actively opposed to it.

Table 1: Pro-EU Attitudes

<i>1a. Generally speaking, do you think that Turkey's membership of the European Union would be...?</i>		
	%	Cumulative %
<i>A good thing</i>	48.06	48.06
<i>Neither good nor bad</i>	17.31	65.37
<i>A bad thing</i>	26.17	91.54
<i>Don't know</i>	8.46	100.00

<i>1b. Taking everything into account, would you say that Turkey would benefit or not from being a member of the European Union?</i>		
	%	Cumulative %
<i>Would benefit</i>	56.92	56.92
<i>Would not benefit</i>	31.34	88.26
<i>Don't know</i>	11.74	100.00

1c. In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?

	%	Cumulative %
<i>Very positive</i>	14.63	14.63
<i>Fairly positive</i>	31.04	45.67
<i>Neutral</i>	20.50	66.17
<i>Fairly negative</i>	15.62	81.79
<i>Very negative</i>	12.44	94.23
<i>Don't know</i>	5.77	100.00

Next, I explore the subjective expectations and perceived threats from the EU. Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer surveys do not have questions that directly tap into the respondents' perceptions of the benefits and threats from EU membership. The most appropriate item is a question that asks respondents what the European Union personally means for them. The respondents are then presented with a list of items (see Table 2) and are asked to choose as many items as they would like. Although these are not ideal questions, they can still act as proxies for the perceived benefits and threats of the EU.

The breakdown of responses to the meaning of the EU to Turkish citizens is presented in Table 2. Economic benefits are among the most mentioned items: for nearly one third of respondents the EU means "economic prosperity". Almost a quarter of the sample mention "freedom of movement", while "social protection" is the third most popular answer with about 20 % of respondents selecting this item. In line with previous findings, it is not surprising to find that Turkish citizens strongly associate the EU with positive sociotropic and personal material benefits.

Table 2: The Meaning of the European Union to Respondents*

<i>What does the European Union mean to you personally?</i>	
	Percentage mentioning
<i>Economic prosperity</i>	32.24
<i>Travel, study, and work anywhere in the EU</i>	24.58
<i>Social protection</i>	19.9
<i>Democracy</i>	17.11
<i>Peace</i>	15.22
<i>Loss of cultural identity</i>	15.12
<i>Cultural diversity</i>	14.13
<i>Unemployment</i>	13.73
<i>Stronger say in the world</i>	13.53
<i>Euro</i>	6.37
<i>Waste of money</i>	4.98
<i>Bureaucracy</i>	3.68
<i>More crime</i>	3.28
<i>Not enough control at external borders</i>	2.09

*Since respondents could choose more than one answer, the percentages do not add up to 100.

The fourth and the fifth most popular choices concern the respondents' subjective political expectations of the Union. The EU means "democracy" and "peace" to 17 and 15 % of the respondents respectively. The next two most popular items concern symbolic attitudes. About 15 % associate the EU with a "loss of cultural identity", which could be a proxy for the symbolic threats posed by EU membership. Fourteen % of the respondents also chose "cultural diversity". However, whether this item has positive or negative connotations for them is not very clear. "Unemployment",

which could be termed a perceived material threat, was listed by 13 % of respondents, as was "stronger say in the world", which could be thought of as a type of political benefit. "The Euro", "waste of money", "bureaucracy", and "more crime" are among the least mentioned items, with less than 5 % of respondents choosing each of them. Overall, the perceived material benefits of the EU to Turkey, such as economic prosperity (i.e. social protection and economic prosperity), and to the self (e.g. freedom of movement), are Turkish respondents' most important

expectations of the EU, while political benefits such as peace and democracy come second. Unfortunately, there were not many items in the list that could unambiguously tap into respondents' perceived material and cultural threats. Of these, loss of cultural identity and unemployment form the third most mentioned set of items. This finding suggests that the Turkish people do not generally see such threats as a priority, whereas positive expectations of the EU are mentioned more. Therefore, in addition to the lack of a strong majority opposing the EU, the Union is associated more with its perceived positive potential benefits rather than its perceived material or cultural threats to the Turkish nation.

I now consider whether there is a relationship between the meaning of the EU for Turkish respondents and their attitudes towards the EU. Table 3 presents selected responses to the meaning of the EU question that taps into pro-EU attitudes.⁴² The table shows that the meaning of the EU and

attitudes towards the EU are closely related, especially for those respondents who associate it with material benefits. Specifically, 73 % of those who associate the EU with economic prosperity also believe that Turkey's EU membership would be a good thing, and 83 % of them also believe that Turkey would benefit from EU membership. Similarly, about 73 % of those who associate social protection with the EU also believe that EU membership would be a good

Perceptions of personal and social material benefits from the EU are strongly related to positive attitudes towards the EU and EU membership for Turkey.

thing for Turkey, while 87 % of them also believe that Turkey would benefit from being an EU member. Although the figures for freedom of movement within EU borders are

less impressive, still more than half of those who associate the EU with free travel within the EU believe that EU membership is a good thing, and about 74 % of them agree that Turkey would benefit from being an EU member. That is, perceptions of personal and social material benefits from the EU are strongly related to positive attitudes towards the EU and EU membership for Turkey.

Table 3: Cross-Tabulation of Meaning of EU and Pro-EU Attitudes

		<i>Those who mention:</i>								
		<i>Economic prosperity</i>	<i>Travel, study work</i>	<i>Social protection</i>	<i>Democracy</i>	<i>Peace</i>	<i>Loss of cultural identity</i>	<i>Cultural diversity</i>	<i>Unemployment</i>	<i>Stronger say in the world</i>
<i>Those who believe membership is:</i>										
<i>A good thing</i>		73.70%	56.60%	72.68%	72.46%	73.33%	24.11%	50.00%	37.80%	57.48%
<i>Neither good nor bad</i>		11.36%	23.83%	15.46%	13.17%	16.00%	23.40%	20.59%	27.56%	20.47%
<i>A bad thing</i>		14.94	19.57%	11.86%	14.37%	10.67%	52.48%	29.41%	34.65%	22.05%
TOTAL		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>Those who believe Turkey:</i>										
<i>Would benefit from membership</i>		83.72%	74.34%	87.30%	78.31%	81.25%	39.86%	65.00%	50.41%	70.97%
<i>Would not benefit from membership</i>		16.28%	25.66%	12.70%	21.69%	18.75%	60.14%	35.07%	49.59%	29.03%
TOTAL		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Political expectations are also closely connected to pro-EU attitudes. Of the respondents for whom the EU means “democracy” and “peace”, 70 % are supportive of Turkey’s EU membership and nearly 80 % believe that Turkey would benefit from being an EU member. On the other hand, those who associate the EU with “loss of cultural identity” and “unemployment” have less positive attitudes. Among those who mention loss of cultural identity, more than half have negative attitudes towards the EU, while 37 % of the respondents who equate the EU with unemployment view Turkey’s membership as a good thing, and 35 % as a bad thing. These respondents are also divided in terms of their attitudes on whether Turkey would benefit from membership or not: while 50 % believe that Turkey would benefit from EU membership, 49 % think the opposite is the case.

Two other items, “cultural diversity” and “stronger say in the world”, are also associated with positive attitudes towards the EU, albeit to a lesser extent. Respectively, 50 and 57 % of those mentioning the two items believe in Turkey’s EU membership, while 65 and 71 % respectively believe that Turkey would benefit from becoming an EU member state.

Overall, although the data presented in Table 3 indicate that the subjective expectations of the EU, as well as perceived threats from it, are strongly related, this

analysis is still far from answering other important questions that are required to provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that affect individual attitudes towards the EU: what is the role of self-interest in affecting attitudes towards the EU? Are perceived benefits and threats still important sources of EU attitudes even when other factors are accounted for? What is the relative power of each hypothesised variable in determining pro-EU attitudes?

To be able to answer these additional questions I ran a multivariate regression.⁴³ The dependent variable was an additive index of the three items that measure pro-EU attitudes (see Table 1). Once the “don’t know” and missing responses were excluded, the responses to each item were coded as 0 and 1. These three items were then summed and rescaled to vary between 0 and 1 in order to facilitate interpretation. The independent variables included the following subjective expectations and threats from the EU (see Table 2): three material benefit items (economic prosperity, freedom of movement, social protection); three political benefit items (democracy, peace, stronger say in the world); one material threat item (unemployment); one symbolic threat item (loss of identity); and cultural diversity, which actually has positive connotations but could also be perceived as a type of threat by some respondents. In addition, the following control

variables were also included: strength of Turkish national identity, left-right ideological orientation, and social status, as well as a number of items relating to immediate material self-interest, namely age, gender (a dummy variable for male), occupational status (dummy variables for manual, white collar, self-employed, and unemployed), and level of education (dummy variables for high and low education level). Because there were no questions on respondents' income level, in order to measure economic well-being, I constructed a "socioeconomic

situation" variable that was an additive index formed from the household items that each respondent listed as being in his or her home.⁴⁴ Finally, I also controlled for place of residence: two dummy variables were constructed for "rural area or village", and "small or middle-sized town", while "large city" formed the baseline category. All items, with the exception of age, were rescaled to vary between 0 and 1 to make it possible to assess their relative effects on the dependent variable.

Table 4: Attitudes Towards the European Union - OLS Regression Results

	Coefficient	Std. Error	P> t
Constant	.554	.061	0.000
<i>Perceived material benefits</i>			
Economic prosperity	.185	.025	0.000
Travel, study, and work anywhere in the EU	.132	.025	0.000
Social protection	.169	.027	0.000
<i>Perceived political benefits</i>			
Democracy	.122	.029	0.000
Peace	.174	.030	0.000
Stronger say in the world	.0193	.031	0.538
<i>Perceived material threats</i>			
Unemployment	-.094	.033	0.004
<i>Perceived symbolic threats</i>			
Loss of cultural identity	-.171	.032	0.000
Cultural diversity	-.082	.031	0.008

Social Identity

Strength of Turkish national identity	-.113	.051	0.026
---------------------------------------	-------	------	-------

Ideology	.037	.044	0.395
-----------------	------	------	-------

Self-interest Indicators

Manual worker	-.039	.034	0.256
---------------	-------	------	-------

White collar	.031	.057	0.590
--------------	------	------	-------

Self-employed	-.075	.036	0.039
---------------	-------	------	-------

Unemployed	-.080	.037	0.030
------------	-------	------	-------

High education	-.073	.042	0.084
----------------	-------	------	-------

Low education	-.009	.027	0.711
---------------	-------	------	-------

Socio-economic well-being	-.126	.048	0.008
---------------------------	-------	------	-------

Social status (self-assessed)	.098	.059	0.099
-------------------------------	------	------	-------

Demographic Variables

Age	-.001	.001	0.395
-----	-------	------	-------

Male	.037	.026	0.344
------	------	------	-------

Lives in rural area or village	-.003	.027	0.930
--------------------------------	-------	------	-------

Lives in small or medium-sized town	.026	.030	0.378
-------------------------------------	------	------	-------

Number of observations = 814

F (23, 790) = 14.81

Prob > F = 0.0000

R-squared = .3013

Adjusted R-Squared = .2809

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4.⁴⁵ As expected, subjective expectations and the perceived threats from the EU had the strongest effects on citizens' attitudes towards the EU, with almost all items having large and statistically significant coefficients. The coefficient of the economic prosperity variable was 0.18, which shows that associating the EU with economic prosperity increases pro-EU attitudes by 0.18 points, which is about 1/5th of the range of the dependent variable. This is the highest coefficient in the analysis, but the effects of other material benefit items were also very strong, as indicated by their high and statistically significant coefficients. For example, the coefficient of the social protection variable was 0.16, which shows that, holding all other variables constant, an individual who associates the EU with social protection is more likely to support the EU by 0.16 percentage points. Similarly, the coefficient for freedom of movement is 0.13, which was also a substantial and statistically significant effect. Thus, as hypothesised, perceived material benefits to self and the nation tend to increase individual support of Turkish respondents for the EU.

Expected political benefits are also significant determinants of support for the EU in Turkey. Those who associate the EU with peace and democracy are more pro-EU, as shown by the relevant positive and statistically significant

coefficients. Associating the EU with democracy related to a 0.12 percentage point increase in pro-EU attitudes, while the coefficient of the peace variable was almost as strong as that of the economic prosperity variable, showing the importance of expected political benefits aside from material expectations. On the other hand, the coefficient for having a stronger say in the world was weak (0.019) and statistically insignificant as shown by the high p value. These results thus seem to be compatible with the findings of Ali Çarkoğlu⁴⁶ that the association of the EU with democratic values increases support for the EU.

The effects of material threats on pro-EU attitudes are relatively weaker compared to symbolic threats.

On the other hand, and as expected, perceived threats were associated with more negative attitudes towards the EU. Those who associated the EU with a loss of cultural identity were, on average, 0.17 points less likely to support the EU, which is about 1/6th of the range of the dependent variable, making it an effect that is almost as strong as the effect of peace variable but in the opposite direction. Associating the EU with cultural diversity led to a decrease in pro-EU attitudes by 0.08 points. Although Table 2 suggested that those who

associate the EU with cultural diversity are slightly more likely to be supportive of the EU, the results of the multivariate analysis show that, when all other factors are accounted for, cultural diversity is in fact associated with lower support. Associating the EU with unemployment, an indicator of perceived material threat, leads to a 0.09 point decrease in pro-EU attitudes. These results also show, in line with some of the findings in the comparative political behaviour literature, that the effects of material threats on pro-EU attitudes are relatively weaker compared to symbolic threats.

For Turkish respondents, a higher education level and socioeconomic well-being were associated with significantly lower support for the EU

Aside from perceived threats, another item that tapped into symbolic attitudes, strength of national identity, also had a strong and statistically significant influence on pro-EU attitudes. Holding other variables constant, those respondents with the strongest sense of national identity were 0.11 points less likely to support the EU. Thus, in line with some of the previous research in other countries, this study shows that national identity is a strong deterrent to support for the EU in Turkey as well.

The other control variables, as well as the self-interest items, did not have statistically significant effects on EU support. In particular, the coefficient of the ideology variable had no statistically significant effect, indicating that ideology does not have a decisive influence on EU attitudes in Turkey. This finding supports the argument of Ziya Öniş that traditional left-right cleavages neither explain Turkish politics in general, nor politics concerning Europeanisation in particular.⁴⁷

As anticipated, the self-interest indicators did not have consistent effects on EU support in Turkey. Starting with occupational status, manual and white-collar workers did not differ significantly in their support for the EU. On the other hand, being self-employed or unemployed is expected to decrease support for the EU. For Turkish respondents, a higher education level and socioeconomic well-being were associated with significantly lower support for the EU, which is the opposite finding to that from other EU candidate countries.⁴⁸ Overall, the effects of self-interest variables were less consistent than the effects of symbolic and subjective variables, which were in line with previous research findings.

None of the demographic control variables, such as age, gender, and place of residence, were statistically significant predictors of attitudes towards the EU. That is, while the hypotheses derived from the symbolic politics and group

benefits approaches were supported by the data, no clear pattern concerning self-interest variables emerged in the present study.

Conclusion

Based on political psychology literature, this paper provides empirical evidence for the argument that symbolic politics and group interests are significant factors in determining individual attitudes towards the EU in Turkey. The paper also shows that group interests and identity politics are not the only significant determinants of attitudes towards the EU, but that their effects are stronger relative to other factors such as individual self-interest. Another contribution of this paper to the literature is in establishing that the perceived political benefits of the EU in the form of democracy and peace are significant contributors to EU support in Turkey.

Previous empirical studies, in line with existing models for other European member and candidate countries, focused on sociotropic and individual material expectations as important factors in determining support for the EU. The findings discussed in this paper, however, also distinguish some

peculiar characteristics of Turkish public opinion. The analyses suggest that the Turkish public appears to have focused its attention on symbolic politics, national identity and group interests, most probably due both to Turkey's arduous and extended EU negotiations and the nature of the Turkish political debate on accession. In other words, this study has revealed that symbolic politics plays a particularly significant role in determining how the Turkish public evaluates the EU.

These findings are not particularly surprising. Previous research has highlighted the uninformed nature of the Turkish public in matters concerning the EU, which suggests that people may not

really be aware of the potential costs and benefits to their personal well-being from Turkey's EU membership. In addition, both the ruling AKP's weakening commitment to the EU project and Turkey's domestic media's representation of the open hostility of several EU member states towards Turkey in the last few years⁴⁹ have possibly raised the importance of symbolic politics.

Despite this negative picture, there is also room for optimism. The Turkish public still overwhelmingly associates the EU with positive material and

Symbolic politics and group interests are significant factors in determining individual attitudes towards the EU in Turkey.

political benefits that enhance popular support for the Union. In addition, the fact that the factors currently associated with decreased support for the EU are mostly symbolic concerns, rather than deep-rooted cleavages or ideological orientations, suggests that support for the EU may be easier to manipulate than might be thought at first. This perhaps is the most significant implication of the current findings. However, this potentially malleable feature of EU support in Turkey may also be a double-edged sword. The apparently significant role of symbolic politics in forming EU attitudes also makes them susceptible to political manipulation, thus making it easier for Turkish political actors to utilise EU-related issues from a more

symbolic perspective rather than for the promotion of well-structured EU policies. At the same time, however, it is also possible that if Turkish political actors need to bolster public support for the EU they may have an easier job than their counterparts in other European countries. While an emphasis on concerns that heighten threat perceptions and discourses that erode individual belief in the EU's capacity to contribute to democracy and economic well-being in Turkey could contribute to more negative evaluations of the EU,⁵⁰ it is also possible that mass media campaigns and more positive political elite discourses could increase support for the Union by emphasising the potential benefits to Turkey.

Endnotes

- 1 Major works that utilise survey data to explore the sources of individual attitudes towards the EU in Turkey are Ali Çarkoğlu, “Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU Membership”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), pp. 171-194; Ali Çarkoğlu, “Societal Perceptions of Turkey’s EU Membership: Causes and Consequences of Support for EU Membership”, in Mehmet Uğur and Nergis Canefe (eds.), *Turkey and European Integration: Accession Prospects and Issues*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 19-46; Çiğdem Kentmen, “Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey”, *European Union Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 487-510; Ali Çarkoğlu and Çiğdem Kentmen, “Diagnosing Trends and Determinants in Public Support for Turkey’s EU Membership”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (September 2011), pp. 365-379; Özgehan Şenyuva, “Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkileri ve Kamuoyu”, in Oğuz Esen and Filiz Başkan (eds.), *Avrupa Birliği ve Türkiye İlişkileri: Beklentiler ve Kaygılar*, Ankara, Eflatun Yayınevi, 2009, pp. 33-60.
- 2 Lauren McLaren, “Public Support for the European Union: Cost/ Benefit Analysis or Perceived Cultural Threat?”, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (May 2002), pp. 551- 566; Lauren M. McLaren, *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*, Hampshire and New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, pp. 38-41.
- 3 Ebru Canan-Sokullu, “Turcoscepticism and Threat Perception: European Public and Elite Opinion on Turkey’s Protracted EU Membership”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 2011), pp. 483-497.
- 4 Donald Kinder, “Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics”, in Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey (eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1998, pp. 778-867.
- 5 Self-interest is usually defined narrowly as the pursuit of immediate material benefits in an individual’s own personal life (or that of his or her immediate family). In addition, it is also essential to exclude material gains that benefit the group, such as sociotropic benefits (e.g. gains to the national economy, etc) as well as non-material gains to the individual (e.g. social prestige), from the definition of self-interest. See, Kinder, “Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics”; David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk, “The Role of Self-Interest in Social and Political Attitudes”, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No.1 (1991), pp. 1-91.
- 6 Kinder, “Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics”, p. 800.
- 7 Ibid., p. 801.
- 8 Sears and Funk, “The Role of Self-Interest in Social and Political Attitudes”, p. 18.
- 9 While most studies find these objective self-interest variables to be of minimal influence, it is wrong to view self-interest as being completely irrelevant in public opinion formation.

- Self-interest does make a difference, especially under certain circumstances: for example, when the material benefit or harm of the proposed policies is substantial, imminent and well publicized. See, Kinder, “Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics”, p. 802.
- 10 Chris Anderson and M. Shwan Reichert, “Economic Benefits and Support for Membership in the EU: A Cross-National Analysis”, *Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 15, Issue 3 (September 1995), pp. 231-250; Matthew Gabel and Harvey D. Palmer, “Understanding Variation in Public Support for European Integration”, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 1995), pp. 3-19.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 Occupational category, level of education, or class-based gains are usually statistically significant predictors of EU support in both member and candidate countries. For evidence concerning the utilitarian hypothesis for candidate countries, see Matthew J. Gabel, “Public Support for European Integration: An Empirical Test of Five Theories”, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (May 1998), pp. 333–354; see, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration”, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (July 2004), pp. 415 - 420; for empirical evidence supporting the utilitarian perspective for EU member states, see, Orla Doyle and Jan Fidrmuc, “Who is in Favour of Enlargement? Determinants of Support for EU Membership in the Candidate Countries’ Referanda”, *The Institute for International Integration Studies Discussion Paper Series*, No. 045 (November 2004), Trinity College, Dublin; Piret Ehin, “Determinants of Public Support for EU Membership: Data from the Baltic Countries”, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (August 2001), pp. 31-56.
 - 13 Kentmen, “Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey”; Çarkoğlu and Kentmen, “Diagnosing Trends and Determinants in Public Support for Turkey’s EU Membership”. A comparative assessment of support for the EU in new and old member states as well as candidate countries also shows the irrelevance of self-interest variables in the Turkish context. See, Brent F. Nelsen, James L. Guth, and Brian Highsmith, “Does Religion Still Matter? Religion and Public Attitudes toward Integration in Europe”, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (April 2011), pp. 1-26.
 - 14 McLaren, *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*.
 - 15 Matthew J. Gabel and Guy Whitten, “Economic Conditions, Economic Perceptions, and Public Support for European Integration”, *Political Behavior*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 1997), pp. 81–96.
 - 16 Çarkoğlu, “Who Wants Full Membership?”.
 - 17 McLaren, *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*.
 - 18 Adel Abusara, “Public Opinion in Turkey on EU Accession –An (Un)desirable Marriage?”, *Western Balkans Security Observer*, Vol. 17 (April-June 2010), pp. 77-87. Also see Şenyuva, “Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkileri ve Kamuoyu”.

- 19 Ruairi Patterson, "Rising Nationalism and the EU Accession Process", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No.1 (Spring 2008), pp. 131-138; Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 2009), pp. 7-24.
- 20 In fact, the effect of self-interest variables is usually context-dependent. Sears and Funk, "The Role of Self-Interest in Social and Political Attitudes".
- 21 Leonie Huddy, "Group Identity and Social Cohesion", in David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 511-558.
- 22 Lawrence Bobo, "Whites' Opposition to Busing: Symbolic Racism or Realistic Group Conflict?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (December 1983), pp. 1196-1210; Robert Alan LeVine and Donald Thomas Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*, New York, Wiley, 1972.
- 23 Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1981; Donald R. Kinder, "Presidents, Prosperity, and Public Opinion", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 1-21; Michael Lewis-Beck, *Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- 24 Jack Citrin, Donald P. Green, Christopher Muste, and Cara Wong, "Public Opinion Toward Immigration Reform: The Role of Economic Motivations", *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (August 1997), pp. 858-881.
- 25 Gabel and Whitten, "Economic Conditions, Economic Perceptions".
- 26 Kentmen, "Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey".
- 27 In fact, democratic attitudes are positively related to support for EU membership. Çarkoğlu, "Who Wants Full Membership?".
- 28 Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981; Henry Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integretive Theory of Intergroup Conflict", in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Monterey, CA, Brooks Cole, 1979, pp. 33- 48.
- 29 Of course, just being a member of a group- such as being female or a citizen of a certain country- is not enough for social identity to have an effect on political attitudes. It is rather the *subjective* identification with one's group(s) or one's sense of belonging that is critical to understanding the political ramifications of group membership since not all group members feel a sense of attachment to their in-group. Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2001), pp. 127-156.
- 30 Paul Taggart, "A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (April 1998), pp. 363-388.

- 31 Hooghe and Marks, “Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion?”; McLaren, *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*; Sean Carey, “Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?”, *European Union Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 387–413.
- 32 Kentmen, “Determinants of Support for EU Membership in Turkey”.
- 33 Çarkoğlu, “Who Wants Full Membership?”.
- 34 Öniş and Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism”, pp. 13-14.
- 35 Bobo, “Whites’ Opposition to Busing”.
- 36 Lincoln Quillian, “Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (August 1995), pp. 586–611. In addition, it is a perceived threat to the *group* that tends to produce the most hostile reactions, not a threat to the individual. Thus, it is primarily the threat to in-group interests that produces hostility toward other ethnic or racial groups.
- 37 David R. Kinder and Donald O. Sears, “Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism versus Racial Threats to the Good Life”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (March 1981), pp. 414- 431.
- 38 Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom, Stanley Feldman, and Gallya Lahav, “The Differential Character of Material and Cultural Perceived Threat from Immigration”, Paper presented at the APSA Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, 28-31 August 2008; Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay, “What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 959-978.
- 39 McLaren, *Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration*.
- 40 Abusara, “Public Opinion in Turkey on EU”.
- 41 Çarkoğlu and Kentmen, “Diagnosing Trends and Determinants in Public Support for Turkey’s EU Membership”.
- 42 For ease of presentation, respondents who answered “don’t know” to both questions were excluded from the analysis, and “neither good nor bad” answers to the EU membership question are not presented.
- 43 Michael Lewis-Beck, *Applied Regression: An Introduction*, California, Sage Publications, 1980.
- 44 The six items included in the socioeconomic well-being index were TV, DVD player, CD music player, computer, internet connection at home, and a car.
- 45 Note that the number of observations declines due to a deletion of missing items.
- 46 Çarkoğlu, “Who Wants Full Membership?”.

- 47 Ziya Öniş, “Conservative Globalists versus Defensive Nationalists: Political Parties and Paradoxes of Europeanisation in Turkey”, in Susannah Verney and Kostas Ifantis (eds.), *Turkey’s Road to European Union Membership: National Identity and Political Change*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, pp. 35- 48.
- 48 Gabel, “Public Support for European Integration”; Hooghe and Marks, “Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion?”; Ehin, “Determinants of Public Support for EU Membership”.
- 49 Patterson, “Rising Nationalism and the EU Accession Process”, p. 136.
- 50 Işıl Cerem Cenker, “Turkey’s Changing Perceptions of the EU: From Partnership to Patronship”, in Meltem Müftüler-Baç and Yannis A. Stivachtis (eds.), *Turkey – European Union Relations: Dilemmas, Opportunities, and Constraints*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2008.