This research deserves the attention of policy makers and analysts of Turkey, its neighbours and partners in the foreign policy realm. Looking at the report's results, the team extracts "political messages" of the population towards four addressees: the Turkish Government and its ruling party, the USA, the European Union and the political community of the MENA region including Israel. According to this reading of the research, the Turkish public 1. supports the new active and solution-oriented Turkish foreign policy; 2. does not express deep grounded enmity towards the US; 3. still clings in its majority to the goal of EU-membership; and 4. it is ready to come to terms with Israel. The government, say the researchers, has to enhance its efforts for solutions and mutual understanding and Turkey's partners have to recognize the country's reasonable interests.

A ROSY PICTURE

Single numbers, in fact, draw a rosy picture: 53% expect more positive relations with the US in the future; a composite 47% argue that stressed relations with Israel are harming Turkey's interests; a relative majority of in sum 31% opt for a solution of the Cyprus problem in the parameters of the international community (with only 14% opposing); and last but not least, 69% still back Turkey's membership in the EU. All these hint to the point, say the

researchers, that Turkey has "not changed its axis", and that Turkey has not distanced itself emotionally from "the West".

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PREVAILING POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Surely, there is much reason to adopt this viewpoint, but I think there is also another side of the same coin. Saying this, I do not want to simply portend some numbers that depict a highly negative image of 'the West' in Turkey. I suggest a slightly different reading of the results, namely to qualify their nature as being independent data that has to be accepted without further ado as 'the message of the population' towards the government or towards any other political actor. For, in my view, there is no public opinion, no perspective of those represented, that remains untouched from - and that is not deeply influenced by - policies, approaches and the pertaining discourse of the political elite.

The responses, thus, may not be treated as pristine views of the people, independent from the preponderate political discourse in the country. The unearthed views of the population are unavoidably shaped by the arguments and worldviews that construct the political discussions and agendas, and they, to a certain degree, mirror the perspectives of the political elite.

Guenther Seufert is a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), where he runs their Turkey programme. Previously he was a freelance author based in Istanbul and a visiting professor at the University of Cyprus.

CONTRADICTORY RESEARCH RESULTS AND CONTRADICTORY PERSPECTIVES IN THE FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

The responses regarding Turkey-US relations may serve as a case in point for the approach in reading research results that I personally favour. The results at first glance show that the US occupies an omnipresent place in the consciousness of Turkey's population. The US figures prominently both in positive and negative assessments regarding the stance and aims of foreign countries towards Turkey. Asked, 'what are the threats to Turkey', the US leads second with 12% directly after the PKK with 14%, and responding to another question 52% say the US behaves 'not like a friend' to Turkey. On the other hand, a majority of 53% are sure that relations between the two countries will be bright in the future.

Does this speak for a divided society regarding the perception of the USA? Unfortunately, the study does not provide us with cross-reference tables that would allow either to verify or to falsify this assumption. Or may one and the same group of persons say the US is both a threat (today) and expect better relations in the future? This, then, in my opinion would simply mirror the overt contradiction of mainstream political discourse in Turkey. Because, Turkey's political community on one-hand asserts a kind of "strategic partnership" between Turkey and the US. But at the very same time, it accuses the US for destabilizing the region, for waging unjust wars, for undermining Turkey's secular order and for undercover support for PKK operatives. In this sense, the research primarily confronts the political elite with the effects of their own policy; a message to be taken seriously.

In the eyes of the interviewees, the US (12%) just outnumbers Israel (10%) as the country that poses a threat to Turkey. The magnitude of the menace ascribed to Israel astonishes the observer given the fact that Turkey does not rely on Israel in a way comparable to its reliance on the US, and Turkish vulnerability through Israel in the realms of military and diplomacy is not comparable to the harm a serious conflict with the US could inflict on Turkey. More people mention Israel (40 %) than the US (33%) as country adverse to Turkey. Looking from the West, this extraordinarily high number of people viewing Israel as hostile to Turkey also comes as a surprise, given the fact that despite the Mavi Marmara incident there is no direct conflict between the two states. At the same time, there is strong interest in patching up the relationship. In response to a different question, 34% say the strained relations between the two countries are detrimental to both of them and 13% argue bad relations affect the interests of Turkey. Thus, 47% think there is a lot to gain for Turkey from good relations with the Jewish state. Again we see a lot of ambiguity and even contradiction. And again the question arises whether the nation is simply divided over this particular issue or whether the responses mirror different strands of political rhetoric, namely anti-Semitism, prominent in society and politics since the early Republic, a quite different tradition of strategic partnership and recent criticism of Israel's present day policy.

THE PREJUDICED EU, THE CYPRUS PROBLEM AND UNEXPECTED VIEWS OF THE POPULATION

The results of opinion research, however, may not be valued simply as the reflected image of the elite's political language. While political discourse is important in shaping the population's perceptions, not all interests, positions and desires of all groups are always reflected in the hegemonic political discourse.

One hint to this, in my opinion, shines through in the responses to questions relating to the EU, Turkish membership and dealing with the Cyprus question. But, first, these serve as a third example of the intriguing link between public opinion and political discourse.

In the introductory text of the report, the research team marvel about the responses to the question for the main obstacles to Turkish membership in the EU, saying: According to the results, television is used as the main source of information by the respondents. TV channels broadcasted numerous programmes on the Cyprus issue, explaining that the issue forestalls the EU-accession process. But people in Turkey mainly point to other reasons. In their eyes, xenophobia in the EU and the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country are the main hurdles for EU-membership. The solution to this puzzler, I would say, lies in the way, TV programmes in Turkey inform about the Cyprus issue. TV programmes on Cyprus in Turkey, more often than not, present the Turkish position as the only reasonable one, thus putting the stance of the EU about the Cyprus question in the complexion of prejudice, onesidedness and anti-Turkish feelings. So we may not speak of a contradiction between being well informed about the centrality of the Cyprus issue for the faltering membership process and pointing to the 'xenophobia of the EU' as the definite obstacle for Turkey's membership in the European club. Again, political discourse and the research results go hand in hand – but only to a certain extent.

Why only to a certain extent? As already mentioned, a relative majority of 31% agree to the solution of the Cyprus problem in parameters acknowledged by the international community. 22% argue for a peaceful consensus and 9% favour the establishment of a bi-zonal federation. This asserts attention,

particularly given the backdrop of the onesided presentation of the issue in the media. It marks the limits of shaping the peoples' mindset and opinions. I tend to read these data together with the relatively small number of respondents that opted for the Cyprus problem when asked for Turkey's main foreign policy issue: only 4%. And I arrive at the conclusion that Cyprus figures not at all as the 'national issue' as which it is presented in official and semi-official foreign policy-speech in Turkey.

There is a considerable group in the population that shows willingness both to come to terms with the EU and to move forward on the Cyprus question.

Despite the display of the Cyprus issue in most TV programmes as a national concern with Turkey in the right, there is a considerable group in the population that shows willingness both to come to terms with the EU and to move forward on the Cyprus question. In line with this only a relative minority of 14% opt for a narrow and nationalist policy on Cyprus, demanding either the integration of Turkish settled northern Cyprus into the Republic of Turkey or for enhanced efforts to win the consent of third states (like Pakistan) for the international recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), until today only recognized by Turkey.

The argument above, points at two further planks in the reading of research data, I consider of importance. One is 'to underline the unexpected', namely to look particularly at findings that differ from official speech, thus hinting at some tendencies amongst the population, for one reason or the other, not taken up in their full magnitude by the political elite. The other plank consists of the attempt to read different single data together and to

arrive at a more comprehensive picture regarding more general attitudes held by the population. What does the research offer in this regard?

STRANDS OF THE GENERAL MINDSET

a) Turkey should be strong and independent

All issues related to Turkey's enhanced strength in its neighbourhood were met with strong approval. Almost three out of four (and in some regards even four out of five) are sure that Turkey can be a model for the Middle East. 75% say Turkey should play a role in solving the quarrel between Israel and the Palestinians. 74% argue for a similar role for Turkey in regard to the Caucasus and to the Middle East in general. Huge majorities support the missions of Turkish troops abroad (Lebanon 58%). In short, people like Turkey to be powerful.

The new foreign policy, is welcomed far beyond the AKP electorate and it seems this policy receives support from almost two thirds of the population.

And Turkey, in the eyes of its population, exerts its power the best way, when acting independently from 'the West'. Closer relations with Russia are supported by 70% (when it comes to closer economic relations, the rate goes up to 76%). Turkey's reluctance to join forces with the USA and European powers in mounting up pressure on Iran to fortify its nuclear programme is also much in line with the mood in the majority of the population. Merely 38% oppose Iran's 'peaceful nuclear energy programme' (47 % take a supportive stance). Only when asked directly 'whether Iran poses a threat to the

Middle East', 35 % express concerns. Asked in a more general way, 'which countries take an adverse stance towards Turkey', only 4 % point at the powerful Eastern neighbour. Given that 65% oppose Iran developing nuclear weapons, it becomes clear that large parts of the population do not share the view of the US and some European states that claim Iran's current nuclear activities are aiming at exactly this goal.

b) Turkey feels like a Muslim country

Nationwide, 65% are supportive of Turkey's new foreign policy. At the time the research was carried out around in December 2010, the ruling party AKP scored some 45% in the polls. The new foreign policy, thus, is welcomed far beyond the AKP electorate and it seems this policy receives support from almost two thirds of the population. Which kind of identities and attitudes are evoked by the new foreign policy, alongside the pride of Turkey being strong and independent?

According to the research, the new foreign policy gathers different levels of support in different regions of the country. The most pleased with the new foreign policy are the inhabitants of the Black Sea region (73%), followed by the inhabitants of Central Anatolia (67%). These regions are known for a mixture of Turkish nationalist and Muslim conservative leanings. There is reason to assume that those rings of the new foreign policy that are compatible with the mentioned outstanding orientations in the Black Sea and Central Anatolia region are the most appealing to the overall population. In particularly the following sensitivities and orientations that might be geared towards striking a chord with Muslim conservative nationalist self-conception: the underlining of Turkey's unique identity, that encompasses European, Asian

and Middle Eastern attributes; the progressively critical approach towards the European Union, the reluctance to bow to Western pressure in the policy towards Iran and the backing of the Palestinians against Israel as well as the overall rapprochement with the Muslim World.

Other data contribute to this expression: The government's initiative, aborted today, to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and to reopen the border to this country, comes out in the research as the only foreign policy move of the AKP government not supported by the majority of the population. Only 39% backed the failed initiative. Motives for its rejection are closely related to cultural identity: 'The Armenians are enemies of Turkey', 'The Armenians betrayed Turkey', 'the Armenians accuse Turkey of genocide'. Only a relative small group (5 out of 44%) reject the initiative with reference to Azerbaijani interests and this is the only surprise in this context. For in official rhetoric, solidarity with Azerbaijan serves as the main reason for the initiative's discontinuation.

In the Black Sea region where Turkishness holds sway, 60% reject the initiative, and only 28% support it, but the result is turned upside down in the predominantly Kurdish settled South East, where 58% support and only 27 % reject the project. Both the overall low level of support to open borders with Armenia and the over proportional and contradictory results in the two mentioned regions with their quite different political and cultural milieus are indicators of the role that strong identity concepts play in the foreign policy evaluations of the people. Even if the question is rephrased and people are asked whether they agree on strengthening relations with Armenia generally (without the opening of borders and without establishing diplomatic relations), only around 50% are ready to agree to such steps.

c) Strong identities and we are a little bit holier-than thou

Strong cultural identities, as a rule, need 'others' who are sketched less positively. This is true also for large parts of the Turkish population who ascribe positive intentions to their own state and people and tend to view other states primarily negative. Asked 'why the US does not treat Turkey as a friend', 23% (out of 76%) say 'the US pursues *only* its own interests', 10% say, 'the US does not want Turkey to gain more strength', 9% say 'Turkey is a Muslim country' and 7% assume that 'the US want to get the country into its hands and to destroy it'. Thus the responsibility for diplomatic tensions lies with the USA. When the question is asked the other way round, the picture does not really differ: Asked 'why Turkey does not see the US as a friend', four out of the five mentioned 'reasons' seem simply as different ways to justify Turkey's 'unfriendly' behaviour towards the US, heaping the entire blame for the unpleasant situation on the partner country: 'Turkey does not trust the US' (18%), 'the US tries to instrumentalize Turkey for its own interests' (8%), 'Turkey knows that the US is not a friend of it (6%) and 'the US supports (the PKK) terror' (4%). Only 7%, instead of accusing the US, say 'Turkey thinks of its own interests'.

Underscoring its own cultural identity and ascribing bad intentions to the other go hand in hand with the responses to the question of why Turkey should not become a member of the European Union[1]: 'Turkey is strong enough alone' (21%), 'Turkey's moral and cultural values are different' (10%), 'the Europeans don't want Turkey (8%), 'Turkey is a Muslim country' (6%) and 'the Europeans interfere in our domestic affairs' (5%) are mentioned

---

1   **Note that this question was only asked to those that responded negatively to the question of whether they wanted to be a member of the EU (26% of respondents).**

The democratisation of Turkish foreign policy since 2004 will make it increasingly difficult for governments to brush public opinion aside. That public opinion is and was created by populist discourse of the government itself does not make things easier.

besides 'the EU is in sharp decline' (6%). Leaving again the last mentioned argument aside, all reasons are identity related, be it explicitly or only implicitly.

The levels of appreciation for membership vary a great degree in different regions of the country. This features how identity related factors interact with socio-political drivers in this issue. In the Eastern and South Eastern regions of Turkey 87% and 91% argue for membership. The region is predominantly Kurdish settled and due to Kurdish nationalism, its inhabitants only partly cling to identity concepts favoured by the Republic like Turkishness and a distinctive Muslimdom that underpins distinction towards Europe. The region is underdeveloped and reasons of purposive rationality for membership are of utmost importance.

In Central Anatolia, on the other hand side, only 58% argue for membership. In the predominantly Turkish settled region, nationalism and Islam have merged into a state-centred identity and due to economic progress and other 'rational' arguments for membership don't have the same convincing power as in the crisis-ridden South East.

The arguments put forward for EU membership are void of culturalist speak and entirely point to rational considerations[2]: The ease of visa requirements (22%), economic advantages

(21%), employment opportunities (8%), and the raise of living standards (7%) are mentioned besides the augmentation of democracy (13%).

ARE THERE STILL CHANCES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Taken all these into consideration, one might be tempted to speak of an urgent need for the European Union to base its policy towards Turkey on more solid ground and to win the hearts and minds of larger parts of the population. It might not be enough to underline that there is still hope towards EU membership and towards mending of fences with Israel and the USA. In light of the research results, Turkey and Europe present the picture of two partners who still stand together firmly in the realms of economy and security, mainly in the institutional frameworks of the EU Customs Union and NATO. But when it comes to self-conception, identity, fellow feeling and cultural as well as political common denominators, the attraction is shrinking. The democratisation of Turkish foreign policy since 2004 will make it increasingly difficult for governments to brush public opinion aside. That public opinion is and was created by populist discourse of the government itself does not make things easier.

Thus, the Turkish government and the European Union as well as the Union's single member states should avoid political rhetoric and political moves likely to broaden the already considerable rift between Europe and the US on the one hand and Turkey on the other. For Turkey and Europe need each other. They dispose of shared interests in political stability, based on economic and political development, prosperity and democracy in a long list of regions from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from Northern Africa to the Middle East.

2   Again this question was only asked to those who responded positively to the question of whether they wanted Turkey to be a member of the EU (69% of respondents.)

But the time frame for the overcoming of obstacles to cooperation in this vast area is seriously limited and things are bound to escalate particularly in Cyprus. Negotiations between the Greek and the Turkish communities on the island have got stuck. The UN ponder on abandoning efforts and to withdraw its troops. Thus, the sensation will vanish that the north of the island is occupied by Turkish troops only temporarily and only until an agreement is reached. The Cyprus conflict, thus, will turn into a conflict directly between Turkey and the EU, because Brussels considers the island in its entirety a part of the EU. Parliamentary elections in the predominantly Greek Republic of Cyprus have strengthened the nationalist right wing recently. In July 2012, the Republic of Cyprus will overtake the rotating EU-Council Presidency. And in 2013, a new President of State will be elected in the Republic of Cyprus, where the President is the chief negotiator of the Cyprus Problem. It does not need soothsaying to foretell the outcome of these polls after a period of foreseeable and earnest conflicts; the cards will be stacked against presidential candidates that opt for concession, compromise and reconciliation. The Turkish government thus will have to rethink its stance on the Cyprus question. As the research bore out, opposition among the Turkish population to compromise in the Cyprus question is limited.

On the part of the EU and their member countries, the situation is not less challenging. Here, political actors have to consider the profound change in Turkey's self-perception. From now on, Turkey needs to be addressed on an equal footing, even if the membership process by its nature seems to condition a different setting. The days in which Turkey was treated easily with carrot or stick are gone. Additionally, European actors have to avoid culturally biased approaches, strategies and

The Turkish government and the European Union as well as the Union's single member states should avoid political rhetoric and political moves likely to broaden the already considerable rift between Europe and the US on the one hand and Turkey on the other.

discourses. If the EU is still interested in having considerable portions of Turkey's population clinging to the goal of EU membership, the Union has to find ways to convince the people that membership is still a realistic option. Today, even those who are still convinced that one day Turkey will be a member of the Union say this might happen only 20 years from now on. Such a perspective in the long run is not motivating at all. The EU, thus, should provide for positive side effects of the membership process itself palpable for larger parts of the population. The easing of visa requirements would be a signal in the right direction. The Union's current stance regarding visa requirements is likely to be unsustainable in the long run. Instead of being forced to loosen visa policies by court decisions of EU member-states, the EU should solve the issue by a political move and take the advantage of determined action. The research has pointed out how central this issue appears to be for large portion of an increasingly EU sceptical population.

TESEV

TESEV FOREIGN POLICY PROGRAMME

The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and the policy-making process in Turkey by opening new channels for policy-oriented dialogue and research.

TESEV's Foreign Policy Programme aims to contribute to the resolution of critical foreign policy issues, to advocate Turkey's membership in the European Union and to help Turkey define its regional and global position. Currently the Programme works under four main themes: the European Union, Cyprus, the Middle East and Armenia.