

THE EU IN THE EYES OF TURKISH YOUTH

At this critical junction in Turkey-EU relations, it is indeed curious that no one has taken a moment to ask Turkish youth what they think of a modernization project which essentially spans over two centuries. Instead, public debate has been short-sighted and focused chiefly on when and if accession talks will begin without a long term perspective of Turkish membership. Indeed, there has been no consideration or debate about the opinions of the very people that will lead the country when Turkey eventually does gain full membership. Within this context, this project is the first attempt to undertake such a task. Thus this essay is an exploration of the perspectives of Turkish youth on the European Union and attempts to highlight both the confusion and contradictions underlying their answers.

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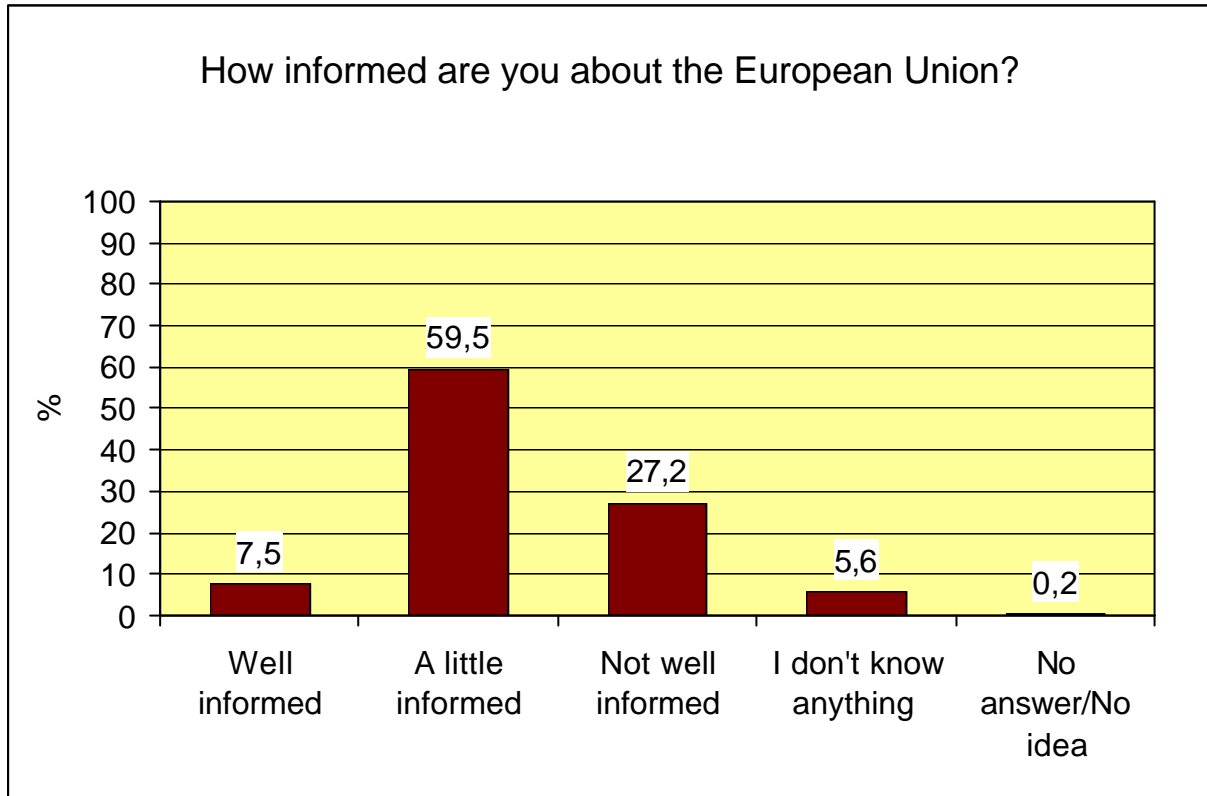
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The **Perspectives of Turkish Youth on the European Union** is a research project conducted under the ARI Movement with Infakto Research Workshop. In what has turned out to be the biggest ever youth research project in Turkey, 24571 high school students, between the ages of 14 and 18, participated from 20 provinces in Turkey. The questionnaire was included as the first page in the one hundred thousand copies of the *Europa Handbook* which was distributed all over Turkey. *Europa Handbook* is a project carried out by the ARI Movement in co-operation with the Generation Europe Foundation which was funded by the European Commission. The contents of this handbook were determined by both academics and experts. Furthermore, the directors of Infakto Research Workshop were consulted for their analysis and evaluation of the questionnaire itself.¹ Overall the results of the project have been striking. Most noticeably, it has emerged that while 7 out of 10 participants clearly support membership of the EU, 60 percent of this group still thinks that this will pose a threat to Turkish cultural values. Further, 18 percent of this group consisting of students between 14 to 18 years old also thinks of the EU as a solely economic union. Thus there are a number of questions we need to ask in the midst of such confusion: Do Turkish youth know what the EU is? To what extent do they follow developments in Turkey-EU relations? Where do they get their information, and are these reputable channels?

The first thing that this research project shows us is that Turkish youth in most part accept their lack of knowledge of EU related matters. Only 7.5 percent of participants believe that they are well informed on the matter while up to 35 percent feel either uninformed or not well informed. This situation is best highlighted by the fact that one in five participants believe that Turkey will join the EU in 2007, a development that is admittedly highly unlikely. Moreover, it seems apparent that those supportive of EU membership do not have credible sources of information.

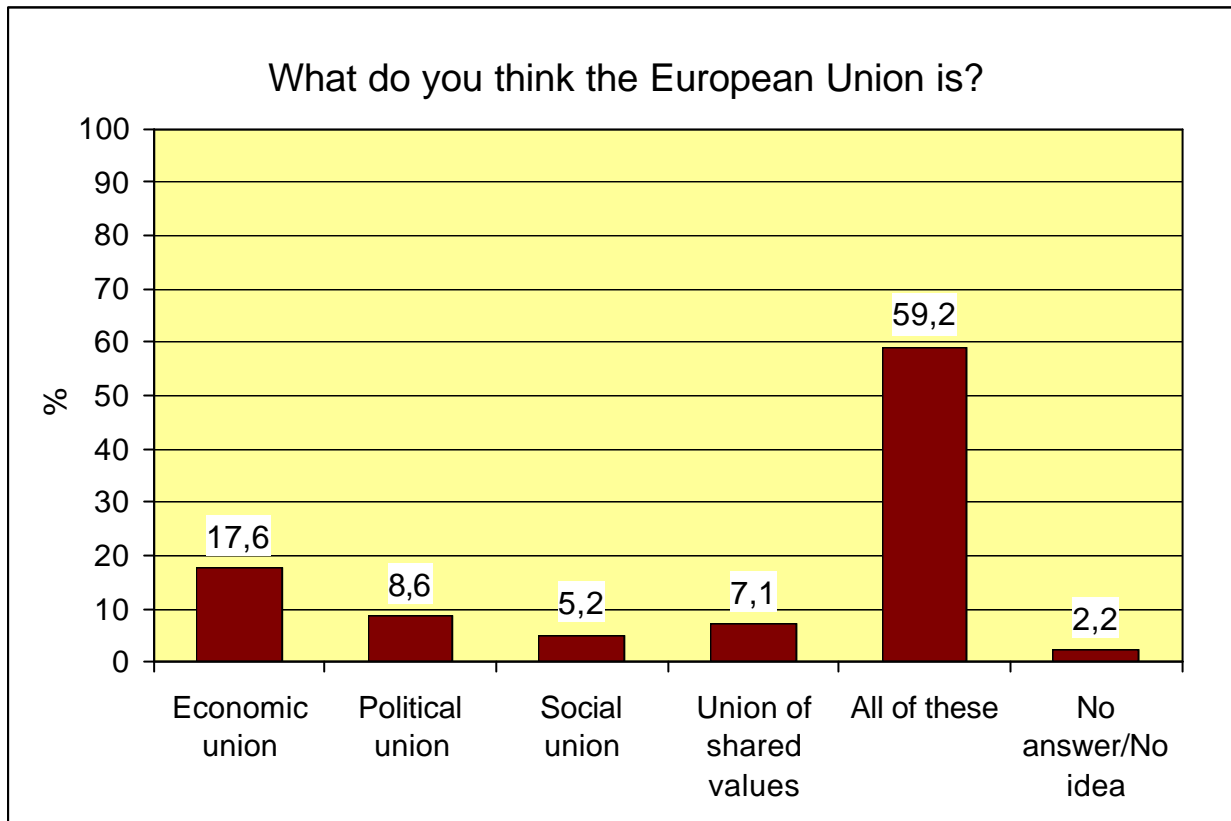
¹ We would like to thank directors of Infakto Research Workshop Dr. Emre Erdogan and Güçlü Atılğan, and the ARI Movement's young volunteers who have played an active role in this research project.

Figure 1



There is also a group who, while believing that membership will bring economic benefits, are nevertheless against Turkey joining the EU and feel that Turkish cultural values will be threatened by this. The picture becomes even more confused when we factor in the fact that the participants of this project are students who attend state schools and whose families are mid to lower income earners. This is because, intuitively, belief that the EU will bring economic benefits should go hand in hand with support for Turkish membership.

Figure 2

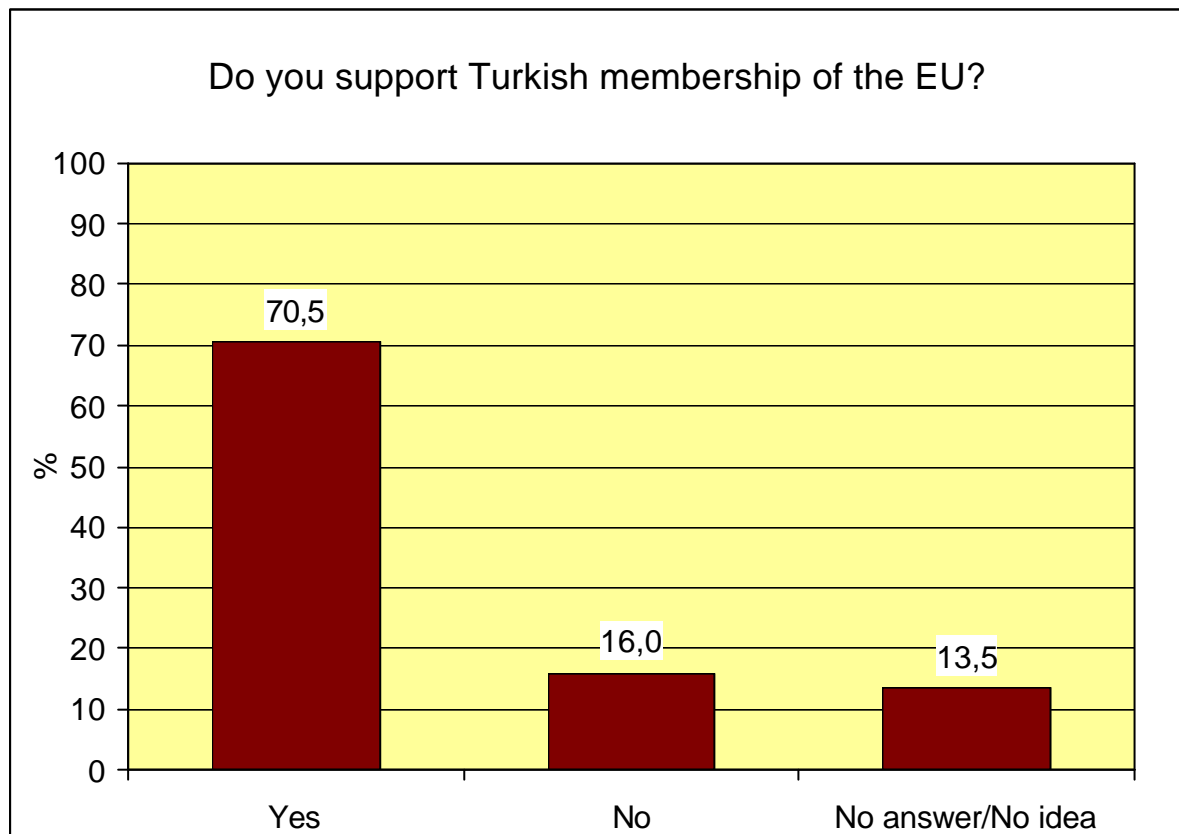


Furthermore, while 60 percent of participants believe the EU to be an economic, political, social union and a union of shared values, only 7.1 percent believe it to be union of shared values alone. Thus, Turkish youth does not consider the EU as a union of shared values despite the fact that the EU itself describes itself as one. Similarly, given the deficiency of EU policy with regards to Iraq, only 8.6 percent of participants believe it to be a political union.

What is most apparent from this research is the result that 70 percent of participants support EU membership while only 16 percent are against it. Further the 14 percent who are confused or undecided must not go unheeded in our evaluation. A question that comes to mind is the avenues from which Turkish youth receive information about the EU, since while 70 percent of participants indicate support for EU membership, a whopping 92.5 percent of participants feel that they are informed or little informed about the matter. The results are clear on this issue; most receive their information from watching television. Although a relatively high number also gets their information from newspapers, many feel that they do not receive sufficient information from their friends, family, and classes at school, radio or the internet. This may suggest that matters regarding EU-Turkey relations are not a popular discussion topic amongst friends. Moreover, they also face a lack of information about the EU in their academic environment. This means that there is a need to provide Turkish youth with objective and factual information regarding the EU, as opposed to negative or positive propaganda, which should be undertaken in educational institutions by experienced teachers. Our advice is the further development of work that has been carried out in recent years which includes all educators. Similarly given the critical role of television in this context, there is a need to have a serious debate about the accuracy of such information. For instance, at the time

when Turkey gained candidacy status, the story that made headline news was that a popular Turkish dish, *kokoreç* (roasted sheep's intestines), would be banned by the EU and the media was split between those who were willing to forgo *kokoreç* and those that were not. Thus instead of such trivialization of EU matters, the media has a responsibility to provide objective and factually based information.

Figure 3



Turkish Youth is Optimistic About the EU

Of the 24,571 participants of the research project, 70 percent believe that Turkey will join the EU sooner or later. Although some believe that this will happen in 2007, most are realists in that they believe that Turkey will become a member around 2010 and 2020. However, for various reasons, 3 out of 10 participants believe that Turkey will never be able to join the EU.

Thus it is possible to observe both the hopes and pessimism of Turkish youth with regards to the future of Turkey. A considerable number of participants believe that most economic indicators will be positively affected, educational standards and health services will improve, unemployment will decrease and the welfare of families will increase. Moreover, 6 out of 10 participants believe that there will be more respect for human rights. However, in contrast to these positive results many participants believe that politics in Turkey will not become more transparent or trustable. Neither are they sure as to whether ethical values will become more important. Thus, while students think that they Turkey will accrue various financial benefits, they do not believe that characteristic attributes will not change. As mentioned before Turkish youth believe that despite the positive effects of membership, they will nevertheless face a loss in terms of the threat posed to Turkish cultural values. Those who attend state schools in cities where Anatolian values are strongly reflected, such as Adana, Kayseri, Van,

Diyarbakir, Sanliurfa, Samsun and Denizli, were anxious that their moral values would be eroded and that there would degeneration. We are thus reminded again about the role of the media in providing reliable information.

Further, more than half of the participants have never met a EU citizen and those who have arguably had difficulties communicating due to the language barrier.

Figure 4

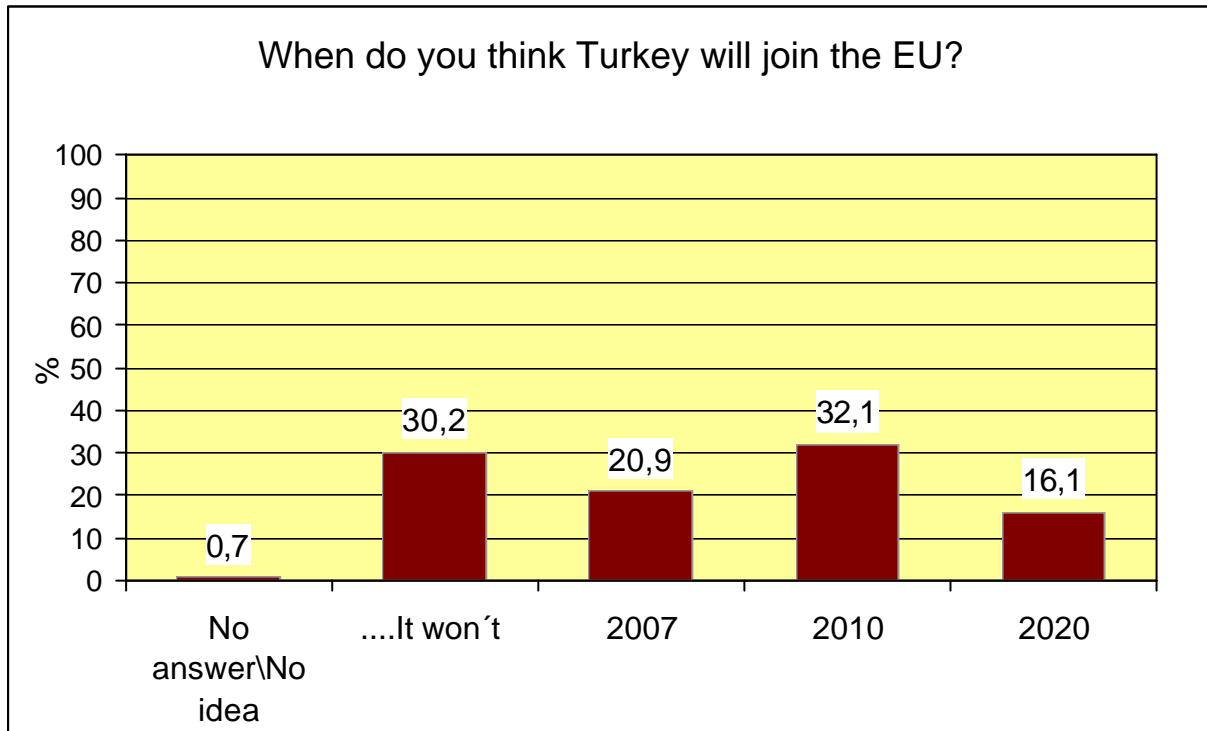


Figure 5

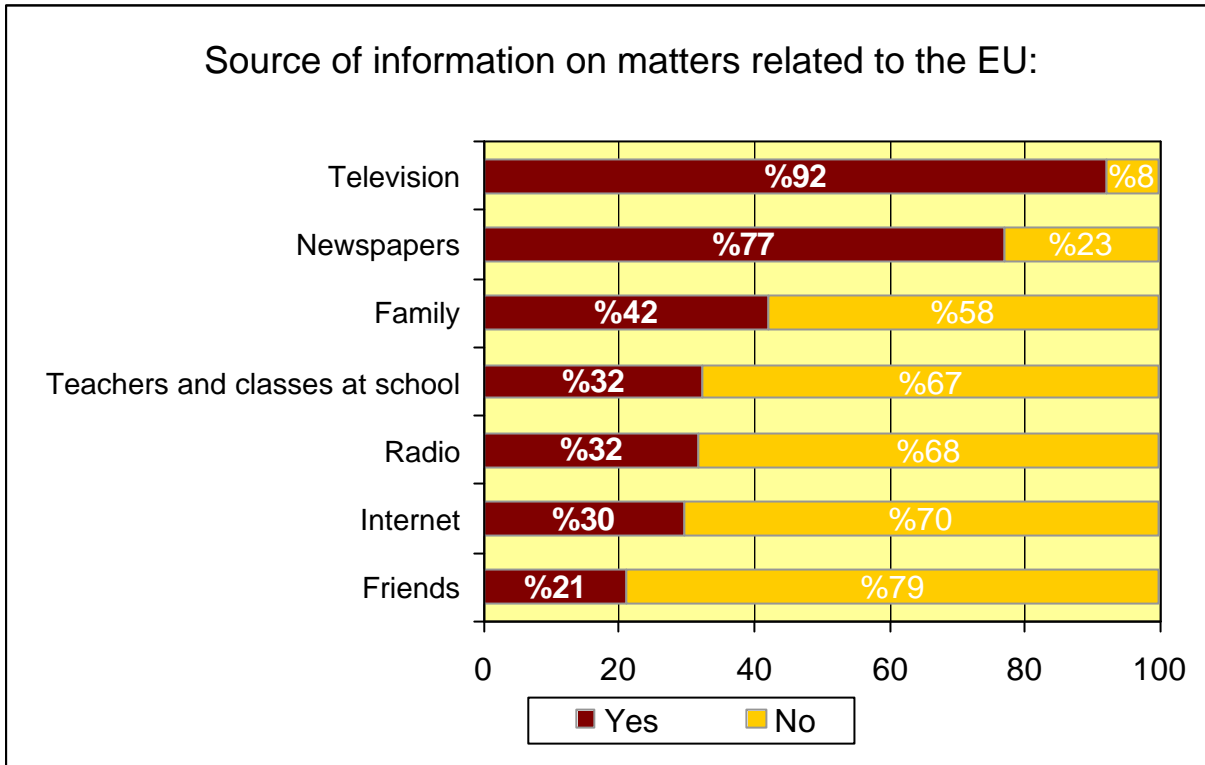


Figure 6

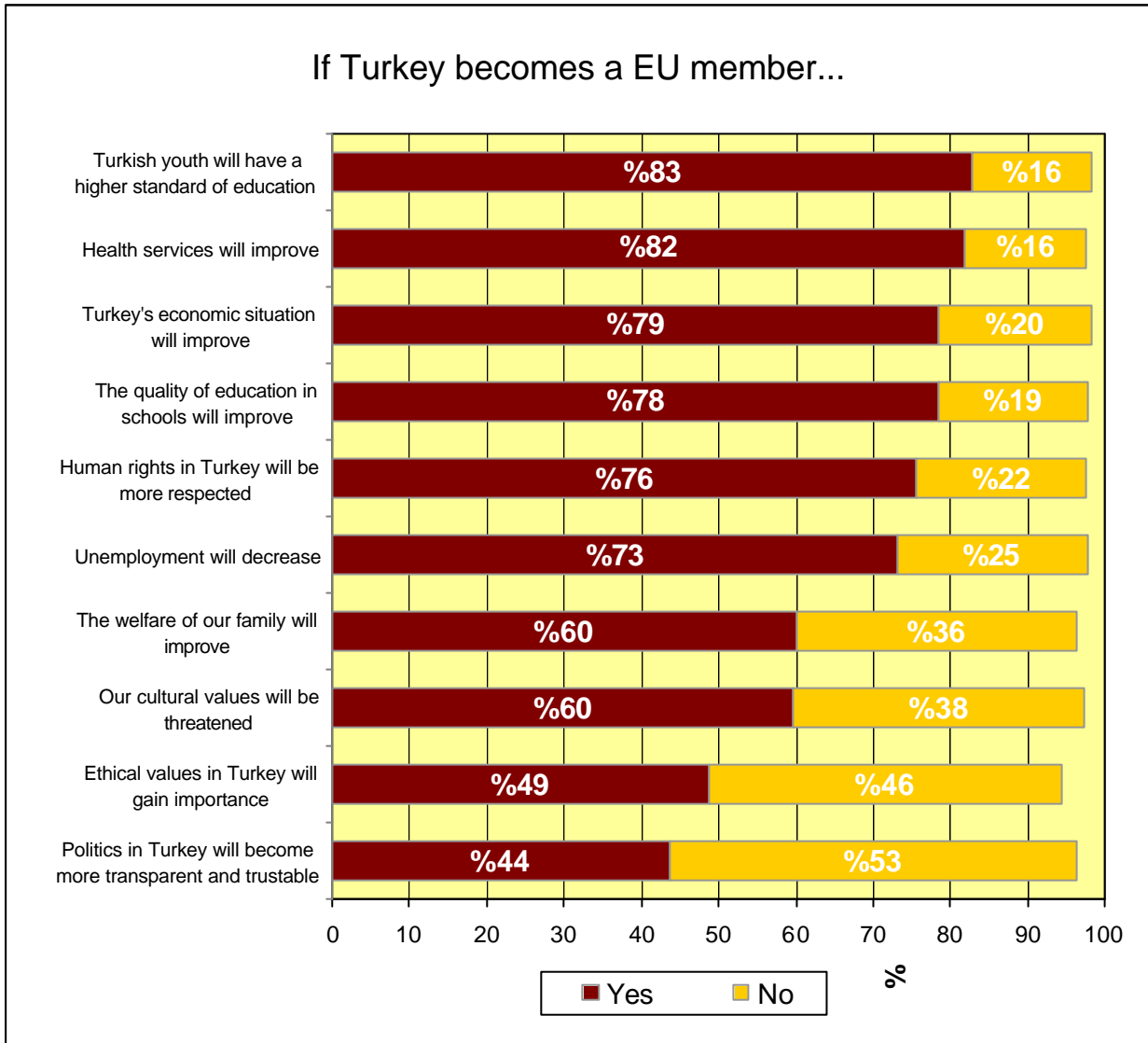
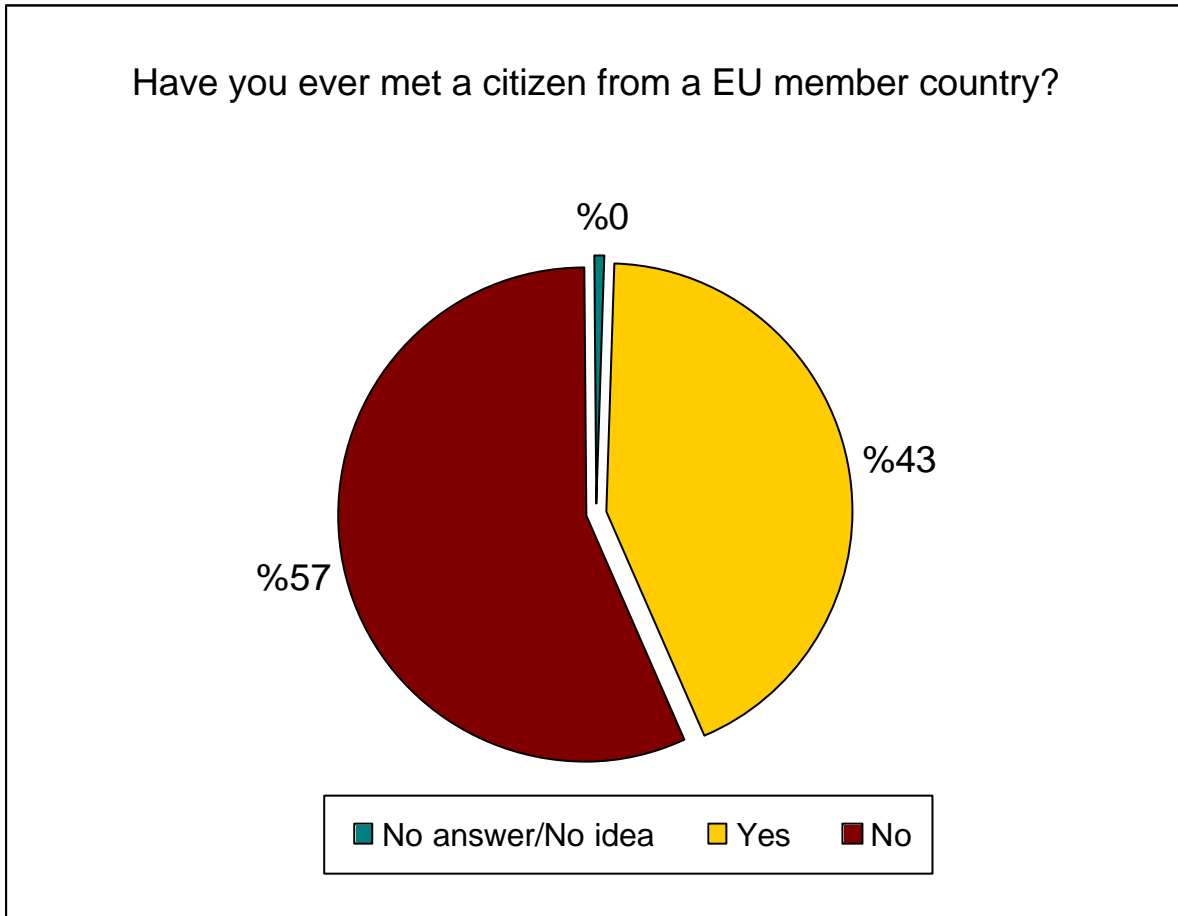


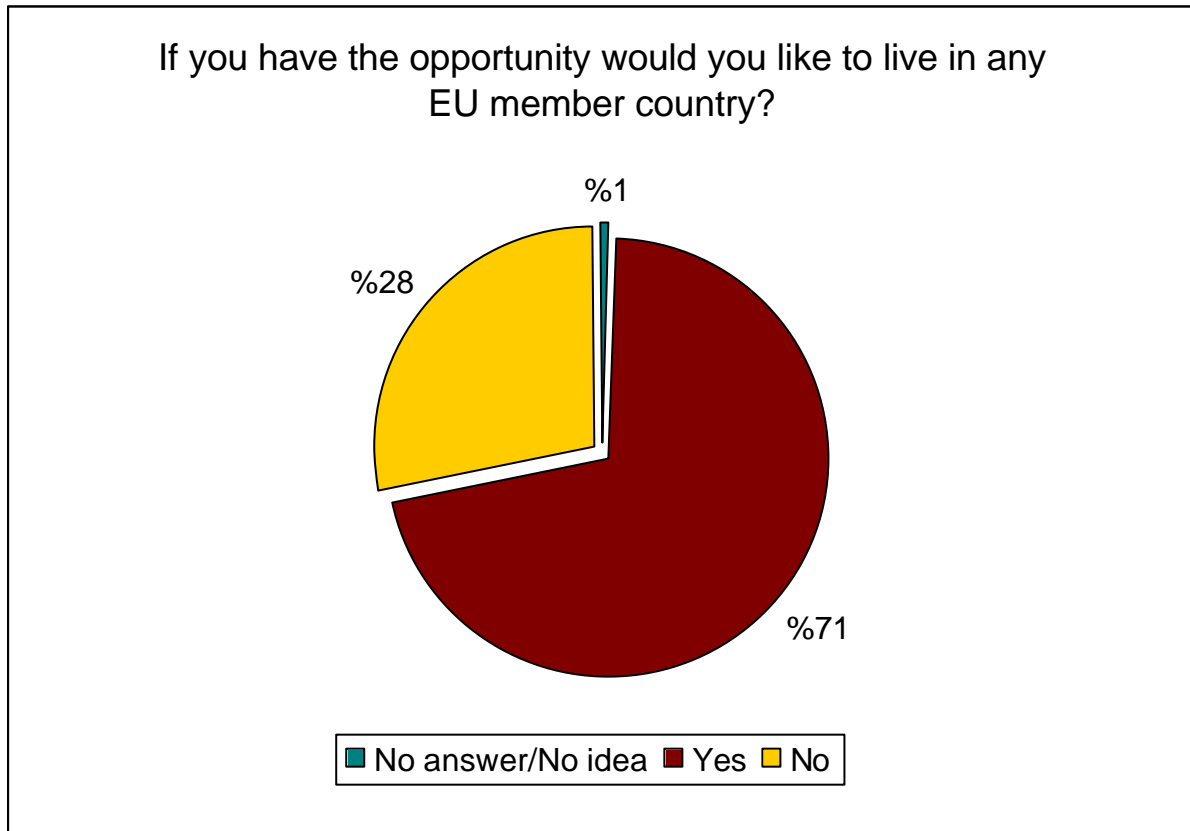
Figure 7



An Expected Result: Most would like to Live in a EU Member Country if They Have the Opportunity

One of the most important results of this research project is that 70 percent of participants expressed a desire to live in a EU country if they have the opportunity. Turkish youth are looking for ways to live in member states where welfare and education standards are high, and unemployment is minimal. However it is of note that participants associate the EU with mainly western European member states where socio-economic standards are high.

Figure 8



Conclusion

Overall the outcomes of the “The Perspectives of Turkish Youth on the European Union” research project are mainly expected results although there are still some surprising points. While most participants admit their lack of knowledge with regards to the EU, many are nevertheless both supportive of membership and are positively hopeful about Turkey’s chances of joining. Furthermore, despite the fact that many believe Turkey will benefit economically, they feel that there will be non-material losses in terms of the threat posed to Turkish traditions and values. Thus it is possible to see that such confused and contradictory feelings, apparent in the wider public, are just as pervasive amongst Turkish youth. Despite an overwhelming support for Turkish membership, the fact that there is still significant Euro-skepticism amongst youth is a point that must not go unheeded. Therefore, there is a need to educate the future leaders of tomorrow. This should be done through the national education system and the media, although the latter must take care not to misinform Turkish youth on the matter. Civil society also has a crucial role to play in using its resources to ensure that Turkish youth have access to objective information on the EU in order for them to be able to make the right decisions concerning the future of the country.