

TURKEY'S ACCESSION TO THE EU: A TEST CASE FOR THE RELEVANCE OF IDENTITY

This article comments on the European integration process with a specific focus on the concept of identity. The processes of integration and enlargement are increasingly being shaped along the lines of culture and identity, and the definition and interpretation of European identity play a very important role in the future of the EU. The problematic accession process of Turkey to the EU is presented as a supporting argument indicating the relevance of identity.

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A Test Case for the Relevance of Identity

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or the first time in EU history, candidate country negotiations are now being held with a deliberate statement of their open ended nature and no guarantee of their conclusion.”¹ Why does the Turkish accession process appear to be more problematic compared to those of the other candidates? The answer to this question lies in the identity debate, which is an integral element of the constructivist theory applied to international relations.

For Turkey, joining the EU is meant to complete the long historical course of the Westernization process that started in the late 19th century. Even though Europeanness is not part of a natural historical legacy for Turkey, it has become a political project. Since the Ankara Agreement of 1963, the first official contact between Turkey and the European Community which affirmed Turkey’s literal European status, the relations between Turkey and the Community have continued in periods of ups and downs. On the one hand, Turkey is a good trading partner, a member of the Custom’s Union with which the EU pursues good neighborly relations. On the other hand, Turkey’s candidacy for full membership has generated heated debates among the European public and political spheres. Even though the EU officially decided to start accession negotiations on 3 October 2005, this is bound to be a long and open-ended process, a term much-favored by the EU.

EU member states are divided on the accession of Turkey for several reasons. “The question of Ankara’s full membership involves all of the possible geopolitical aspects one can expect, from demography to cultural identity, from geostrategy to economics, and from the internal European political balance to the EU’s relations with both the U.S. and the Middle East.”² Turkey’s Islamic culture, the strong emphasis of the military on political life, and demography (forecasts that the state will be the EU’s most populated country by 2015-20) are perceived as threats to the political balance inside the Union.³ Last but not least, the impact of Turkish identity on the accession process can be listed among the reasons why the EU takes on a hesitant approach towards Turkey. The combination of all of these factors shape the attitudes of EU members towards Turkey, and the significance of the influence of identity arises from the fact that it is not an official accession criteria, cannot be measured or commented on with progress reports, and open to subjective evaluation.

The success of Turkey’s bid for membership will be a significant indicator of how much impact the conceptualized European identity has on the integration process and enlargement; and also to what extent Turkey has been willing and will continue to adopt EU norms. Turkey’s much debated membership reveals very important clues about Europe’s conception of its own core values and identity. As a matter of fact, Turkey serves

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¹ Greg Austin and Kate Parker, “The Mono-cultural Delusion: Turkey and Migration Politics”, in Sarah Schaefer, Greg Austin and Kate Parker (eds.), *Turks in Europe: Why are we afraid?* (London: Foreign Policy Center, 2005), p.19.

² Federico Bordonaro, “Turkey’s Accession Divides the EU”, *Power and Interest News Report* (<http://www.pinr.com>), 5 October 2005.

³ Bordonaro, 5 October 2005.

as a test case for determining the way European identity will take shape and influence European integration from now on.

The Winding Road to Membership

The Maastricht Treaty provides that any European State whose system of Government is founded on the principle of democracy may apply to become a member of the Union. Even though the Union has clearly defined its accession strategy with the Copenhagen Criteria, the reactions and policies of the national governments of member states towards Turkey suggest that identity plays a crucial role in shaping enlargement and integration strategies. Needless to say, the formulation of enlargement strategies has two equally important components: Willingness and effort displayed by the candidate country to adopt the *acquis communautaire* and EU norms, and the challenges faced by the EU during that specific period.

“While actors (individuals or states) have a single personal (or corporate) identity, they have multiple social identities that may vary in salience.”⁴ This is especially true for describing the relationship between Turkey and the EU, where identity becomes a major determinant. Due to the strong relevance of the concept of identity, Turkish accession into the community appears to be unique compared to previous enlargements. The perception and interpretation of Turkish identity by the EU influences and shapes the integration process along with the technical accession criteria that Turkey needs to fulfill. In comparison to the idealized European identity, the modern Turkish identity which was established with the foundation of the Republic is relatively young. The difference between European and Turkish identities is that the former is a synthesis of a well-established Western tradition that dates back to ancient Greece, while the latter has been “converted” into this model.

Many things have changed since the Ankara Agreement. Back then, the EEC was an economic organization, and did not come with a long list of political admission criteria. The real problem is that Turkey has been slow to grasp the growing importance of political and cultural elements in the Community’s accession strategy over the years, which started in the 1980s with the southern enlargement of Greece, Spain and Portugal; and intensified with the accession of Central and Eastern European Countries. In 1987, Turkey made a formal application under the Özal government, after a series of attempts to liberalize the economy and democratize the country following the military coup in 1980. However, “Turkish authorities failed to notice the shift in Community priorities as reflected in the criteria for membership”⁵, and renew the accession strategy accordingly. The Turkish application was rejected on both economic and political grounds. Turkey has been struggling to meet these conditions ever since.

Turkey entered the Customs Union in 1996, but could not go further than that. Turkish leaders and people were even more disappointed when Turkey was declared ineligible at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997, whereas most post-communist states which also had weak economic and political records were announced as candidates. Many European

⁴ Yücel Bozdaglioglu, *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Identity: A Constructivist Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p.22.

⁵ Sevilay Elgün Kahraman, “Rethinking Turkey-European Union Relations in the Light of Enlargement”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol.1, No.1 (Spring 2000), p.5.

leaders proclaimed that the EU was a civilizational project in which Turkey had no place.⁶ The Turkish government responded by freezing all political dialogue with the EU, following the Luxembourg Summit. Finally, Turkey was granted candidate status at the Helsinki Summit of 1999, even though it was repeated again that the accession criteria was still far from being met. Afterwards, Turkey started a rigorous program by calling for the National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis, and implemented a series of reforms such as the abolition of the death penalty, curtailment of the influence of the military, increased freedom of expression, and more freedom for the use of and study of the Kurdish language.

Having started accession negotiations, Turkey has a long way to go, and there is also the risk of not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel at all. The possibility that accession negotiations might not eventually result in full membership even if necessary reforms are carried out would be a de-motivating factor for the Turkish government, and especially hurt Turkish public opinion about the EU in general. Still, no matter how troubled the negotiating process can get, excluding Turkey completely cannot be an option for the EU. As it had been stated in the Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council (16-17 December 2004), “while taking account of all Copenhagen Criteria, if the Candidate State is not in a position to assume in full all obligations of membership it must be ensured that the Candidate State is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond.”⁷

The challenges that the EU faces today are numerous: Internal political, economic and social cohesion, improvement of the CFSP, tensions in the Transatlantic Relationship, relations with the unstable Middle East, environmental concerns, rising competition from China, to name a few. Each enlargement and candidate brings their own issues into the Union, which is why the EU is hesitant towards Turkey. At first glance, this might be perceived as a double standard against Turkey, and that EU member states have no intention of really admitting Turkey into their “club” so they try to find excuses to delay the negotiations. But we should also keep in mind that not all enlargements can be alike and smooth in all aspects, and the Turkish case is no exception.

In broader terms, “there is a new political contest about the relationship between the Union and its “national components,” and how they should all deal with “outsiders.” This has been provoked particularly by the enlargement of 2004, by prospective enlargements including Turkey, and growing anxiety about immigration and integration.”⁸ The economic burden of the latest enlargement, unemployment, stagnating growth rates, an aging population are already pressing issues that the EU needs to address in the long term. On top of all these, the idea of Turkey becoming a member is more than some EU members can cope with.

The Religion Factor

As the Ottoman Empire expanded into Europe through territorial conquest in the 16th century, relations between the two evolved around military confrontation. Today, Turkey’s Islamic character and the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire are invisible hunchbacks

⁶ Paul Kubicek, “Turkish Accession to the European Union”, *World Affairs*, Vol.168, No.2 (Fall 2005), p.69.

⁷ “Brussels European Council Presidency Conclusions”, *Europa - The European Union Online*, (www.europa.eu), 17 December 2004.

⁸ Austin and Parker, (2005), p.42.

of Turkey during the accession process. Christianity, which is a key element of European identity comes to the surface in the EU's relations with Turkey.⁹

Also to the dismay of Turkey, *Islamophobia* has been solidified especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks to the U.S. and Western values in general.¹⁰ This ideological shift in European politics worked to the disadvantage of Turkey, underlined religious differences as a factor, and raised the anxieties caused by "radical Islam" in Europe.

The caricatures published in the Jyllands-Posten Danish newspaper depicting the Prophet Mohammed unpleasantly caused rage within the Muslim world, and were regarded as an insult to the moral values of Islam. This event underlined once again how the concepts of "Muslim" and "violence" were dangerously intertwined in the EU. "The cartoon controversy was really about the clashes within two civilizations: Western Europe and global Islam. The cartoons' publication was not merely an academic exercise in freedom of speech, but something that reflects underlying tensions racking Europe."¹¹ It is very dangerous to link the Turkish accession with Islamic extremism, but the way Islam is portrayed in European media and politics further complicates the accession process for Turkey.

Turkey's Much-Debated Europeanness

Samuel Huntington had defined Turkey as a "torn-country"¹² back in 1993, meaning that Turkey is neither completely Western nor Eastern. "Turkey does not share in the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, but neither does it belong to the predominantly Arab Islamic culture."¹³ Moreover, the multiple and contrasting identities and/or attributes that Turkey has –big but relatively poor, Muslim but secular, modern but traditional– confuse the EU and blur the image of Turkey. EU members evaluate Turkey based on these different traits from time to time and arrive at different conclusions.

"Turkey's accession to the EU adds a culturalist angle to the debate. It forces the EU to distinguish between a Christian, geographically narrow Europe and a broader, multicultural Europe of values."¹⁴ This has become a source of tension for the decision-making mechanisms of the EU and the national governments of member states, as European people desire to maintain their boundaries and national priorities even within the EU. European politicians fear that the addition of Turkey to this club would further complicate its integrity.

How compatible is Turkey with European identity? This is a pressing question which has different answers for both parties, i.e. Turkey and EU. As Ziya Önis argues, the EU is not only an economic or political project, but ultimately a cultural and civilizational construction.¹⁵ The EU as a civilizational construction has both a positive and a negative

⁹ Ziya Önis, "Turkey, Europe, and Paradoxes of Identity: Perspectives on the International Context of Democratization", *Mediterranean Quarterly* (Summer 1999), p 113.

¹⁰ F.H. Burak Erdenir, *Avrupa Kimliği* (Ankara: Ümit Yayıncılık, 2005), p. 76-77.

¹¹ "Cartoon crisis frames Europe's conflict within", *USA Today*, 14 February 2006.

¹² Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3 (Summer 1993), p.42.

¹³ Bozdaglioglu (2003), p.68.

¹⁴ Othon Anastasakis, "The Europeanization of the Balkans", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol.12, No.1 (Summer/Fall 2005), p.79.

¹⁵ Önis (1999), p.117.

connotation. In its positive sense, the EU is the synthesis of all the achievements, progress, ideals, virtues and merits of its member states. The underlying message in the EU motto “United in Diversity” stems from the idea that all EU members share the same heritage and identity, while preserving their diversities at the same time. In its negative sense however, the EU as a civilizational project is portrayed as a discriminatory club which evaluates prospective candidates on the basis of their similarity with the Western European values, norms and traditions.

Leaving aside the technical reforms and political moves that are expected of Turkey in the interim, what we should really ask ourselves is whether we really think of Turkish identity as “European” enough. What would an ordinary EU citizen who does not know Turkey well enough think about this country at first instance? The presence of the AKP government as a rightist party has only strengthened the image that Muslim Turkey is not European enough to join the EU, justifying the question marks of EU officials and also European people. We cannot blame the European masses and politicians for their evaluations, while there are also heated domestic discussions among Turkish elites on how the AKP government is secretly trying to hamper secularism and penetrate through the democratic institutions of the Republic. The ambiguity of the true intentions of the AKP government and rising anxiety in Turkish society about the future of the secular Turkish Republic further weakens the hand of Turkey in her interactions with the EU. EU officials are likely to wait for the results of the 2007 election before they can take more concrete steps about the course of Turkey’s accession negotiations.

The determination of identity is a mutual construction, and an actor’s identity becomes meaningful only when it is recognized by the other party. Since the EU will be the decision maker in the accession process, how the EU perceives Turkish identity is perhaps more important than how Turkey identifies herself. The Europeanness of different segments in Turkey is also a question of debate, while the economic, social, and cultural disparity between different regions of the country does not escape the EU. For the EU, Europeanness implies all the positive aspects of Western democracies and modernity: Secularism, prosperity, respect for the rule of law, human rights and minorities. While there is a European segment of Turkish society comprising an educated, working elite, the majority of Turkish society lags behind Europeans in terms of their educational or economic backgrounds, and having more conservative value judgments and opinions. The AKP government which came to office largely due to the votes of this segment in Turkish society gives the message to the EU that Turkey is still predominantly non-European. This duality inevitably triggers unfavorable perceptions emanating from EU member states about Turkish identity.

There are numerous political, legal, economic, and social issues that Turkey has to deal with, during its accession negotiations with the EU. Turkey’s pace of progress and political priorities do not overlap with that of the EU. Especially the Cyprus issue has nearly brought the negotiations to a deadlock, as the EU pressures Turkey to recognize the Greek Cypriot government and Turkey insists that the platform to discuss this issue should be the UN instead of the EU. Each party is trying to push the other’s limits as the EU expects Turkey to make political concessions in return for the prospect of full membership. The trick is that, even if Turkey meets the EU’s expectations, opens its ports and airspace to the Greek Cypriot government and officially recognizes them, the identity factor might still come to the display as a means of last resort for the EU.

Opponents to Turkish accession have come up with the privileged partnership model as a substitute for full membership. The logic behind the privileged partnership formula is that “Turkey is not seen as part of the broader European family or civilizational nexus but as an important nonmember with which relations primarily of an economic nature need to be developed.”¹⁶ Even though the Turkish government has announced that any formula besides full membership would indicate a second-class status and would therefore be unacceptable, the slowing pace of reforms and support for the EU in Turkey do not help the situation at all.

Being a candidate to the EU undoubtedly gives incentive to Turkey to conduct reforms in favor of democratization, which is good for the country even if negotiations do not result in full membership; but the drop of support from the Turkish people for EU membership stems from a combination of anger, frustration, and the conviction that eventual membership will not be possible. For Turkey, joining the EU will indicate a confirmation of her status as a modern Western democracy.

So what should be the prescription for Turkey? Since the rules of the game are set by the EU, Turkey has to play by the rules, although this is not to say that all requests from the EU should be accepted unconditionally. But the Turkish government and also Turkish people need to understand that each candidate will be evaluated in its own context and according to its own political, social, and cultural attributes, even if this leads to subjective assessments. In order to prevent subjectivity and pursue a clever accession strategy, Turkey’s motives for full membership have to be revised in the near future. Currently, the AKP government does not recognize the growing cultural gap between the two parties and assumes that all will be well in the end, if Turkey makes good foreign policy moves and does her homework on fulfilling the accession criteria. What is neglected at this point is that Turkey also needs to work first and foremost on improving her image and perception by the EU, and convince both the governments of member states and European people that Turkey’s inclusion will not disrupt the harmony of the EU. But we are not in a position to prove this even to ourselves yet...

Even though culture and identity are not static concepts, they do not change so smoothly, either. While modes of behavior concerning economic and technical developments are relatively easier to alter, culture can be transformed only at the end of a long and slow process.¹⁷ As Jacques Chirac said, “Turkey will need to complete its ‘cultural revolution’ in order to be fully accepted into Europe – sentence signaling that cultural issues are far from settled.”¹⁸ All in all, Turkey will need much time and effort to curb the negative stereotypes and public opinion, which inevitably go hand in hand with the policies of national governments of the EU.

¹⁶ Önis (1999), p. 135.

¹⁷ Erdenir (2005), p.29.

¹⁸ Bordonaro, 5 October 2005.