

## **Problems of National Identity in an Era of Globalization: Turkey's Bid to Join the European Union**

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*This paper examines Turkish national identity as the critical element in Turkey's exclusion from the European Union (EU). My central contention is that the main obstacle to Turkey's membership in the EU may not be the reason that European officials formally cite, that is to say, problems related to democracy, economics, and human rights, but rather, perceptions of Turkey and Turkish national identity as 'alien' and 'others.' As Europe reinvents itself along ethnic and to a certain extent, racial lines with the emergence of the EU, a powerful regional block pursuing a different kind of superpower whose main domain is the soft power, European perceptions of the Turk constitute serious obstacles to Turkey's integration into Europe. Therefore, Turkey's hopes for full membership in the EU are far from being materialized at this point due to questions regarding Turkey's national identity.*

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"Identity" is conceptualized as above all involving the notion of the *permanence* of a subject or of an object through time. Schlesinger (1991), for instance, notes that as many modern societies move away from a class-based industrial capitalist model, the concept of identity has become increasingly important for a theory of action that explains the formation and activities of various groups. He also points to the notion of *unity* which establishes the limits of a subject or object and which allows it to be distinguished from any other.

However, formerly assumed to possess coherence and order that enabled it to act as the grounds for the formation of stable identities, "culture" is no longer able to perform this task adequately. The linkages between "culture" and "identity" are now understood as increasingly problematic as the variety and number of sources of cultural production and dissemination rise. Benedict Anderson's work addresses this problem of national identity by defining it as imagined political community. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-citizens, nor meet them, nor even hear of them, yet in the minds of each life an image of their communion is fully realized. It is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, the nation is always conceptualized as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1983).

This paper thus examines the Turkish national identity in an era of globalization, especially focused on Turkey's role in Europe where a question of identity is increasingly salient in a political and social realm. As Europe reinvents itself along ethnic and to a certain extent, racial lines with the emergence of the European Union (hereafter, the EU), European perceptions of the Turk constitute serious obstacles to Turkey's integration into Europe. Turkey's hopes for full membership in the EU are far from being materialized due to questions regarding Turkey's national identity. Hence this paper proposes that the main obstacle to Turkey's membership in the EU is not the reason that European officials formally cite – problems related to democracy, economics, and human rights – but rather, perceptions

of Turkey as alien. I will focus on Turkish national and cultural identity as the critical element in Turkey's exclusion from the EU, though such a focus does not detract from the importance of other factors.

I mainly adopt an interdisciplinary approach combining political, historical, descriptive and/or discursive analysis. My methodological objective is to undertake a nuanced analysis emphasizing broader *contextualization*, focusing on the logic of contestation, inclusion and exclusion, and the relationship between the political- or media discourse and the actual political result. I thus seek to offer a detailed and empirical politico-economic, socio-cultural, institutional, historical and discursive analysis rather than merely a textual one. For instance, discourse analysis, although it usually stresses close textual analysis, aims to analyze language use in its larger social context. It is therefore likely to often "go beyond" the text. While textual analysis tends to look for only those cues appearing in an actual text, discourse analysis may develop its argument by reference "outward" to a diagnosis of external social relations or structure (Tonkiss 1998; Ryoo 2005). Seen another way, discursive structures constitute society itself as Foucault (1972) argued. Conventions and social practices have *histories*, and discourses convey ideas that shape collective understandings of society and its order. Discourse analysis is therefore social analysis, the assessment of the social and historical contexts in which discourses circulate (Ryoo 2005).

A study of this problematic notion of national (or cultural) identity should begin by briefly noting the global, local, and historical context. The history of Turkish-European relations dates back to the Middle Ages when, according to Rich (1999), "Western Christendom expanded on the basis of a steady cultural, religious and linguistic penetration of surrounding lands and found itself in the east confronted by the unreciprocating will of the unspeakable Turk." Thus, it is important to begin a discussion of Turkish European history with the Turkish Republic's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Turks have been a part of Europe geographically since their arrival in Asia Minor in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, economically since the 16<sup>th</sup> century as trade routes expanded, and diplomatically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ottoman empire was officially included in the Concert of Europe.

At the Paris conference of 1856, Europe's great powers agreed that the territorial integrity and the independence of the Ottoman empire were vital to Europe's stability. However, from the start, some Europeans had reservations that the Turk possibly did not belong to the progressive races of mankind (Neumann & Welsch 1991). Europe was born and grew with the Greek-Latin culture, experienced a Renaissance and is Christian. Thus, Europe, as conceived by its noble elites, focused its hostility on Islam. Military resistance to the Ottoman empire was intensified by the role of religion (Yapp 1992).

The term "Europe" was increasingly used in relation to the rise of the Ottomans and the threat they posed to Christianity. Europe as a term has been used from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward, before that, there was no notion of Europe, but rather Christendom. Thus, the dominant "Other" in the history of the European states system is "the Turk." In contrast to the communities of the New World, the military might and physical proximity of the Ottoman empire, combined with the strength of its religious tradition, made it a particularly relevant other in the evolution of European identity (Neumann & Welsch 1991). For Europeans, the threat from the East was substantial, given that the Turks were besieging Vienna as late as 1683. The Turks represented all that was negated in the European identity: savage, barbarian, despotic, oppressive, violent, and a threat to European civilization. Lively (1981) used the Ottoman Empire as the differentiating element of the European identity and the differentiating factors were its despotism and Islamic values.

Thus, the perception of Turks as “the Other” in Europe is deeply embedded in Europeans’ collective memory and the portrayal of Turks in the manner described above remains a serious obstacle to Turkey’s inclusion in Europe. Turkey seems to be confronted with a cultural arrogance and cultural hatred from some quarters in Europe because as the Other, it is marked by an insurmountable particularity, and consequently can never be assimilated into the European culture (Robins 1996).

After the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans initiated a process of modernization in order to retain their power, looking west for a model. They began to import European ideas, lifestyles, and ways of thinking and introduced such concepts as nationalism, patriotism, and liberty into Ottoman society. Thus, Europe became a mirror through which the Ottoman elite perceived its own weaknesses, differences, and traits. The Ottoman process of Europeanization became critical in defining what the Turkish people rejected, namely non-European elements of their national character (Schulze 1996). Hence, we can assume that a gap formed between the ruling elite and the masses in their perceptions of Europe and modernity since the Turkish elite transformed Ottoman society from above.

## 1. TURKEY AND THE EU

The European Council decided to open accession negotiations with eleven applicant countries by dividing them into two waves in its 1997 summit in Luxemburg. The first wave, a preference for earlier consideration for its membership, comprised Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. The second wave consisted of Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia (Muftuler-Bac 2000). The decision not to include Turkey among the candidates for accession calls into question the EU’s objectivity in evaluating candidate countries, since Turkey has a more developed market economy than most of these countries and its political problems are no worse than those of many of the other applicants.

Therefore, Turkish perceptions of the EU as a closed cultural and religious club were strengthened by the European Council’s failure to produce a credible explanation for not opening negotiations, given that negotiations do not guarantee accession. The future of Turkey within the EU is more complicated than that of other candidate countries because of questions regarding Turkey’s identity. A Muslim country sitting on Europe’s outer banks, it does not fit into Christian Europe or the Islamic Middle East. Cultural differences and divergent social norms and attitudes make it easy to label Turkey as non-European, especially if European identity is based on racial, ethnic and cultural features (Nederveen 1991). However, Turkey has historically seen Europe as a mirror through which it perceived its identity and has consistently sought recognition and acceptance of its Europeanness.

The European Commission noted Turkey’s eligibility detailed serious economic and political difficulties that rendered Turkish accession unlikely. These included the limitation of political pluralism, the state of democracy, the persistence of disputes with a member state (namely Greece), the lack of a viable solution to the Cyprus problem, relative economic backwardness, the Kurdish question, and problems related to human rights. However, continued delays are seen in Turkey as unfair and discriminatory, especially in light of Turkey’s Cold War inclusion in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As Turkish president Suleyman Demirel remarked bitterly, “When the defense of European civilization (against communism) was at stake, they didn’t say we were Turks and Muslims” (Muftuler-

Bac, 2000). In response to the Luxembourg summit decisions, the Turkish government in December 1997 decided to suspend all political dialogue with the EU, thereby cutting the line of communication between Turkey and the EU on all political matters. A breakthrough came in December 1999, when the European Council decided in its Helsinki summit to grant Turkey a candidate status. At that time president Suleyman Demirel responded in a saliently different tone. "Turkish membership would be a concrete contribution to the pluralism of the EU and enrich it in many ways. Today, at a time when cultivating a culture of harmony between civilizations has gained great importance, and I believe the meaning of those words is even more pertinent." (Turkish Daily News 2004)

European objections to Turkish membership can be grouped under four main headings: economic factors – Turkey would require substantial financial compensation from the EU in order to meet the level of Western European economies; the Kurdish problem – the recent crisis resulting from Abdullah Ocalan's capture demonstrated that the Kurdish problem has become a European problem; the Greek veto and the Cyprus problem; and the state of Turkish democracy and human rights – which are perceived to lag behind EU standards (Kosebalaban 2002). The EU seems to perceive that Turkey still does not meet the Copenhagen political criteria although the basic features of democratic system exist in Turkey. The EU's claim is that there are serious shortcomings in terms of human rights and protection of minorities. These factors all legitimately complicate Turkey's relations with the EU but one important implicit factor is missing from the EU's stated objections - perceptions of Turks as culturally different and, essentially, non-European.

If we consider the EU's evaluation of political conditions in other applicant countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, this is clear. These countries were found to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria, despite the facts that their democracies are no more stable than that of Turkey and that Turkey is ahead of these countries in its economic capacities and its ability to adopt the body of Community law, regulations, and directives as demonstrated by Turkey's performance in the last decade (Muftuler-Bac 2000). Thus, there must be another variable, aside from politics and economics, that accounts for Turkey's perpetual outsider status. That variable seems its cultural identity.

Turkey's accession to the EU would be to the EU's advantage economically and politically, but it would not be possible to evade the problem of cultural integration. In a survey conducted among the members of the European parliament, Turks were found to be the least desirable immigrants in the EU (Lahav 1997). Of course, the leaders of EU countries will not publicly admit that their reservations are related to Turkey's Europeanness or religion, but it is indeed a crucial factor that Turkey's identity is a serious concern.

The perception of Turkey as "the Other" has indeed been created and strengthened by the European media and this is well exemplified in Edward Said's works such as *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*. Said focuses on how Western politicians, media and academic experts have created an ideological phantom called "Islam" to cover up their own interests, fears, prejudices and ignorance. Said contends that the Western media personalities and scholars tend to have narrow knowledge and focus of analysis corresponding to the transient and nationalized European or the U.S. strategic, economic and political interests. This problematic tendency was well exemplified in a series of European leader's discourse politics by utilizing a new battle of cultures, to say on the lines of Christian western world against Islam.

For example, former German chancellor Helmut Kohl announced firmly in 1997: "Turkish membership in the EU is not possible," and the Christian Social Union (CSU)

leader Edmund Stoiber has said “Turkey’s EU entry would be the end of Europe’s political union.” In addition, many leading members of Germany’s conservative opposition have opposed Turkish membership of the EU as well (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2002). Also remarks by former Greek foreign minister Theodor Pangalos about Turks being allowed to “to drag their bloodstained boots across the carpet” in EU capitals and his labeling of Turks as “bandits, murderers, and rapists” reinforced Turkish feelings of discrimination (The Economist 2002). Also, a former president of France, Giscard d’Estaing told French daily *Le Monde* that Turkey was not a European country and its membership would spell an end to the EU (Xinhua News Agency 2002; BBC Monitoring Int’l Reports 2002). Furthermore, Nicolas Sarkozy, who won the presidential election in France in 2007, and also known as a popular Gaullist, has vehemently opposed Turkish membership. Angela Merkel, who is German chancellor also has opposed Turkish membership in a moderate degree, and above all only 35 percent of EU citizens support Turkish membership (The Economist 2005). Within this context, Turkey’s future in the EU is problematic, and hence Said seems to have produced a timely and powerful critique of the hypocrisy and hidden assumptions of those European journalists and politicians whose writings have guided our thinking on the Islamic world down twisted and dangerous paths.

## 2. TURKISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

Questions about Turkish national identity are directly related to the concept of a European identity. One theory of European identity posits that the very idea of what Europe was from the beginning is defined partly in terms of what it was not. In other words, “the Other,” that is to say, the non-European barbarian or savage, played a decisive role in the evolution of the European identity and in the maintenance of order among European states as argued by some scholars (Schlesinger 1991; Neumann & Welsch 1991). The concepts of Europeaness and non-Europeaness are thought to be mutually exclusive with the line of demarcation between ‘civilized’ Europe and ‘barbaric’ non-Europe.

Identities are forged out of shared experiences, memories and myths, in relation to those of other collective identities. They are in fact often forged through opposition to the identities of significant others, as the history of paired conflict so often demonstrates (Smith 1992). Who and what, then are Europe’s significant others? The others of Europe have, of course, changed over time. But, what is important is that the politics of inclusion in and exclusion from the EU is the modern day reflection of the concept of paired conflict. As Hall (1996) suggests, “Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render outside abjected.” The concept of identity here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one and this concept of identity does not signal the stable core of the self. Because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, one must understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices.

In addition to attractive economic advantages, part of Turkey’s desire to join the EU is grounded in its desire to have its Europeaness legitimated, as is the case for the Central and Eastern European countries. The identity of the “new Europe” is based on a common cultural heritage, with foundations in ancient Greece, Christianity, and Europe of the Enlightenment. If religion is an important variable in determining Europe’s boundaries, then it is an obvious influence on EU’s perceptions of predominantly Muslim Turkey. According to an article in

*Washington Times* (1999), “Western fears of Islam are making it difficult for Muslims to be accepted in Europe. That fear is partly the result of a media-driven Islamophobia that links Islam to terrorism and fundamentalism.” Of course, accepting Turkey as a member may unleash xenophobic forces (EUObserver.com 2002). But it also will enable Europe to make a strong statement that there is no place for xenophobia in this continent.

Turkey’s incorporation into Western European security arrangements after World War II seemed to afford Turkey the European legitimacy it always sought. During the Cold War, Europe’s identity was reinvented along security lines and the Communist bloc became the Other, non-Europe. As long as the line of demarcation was the Iron Curtain, real political interests dictated that Turkey’s Europeanness not be openly questioned. The need for Turkey as a buffer against Soviet expansion also helped Turkey gain associate membership in the EC in 1963. But, the disappearance of the Soviet enemy eroded Turkey’s position in the Europe. It no longer served a clear function, and thus was shunted to the back of the line of candidates for the EU membership in the 1990s.

### 3. CHALLENGES FOR THE EU MEMBERSHIP

The end of the Cold War seems to have sent Turkey’s relations with Europe back in time to 19<sup>th</sup> century ethno-nationalism. The replacements of the ideological East-West conflict with ethnic, religious, and historical conflicts emphasized Turkey’s non-Christian, and hence non-European character (Tunander 1995). The search for Europe’s new other has focused on the south of Europe, in Islam, and in the foreigners living in Europe, outsiders in race, religion, ethnicity, and culture. Racism is becoming a major component in European politics, as evidenced by the 1999 electoral gains of racist right-wing parties in Austria and Switzerland.

In 1997, the European Commission ordered an opinion survey asking citizens of the 15 member states whether they considered themselves racist; many of the respondents did (Boyes 1997). Europeans share a growing concern about the Other – the non-European, non-White, possible migrant. Thus, racism at the national level reflected in the EU to a certain degree, therefore, it is a diffuse racism that can speak in the name of both a national identity and Europeanism (Delanty 1995). This sentiment is publicly expressed by EU politicians that Turkish membership in the EU might be too much for Europe and that Turkey’s membership could endanger the identity and political workability of the EU.

The Turkish government perceives these developments as indicators that ethnonationalism and religion are the real reasons behind Turkey’s exclusion from the EU. According to a press release from Turkey’s ministry of foreign affairs, “The danger is to create new lines of division, new discrimination, new compartments, defined explicitly or implicitly on criteria of ethnicity, religion, region, levels of development, and civilization. The danger, if it grows freely, will somewhat confirm the prophecy of those who proclaim ‘the clash of civilization’ as the inevitable, imminent fact of the next decades.” (Muftuler-Bac 2000). It is indeed obvious that Turkey had not taken any serious steps regarding the EU membership issue up until very recently (Turkish Daily News 2001).

Parallel to Europe’s identity reformulation, Turkey is going through its own identity crisis, one that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still lingers. Turkey is split into two camps. One is based on the modern, secular, Western-oriented discourse, and the other is traditional, Islamist, and Oriental in its formulations. The new Turkish Republic succeeded in repressing

the conservative, reactionary tendencies for some time. However, the undercurrent of traditionalism was always there and it found fertile ground in the post-Cold War era. In the past decade, a number of traditional elements, most prominently the Islamists, began to challenge Turkey's official secular identity. The Islamic movement in Turkey has always opposed the process of modernization and Europeanization (Heper 1997). During the Cold War, Turkey's inclusion into European security arrangements was perceived to have settled the identity dispute in favor of the modernizers. The Cold War helped suppress religious reactionaries and their opposition to Turkey's European bent. However, the EU's consistent refusal to admit Turkey after the Cold War has played well into the hands of religious conservatives.

Islamist groups in Turkey effectively utilize anti-European tendencies in the Turkish population for their own political ends. They even claim that the origin of European civilization is in Islam. For example, Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's former Islamist prime minister and leader of the Welfare party, capitalized on the argument that Europe is an expression of imperialism and we need to turn to our true friends, the Islamic brothers in the Middle East (Muftuler-Bac 2000). Despite their decline in electoral popularity over the past four years, the Islamists mobilize their supporters around opposition to European culture and the process of westernization.

In short, Turkey is big, poor and Muslim. Poland, for example, – one of ten that joined in May, 2004 – is also big and poor, but it is Christian and undoubtedly at Europe's core, making its membership a crucial part of uniting the continent. Europe does not shy away from tough enlargements, but Turkey would be the toughest because nearly all Turks are Muslims and the country's current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leads a party with Islamist roots (The Economist 2004). However, there is no clear rationale why Islam should be incompatible with EU membership unless the question is begged by defining Europe as purely and inherently Christian.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Turkey's ongoing identity crisis has contributed to its marginalization within Europe. The presence of Turkish migrant workers in Germany, for example, has led many Europeans to believe that Turks really are Europe's others. The long history of Turkey's association with Europe and a loyal NATO ally did not decrease the differences between Turkey and Europe, rather it made them more visible. Throughout contemporary history, Turkey's relations with Europe have served as an indicator for measuring the success of Turkey's modernization efforts, as well as the acceptance of Turkey's European credentials. Unfortunately, the redefinition of Europe's identity along ethnonational and cultural lines may mean that Turkey will not qualify for EU membership and, therefore, will not be part of European civilization (Bhabha 1998).

Turkey's long history of association with the rest of Europe has finally reached a turning point. The fact that Turkey has fallen behind countries like Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Poland in the race for EU membership has deepened the divide in Turkey among Western-oriented modernizers and Islamic-oriented conservatives. As for Europe, the recent emphasis on ethnicity and culture poses a serious obstacle for a dynamic transformation into a United Europe.

Turkey today stands at a crossroads since it was not included in the EU's recent

enlargement phase. Furthermore, there is great uncertainty as to whether it ever will be included due to the EU's recent decision to review Turkey's membership bid (The Economist 2002; The Wall Street Journal 2002). The reason behind Turkey's exclusion seems *religion* and *culture*. Turkey still faces the prejudice of those who believed in the Little Europe model that the EU should not expand beyond Christendom.

It is, however, clear that both Europe and Turkey would benefit from the notion of the nation accepting their dual (or even multiple) national and cultural identities for peaceful coexistence with their rich cultural and religious heritage they can mutually offer as a platform for a dialogue of civilizations. Hence, Turkey's EU membership is no longer just a Turkish project, but at the same time is a project for transforming the old continent (Worldpress.org 2005) into an open, multicultural and multi-religious regional block, which will consequently help to strengthen the EU's soft power based on the power of persuasion and international agreements rather than military hardware. Indeed, accepting Turkey as a member would show the world that the European Union is not a parochial Christian club in the age of globalization.

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