

Tackling Turkey's Image Problem in the European Union

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Brief Analysis

In February 2007, the Austrian government became the latest member of the European Union to propose a referendum on Turkish accession, citing "differences in values and standards" between Turkey and the EU. Recent data, however, reveals that these cultural differences are not so pronounced. And at a time when Turkey's EU accession faces challenges, highlighting shared Turkish and European values could greatly enhance the prospect for Turkey's membership.

Shrinking Support for Turkey

Public opinion in the EU typically varies at the prospect of new member states, but in Turkey's case, there is particularly strong opposition. According to surveys collected by the European Commission's "Eurobarometer" -- a compilation of EU national surveys -- public support for Turkish membership has fallen 18 percentage points since negotiations opened in 2005. Furthermore, in 1996, opponents of Turkey's accession outnumbered supporters by 8 percentage points, while in 2006 the difference had grown to 35. In this context, it seems possible that in the long-term, accession referendums proposed by some EU member states (France and Austria among others) will fail, blocking Turkey's bid to join the EU even if it fulfilled all other necessary conditions.

Perceived cultural differences are the main reasons for the lack of popular support for Turkish membership in the EU. In a 2006 Eurobarometer survey, 61 percent of EU citizens stated that these differences were "too significant," and in countries where popular support for Turkey's accession was the lowest, this perception was particularly high: 74 percent in Germany and 79 percent in Greece.

A Test of Values

Despite the opposition, Turks share many values with Europeans. In the same 2006 survey, Eurobarometer asked citizens in EU member and candidate states to choose their three most important societal values from the following list: rule of law, respect for human life, respect for human rights, individual freedom, democracy, peace, equality, solidarity, tolerance, religion, self-fulfillment, and respect for other cultures. A comparison of their responses shows that Turkey is not so different from the EU.

According to the poll, if we consider the EU15 -- the original 15 member states -- as the "core EU," Turkey is no more distant from them than some of the member states that joined the union in 2004 and 2007, such as Hungary, Lithuania, and Romania. Yet, unlike Turkey, none of those countries had to face popular referendums as part of their accession process, nor was public opinion as negative toward their candidacy.

In fact, among the twelve values offered, only two vary significantly: religion and peace. All the other values, many of which constitute the heart of the EU's legal system, are regarded as highly in Turkey as they are in the EU15 -- and in some cases, more highly. For example, more Turks chose "the rule of law" (5 percentage points higher in Turkey than the EU15 average), "respect for human life" (6 percentage points higher), "respect for human rights" (9 percentage points higher), and "democracy" (4 percentage points higher).

Cultural and Religious Differences

Given these shared values, Europeans' perception of "cultural difference" seems to be rooted in their fear of Muslim -- not necessarily Turkish -- immigration into their countries. In fact, 85 percent of Europeans who believe the cultural differences between Turkey and the EU are "too significant" also fear that Turkey's accession will bring more Muslim immigrants.

The Pew Center's 2005 and 2006 Global Attitudes Polls suggest that EU member states with high percentages of Muslim immigrants hold negative attitudes toward people practicing Islam. For example, 20 percent of British, 35 percent of French, 54 percent of German, and 62 percent of Spanish citizens have such views towards Muslim immigrants. These Europeans believe that Muslims are unwilling to assimilate and will cling to their Islamic identity -- tendencies that Europeans consider foreboding for their nations' futures.

For them, the possibility of 70 million Turkish, mainly Muslim, people becoming part of the EU poses a cultural threat. Turkey is far above the EU average on the personal importance that its citizens attach to religion: 29 percent select this among the three most relevant values compared to 7 percent in the EU15. Both secular and devoutly Christian citizens in the EU seemingly oppose Turkish accession for particular reasons: the former fears the influx of more religiosity, while the latter sees a greater number of Muslims as a threat to their faith. Both perceptions reflect the EU's current struggle to define the nature of a still unformed European identity.

Promoting Turkish Accession

This unresolved European identity issue notwithstanding, there seems to be a fix for Turkey's image problem in the EU. According to the 2006 poll, Europeans

who do not see large cultural differences between EU citizens and Turks tend to strongly support Turkey's candidacy. When an EU citizen sees more similarities than differences between the Union and Turkey, the probability that he or she will support Turkey's accession increases from 12 to 89 percent.

To promote cultural understanding, the U.S. government could work with Turkish embassies, and the Turkish government could work with EU elites (Eurocrats, national politicians, academics, journalists) to educate European citizens about the shared values between Turkey and the EU. Such a strategy should also emphasize that Turkey remains a secular state to overcome at least some European fears of a "religious" state entering the union.

In this regard, EU elites have an important role to play. They can help disentangle the question of Turkey's accession from the fear of Muslim immigration, which would help Turkey's accession prospects. The language of the debate on Turkey's accession should focus on Turks, not Muslims. Many Turks in Germany complain, for instance, that whereas before the September 11 attacks they were referred to as "Turks" by German opinion makers and media, after September 11, they suddenly became "Muslims." Turkey and European elites should also work with Turkish organizations in the EU to promote associations that reassure Turkish Muslims about the compatibility of Islam and national loyalty to European governments, while promoting civic obligation and national attachments. In addition, the history of EU enlargement should be recounted; the anticipated mass migrations from large and relatively poor countries, such as Spain and Poland, never materialized because employment opportunities and incomes increased as they entered the EU, creating reasons for their citizens to stay at home.

Most relevant of all, the unspoken role of religion within the EU must be openly discussed at some point as a way to educate EU and Turkish citizens about religious tolerance. This discussion should be promoted by all parties, including Turkey, the EU Commission, and the U.S. government.

Antonia Ruiz Jimenez, a visiting fellow in The Washington Institute's [Turkish Research Program \(templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#), is an adjunct professor at the Pablo de Olavide University (UPO) in Seville, Spain. Financial support for this investigation was provided by UPO Foreign Relations Office. ❖

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