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OPINION

Differences between the EU and Turkey greatly exaggerated

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The current debate about Turkey’s accession to the European Union greatly exaggerates the cultural differences between Turkey and other EU-member states. Empirical research shows that Turkey is not significantly different from other European countries. Turkey’s membership would therefore be unlikely to widen already existing cultural differences within the European Union. This article argues that there is no solid argument to block Turkey’s membership and EU dithering on this issue confirms its insincerity, which is rooted in a long history of negative perceptions about Turkey.

Twenty-five years ago Geert Hofstede in his influential study, *Culture’s Consequences: International difference in work related values*, investigated the work related values of people in over 50 countries, who worked in local subsidiaries of IBM. He identified 4-dimensions of national culture. In all four dimensions Turkey was grouped with other European countries such as Belgium, France, Greece, Portugal and Spain. This is still true today. Recently, by analyzing the data from the European Values Study, 1999, we showed that many of Turkey’s supposed cultural differences with the rest of Europe are in fact unsubstantiated.¹ We find extensive support for the argument that the social and cultural differences between Turkey and the EU are largely exaggerated, based more on (mis)perception and unsupported by empirical evidence.

Religion and democracy

In the first place, our analysis shows that basic values related to religion and democracy, two cornerstones in many of the arguments against Turkey’s membership, differ greatly among the current EU members. This heterogeneity has actually increased when the EU expanded from 15 to 25 member states. This suggests that European “common values” are not as common as they are believed to be. The success of the European

¹ This part is based on Akçomak, I.S., and Parto, S. (May, 2006) "How 'black' is the black sheep compared to all others: Turkey and the EU ", UNU-MERIT Working Paper No:2006-024.

project significantly depends on the performance of the EU in bonding, bridging and managing this heterogeneity.

Second, a striking finding in our work is that introducing Turkey to the analysis does not alter the main patterns of diversity. In most of the cases Turkey's scores oscillate between the minimum and maximum values for the EU25 as a whole.

It appears therefore that the objection by some EU member countries to Turkey's membership is based on a misperceived belief that Turkey's mix of ethnicity and culture (including religion) is incompatible with that of Europe in general. The foundations for these arguments are less than empirically sound and perhaps motivated by other concerns. Unfortunately, this misperception is systemic and shared by the European public.

Erasmus

These misconceptions have historical roots. In *De bello turcico (On the war against the Turks, 1530)*² Erasmus refers to the Turks as "wicked barbarians" who are trying to confine Christianity to a narrow land. According to him the Turks have established an immense empire not because of their own merits but due to Christian sins as he wrote "...we have angered God and caused him to send the Turks against us, just as he sent frogs, lice and locust upon the Egyptians long ago...". Having made such sharp comments about the Turks the document as a whole has a rather positive conclusion that war must never be undertaken unless, as a last resort, it cannot be avoided. In part of the document he even argues that "Turks are men and, what is more important, half-Christian..." therefore deserve to be treated as other people. Nevertheless his conclusions do not change the fact that his perceptions regarding the Turks were negative in nature.

Since then, social, economic and political climate has changed in great extent. But have the perceptions regarding the Turks changed as well? Let me give examples from ordinary life nowadays. Whenever I tell people that I am from Turkey, I can observe the astonishment followed by the statement "you do not look like a Turk". I call this an *annoying compliment* because it praises me as an individual but at the same time despises the Turks in general. What is more staggering is how these people are paralyzed when they are unable to answer a simple counter question; "how does a Turk look like, then?"

In other instances when I found myself in a discussion regarding Turkey's membership to the EU, people easily put forward that Turkish culture is different from the European culture. This is indeed true in some aspects. However, it is such a pity to observe the tonal difference and to realize that what they actually meant is Turkish culture is *inferiorly* different. But as the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss argues "one culture has no absolute criteria for judging the activities of another culture as low or noble".³

The two examples above illustrate how these people's *software of the mind*, to paraphrase Geert Hofstede, is programmed against the Turk. Although such perceptions

² Erasmus, "On the War against the Turks," in Erika Rummel, ed. (1990), *The Erasmus Reader*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pp. 316-319.

³ Cited in p. 7, Hofstede, G. (1997), *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the mind*. McGraw Hill, New York.

are softened and have evolved to another dimension, in essence they have not changed much in the past 500 years.

Key arguments for and against Turkey’s membership to the EU

Arguments for:	Arguments against:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turkey is a geopolitical bridge between the west and the east bordering the major oil fields and has a huge potential to play stabilizing role in a turbulent region. • Turkey is considered to be a large and dynamic emerging market with a liberalized ‘functioning market economy’. • Turkey’s parliamentary system is compatible with the western European political systems • Turkey enjoys a high degree of economic integration with the EU (as indicated by its membership of the Customs Union, for example) • Turkey’s membership would validate the claim that the EU is an open and inclusive community of nations, not a closed ‘Christian club’, capable of drawing strength from cultural and religious diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and religious differences as well as political volatility and weak democracy represent insurmountable barriers to Turkey’s membership of the EU. (This sentiment is shared by both EU members and different anti-EU membership groupings in Turkey) • Turkish public opinion increasingly turning against EU, arguing that the EU-Turkey relations are not based on reciprocity and shared interest. The EU is said to be benefiting more than Turkey from these relations with no demonstrated willingness to help Turkey with some of its many worries. • Turkey’s large and poor population would create direct (e.g., EU budget, structural funds) and indirect (e.g., flow of Turkish workers) financial burden to the other members. • Turkey’s large population would create a bias in favour of Turkey in EU decision making: Turkey would be the second most powerful state in terms of the number of votes

Extra criteria

In addition to this the EU tends to come up with new demands for Turkey’s membership to the EU in addition to those originally agreed at Maastricht and Copenhagen. These include the demand by some member states that accession talks be “open-ended” and not necessarily result in full membership, that there should be “permanent” limitations on (Turkish) labour-mobility, insistence on the recognition of Cyprus, admission by Turkey to responsibility for the killing and persecution of Armenians during the first world war, and a willingness to address the unresolved Kurdish question. None of the member states were given such a long list of ever lasting demands that are not part of the original list of criteria.

Given these complicated issues, it seems that many of the EU member states have no intention of embracing Turkey as a member. İsmail Cem, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, complains that EU has formed a deliberate habit of bringing specific issues (the Cyprus issue, problems with Greece, minorities issue etc.) into the discussion over and over again, even if a consensus had been reached on them in

previous negotiations. Cem is disappointed and finds this “extremely unhealthy” as regards to the future of the negotiations between Turkey and the EU.⁴

EU sincere?

Indeed, this poses a big question mark on the sincerity of the EU about accepting Turkey as a member. These issues should not be used against Turkey’s membership. Instead membership of the EU should be used to accelerate and strengthen Turkey’s attempts to address these issues. It should be clear that Turkey is less likely to effectively address the outstanding membership requirement issues in isolation from the EU.

The differences between Turkey and the EU are rather of an economic and political nature and, as such, can only be addressed through increased integration of Turkey into Europe through formal and equitable membership, rather than pressures that could lead to Turkey’s isolation. Put differently, further work to bring Turkey into the EU’s fold should be based on the full recognition of Turkey’s multi-cultural diversity and can only be achieved with conscious and conscientious EU support in Turkey.

If the EU fails to address such weaknesses in approaching Turkey during the accession period, the negotiations between the EU and Turkey will not be sustainable. On the other hand, increased cooperation between Turkey and the EU offers an important opportunity to start a process of understanding and healing to thwart a potentially serious cultural divide along religious lines with quite significant global implications.

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⁴ For a thorough discussion see Cem, I. (2005), “Turkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya: Avrupa’nin Birliği ve Turkiye [ikinci cilt] (Turkey, Europe, Euro-Asia: European Union and Turkey, Vol. II)”, Istanbul Bilgi Universitesi Yayinlari: Istanbul.

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