

# The Question of Identity: The EU/Turkey Integration Debate

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TOM DIXON, JUL 21 2011

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the role of identity in the debate over Turkey joining the EU as a full member. Specifically, we need to answer the question of whether there is a common European identity, and if so, can the Turkish national identity be integrated into it. Former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez has said, *"Europe...should stop at the borders of Turkey because of social and cultural differences."* [1] Nicholas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel have also expressed their reservations about the accession of Turkey to the EU. Sarkozy going as far to rule out full membership for Turkey because it is time to *"say who is European and who isn't."* [2] Why are these policy makers formulating their argument against Turkish membership in terms of identity? Why should social and cultural differences be seen as a barrier to joining the EU? And, what do we mean by identity anyway? What factors create and shape identities to allow people to express themselves as British, French, Turkish or European? What is it that makes the people of the current EU member states 'European' and Turks not? Finally, if Turkey is to join the EU as a full and welcome member – can an EU citizen be simultaneously Muslim, Turkish and European?

### The Importance of Identity

Let us first think about what identity is and how it is formed. Identity can be defined as a feeling of belonging to a group that have the same background and interests as you; also of importance is the idea of 'the other': different groups to which a person does not belong. *"It is through interaction with each other and with outsiders that individual and group identities are constructed."* [3] Many theorists have described this feeling of belonging as an 'imagined community' of similarity. Individuals can have more than one social identity and may often have several, so we may see ourselves as having an identity fixed around our family, home town, region and nation.

*"The multiplicity, context-boundedness, and contestedness of collective identities has led many authors to conclude that social identities are fluid and subject to frequent change."* [4]

So if Identity is subject to change, how does this change come about? We can identify two aspects of identity formation, either a social or what we may call a grassroots process where the cultural norms of an 'imagined community' are recognised organically and non-state actors are mobilised to influence policy towards creating a clearly identifiable nation-state. On the other hand, institutions may take a top-down approach in trying to manufacture an identity through promotion of norms and creation of symbols as a political project. Identity formation is a *"fundamental battle"* [5] for politicians and can be measured or recognized by a population's responsiveness to the symbols, images and experiences that define their particular group. The importance of identity has not been underestimated by the EU's political elite. MEPs recognize that a European identity is important for the EU's *solid socio-intellectual and cultural base.* [6] And also that identity can be influenced and moulded by the messages sent from institutions to citizens. And as a result they have created the various symbols and images that we may associate with the EU (flag, anthem, and national day) and are an important part of promoting a common EU identity.

For the EU as an institution the issue of Identity is crucial. For Political entities the idea of identity is the basis of legitimacy and a crucial source of sovereignty. *"Without identity, it seems that there can be no true, durable, legitimacy attached to a political entity."* [7] Without a social identity to match its political integration the EU has no

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real and lasting attachment to its citizens – no authority to make laws or enforce order. Furthermore, the importance of an EU identity is increasing as the EU develops. As more and more of the important decisions affecting the EU's population are transferred from a national to the EU's supra-national level, we can expect a related transfer of sovereignty. A European Identity would mean that questions of taxation, social policy and budgeting could be answered by the EU rather than national governments. If the EU is going to successfully develop into a recognized political entity in its own right its population must accept its sovereignty and legitimacy through accepting themselves as European. Eurocrats should always be asking the citizens of Europe – would you miss us if we were gone

## A European Identity

Studies looking at whether there is a European Identity have found that the citizens of Europe have progressively felt more able to identify themselves as Europeans since the 1970's, when the idea of identity promotion was initially conceived in Brussels[8]. Whether this increasing identification has led to a well formed identity is not clear. Generally a majority of people may be able to identify themselves as European in some sense. It seems that for some Europeans, *"Europe is already a part, albeit a weak part, of their identity structure."* [9] Promoting the idea of Europe within that structure is a key aim for the EU. However, it is clear that the EU has a lot of work to do if it is to supplant the national identity of its citizens.

More important to our study is to identify the basis of any identity that has developed either as an organic social process, or as a result of a Brussels led political project. This is a matter of some debate. This debate has coalesced around the basis of European identity. There are a number of factors on which European Identity is constructed. The most prominent of which are on the one hand the idea of an identity formed through a common historical and cultural experience, or on the other as recognition of mutual values that represent the idea of being European. Which of these ideas is prioritised is crucial to Turkish integration. We also need to think about the influence of the EU itself and how its institutions influence citizens even if they don't recognize its authority individually.

When searching for the basis of a European Identity, the notion of a shared historical and cultural experience can be seductive. This idea based as it is on the shared norms of an original Europe based around the Roman Empire, and then Christianity, the Enlightenment and Industrialization would seem to rule out Turkey as a European country altogether. In fact for centuries the Turkish culture in the form of the Ottoman Empire has been used as one example of 'the other' for European Peoples. As we have seen above this idea has been seized upon by European Politicians opposed to the entry of Turkey. However, the idea of a culturally united Europe has been discredited in most academic work on the subject.

*"Answers to questions about European Cultural Identity in terms of a continuing European 'Civilization' and the progress and modernization that implies tend to founder on the rocks of empirical verification: they are myths, with some highly misleading and negatively provocative qualities."*[10]

More recent history such as the WWII experience and subsequent formation of the EU as a basis for preventing further European wars is more likely to have promoted a common European experience however; the weakness of this idea is that *"the historical memory of this experience has continued to remain divisive."* [11] So, while certain shared concepts remain central to the idea of a European culture across Europe, different areas give these concepts different meanings due to their dominant national or regional perspectives. These historical experiences may not provide a specific European identity but can be seen in an EU perspective of contributing to its legal and political norms. It is important to note the difference in view between the EU itself and the comments of the most anti-Turkey member state leaders. The official EU cultural formula is 'unity in diversity' so would not rule out Turkish membership on cultural grounds. Far from a unified identity, Europe combines different identities and gives them the opportunity to co-exist. EU politicians have clearly grasped that the best way to create the EU as an 'imagined community' in the minds of its citizens is to embrace the many different identities that exist in modern Europe. It is up to the Peoples of Europe to recognize that the existence of these different identities is in itself uniquely European.

A more unifying idea is of a European Identity based on a *"loose collection of civic ideals and principles, such as*

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*democracy, progress, equality and human rights.*"[12] These universal principles can act as the basis for EU unity and identity without the need for the comparable historical or cultural bonds that may have created them. In fact, one of the most recently identified features of European identity is its ability to tolerate cultural differences at least as long as the key principles above are preserved. These values are not enough in themselves. Their continent wide acceptance must be supported by the political decisions that directly affect Europeans. The role of EU institutions in this is important, by identifying key European principles, promoting and preserving them, people will increasingly identify them with the EU and their feelings of Europeanness will be increased. The EU needs to further investigate which values are identified as being European and take steps to protect them. The very existence of the EU itself is helping to spread its identity. The growth of EU institutions has created the EU elite, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and transnational companies that look to Brussels rather than a specific nation for their own legitimacy. Positive interaction between people from varied backgrounds in EU settings are increasingly creating an EU solidarity and a mutual recognition of commonality as Europeans. These most integrated Europeans are the torch carriers for the idea of European integration.

What is abundantly clear is that European identity creation is a project that is being implemented without the usual cultural bonds of a nation being present and that in fact, seeks to make Europeans re-evaluate their existing identity structures in order to find space for viewing themselves as having a common EU identity.

## Turkish Identity

It is widely felt in Turkey that the Ottoman Empire and Islam have for centuries acted as 'the other' to the peoples of Europe. This feeling has been the basis of huge change in the Turkish Republic since the end of empire, and for many it is recognised that for a future Europe to include Turkey Islamic culture must be made "*less visible*"[13] in Turkey. This feeling has been reinforced by the comments of European leaders, in fact, "*In a 2005 interview, the then French president Jacques Chirac demanded that Turkey go through a cultural transformation to become an EU member.*"[14] The process of Westernization in Turkey has been an ongoing political project for over 200 years[15], its aim similar to that of the EU over the last thirty or so: identity manipulation.

*"The paradox of Turkish nationalism which resulted in both a hostility towards and an imitation of Western ways has accompanied the modernization process since the turn of the nineteenth century*[16]."

This long process comes down to a struggle between the westernising Kemalists and traditionalist Islamists for the soul of modern Turkey. When we view this struggle through the lens of EU membership, it is much less simple than a clear battle between modernisation and tradition. For decades, the supporters of Kemalism were given encouragement in their attempts to Europeanize Turkey in the Republic's admittance to several 'Western clubs', the OECD, Council of Europe and NATO. However, its fractious relations with the EU since its initial application for membership of what was then the EEC in 1959 have inflamed the debate about which identity, Western or Islamic is most appropriate for Turkey.

It is clear that the Turkish Political Identity has been manufactured from above. It is the Political elites that hold the key to how Turkey is defined and how it approaches the question of European membership. The key point seems to be achieving a balance between the modernisation process to assimilate with Europe while also striving to preserve the spiritual Islamic elements of Turkish culture and identity. This contradiction is a strong element in modern Turkish Identity. It seems to be the Islamists who are able, currently, to maintain the balance and manage this contradiction most effectively. The ruling AKP of former Mayor of Istanbul Recep Erdogan has formed a government that although has an Islamic background "*is committed to representative democracy, the rule of law, secular legitimacy, and integration with Europe.*"[17] In the view of the AKP's supporters Turkey's Islamic identity within the framework of the values expressed above is not a barrier to EU integration. There is recognition that the Kemalist model is no longer an asset to Turkey EU relations due to its suppression of Islam, discrimination against the Kurds and its reliance for legitimacy on the military rather than the people. Kemalism's downfall was a "*two-sided crisis built into its very nature: it is neither internalized by Turkish society, nor respected by its source of inspiration, Europe.*"[18] Whereas Islamism's drive to the West has been motivated by the acceptance that the values enforced and legitimized by the European identity would mean acceptance and respect of Islam as a part of Europe's "*family*

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of cultures”.[19] This change has redefined Islamism and identity in Turkey. Can we describe a popular Political movement supporting democracy, human rights, the rule of Law and EU integration and most importantly, garnering support and votes from all sectors of the Turkish population as Islamic?

## Convergence or Conflict?

Having looked at the ways in which both Europeans and Turks identify themselves we need to consider the opinion of the people of Europe towards EU integration with Turkey. This will give a better idea of how the peoples of Europe view themselves rather than how their identity has been constructed. For this, we will firstly analyze two parts of the EU's most recent Eurobarometer polls published in November 2008. We will look at whether there are agreed common values between the EU and Turkey, and then at how future Turkish membership is viewed by the EU population.

Over half of current EU citizens (54%) feel that there are common values between the EU member states. This is eclipsed by the feelings of Turkish respondents 64% of whom believe in common EU values.

The values that EU citizens feel are most important to them personally are Peace (45%), Human Rights (42%) and Respect for Human Life (41%). Turkish responses differed slightly with the three most important values being Respect for Human life (46%), Human Rights (41%) and Equality (31%). When we look at which values best represent the EU itself, the answers were Human Rights (37%), Peace (35%) and Democracy (34%). Turkey's answers were Human Rights (43%), Respect for Human Life (34%) and Democracy (26%). These responses show a high level of resonance between European and Turkish values. Citizens of both the EU and Turkey associate specific and common ideals with the European project.

From the above, it seems that *“Europeans are coming to terms with a sense of self that exhibits a broader range of identities and values than Europe was willing or able to accommodate in the past.”* [20] Europe today is defined by inclusive and universal values and most citizens have taken the opportunity to embrace the EU as the defender of these values.

When asked the question of whether Turkey should be granted full membership of the EU, there is less cause for optimism. Only 31% of EU citizens approve of Turkey's integration into the EU. However, when asked a different question regarding Turkish membership once it has complied with all the conditions fixed by the EU there is no consensus, 45% are in favour, 45% are opposed with 10% unsure. It seems that although EU citizens and Turks share similar values there is still resistance to Turkey's membership. This resistance seems to emanate from the views of member states Political Leaders who are against Turkish membership, so therefore refuse to view the European Identity in terms of values.

So it seems that once Turkey has taken the necessary steps to bring it's institutions, economy and law in line with EU norms, there should be no reason why Turkey cannot be integrated into the EU's existing identity structure, if not the EU itself. This seems especially true when we look at changes over time in EU attitudes to a culture of shared values and Turkish integration. More people accept the reality of common European values than in the past. Support for the enlargement of the EU has risen as has support for Turkish membership in particular. Further insight into the answers respondents have given broken down into demographic groupings shows a broadly positive change over time. The most ardent supporters are the young, most educated respondents. In these sectors of society, a majority are in favour of Turkish integration, this is true of Turks themselves and representatives of the current EU states. This is a factor related to a change in educational approaches towards the EU and Europe in general. The origins and basis of European identity found in school textbooks are *“treated less and less in ethnic or religious narratives, and increasingly more in terms of universalistic principles.”* [21]

However, as well as the statistics analyzed above, there are other factor we need to take into account regarding the level of resonance between European and Turkish identities and their ability to co-exist. It is important to remember the more than 3 million Turks that already live within the borders of the EU. In the same way that the EU elite is helping to influence Europeans attitudes towards a European identity this Turkish minority highlights the *“social fact*

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*of an ongoing process linking Turkish and European identities that significantly pre-dates the formal process of Turkey's accession to the EU."*[22] So it is clear that Turkey as a full EU member would not bring a host of new problems for a European identity to deal with. However, it would force European leaders to think about a *"long-standing but conveniently avoided problem"*, [23] Europe's relations with Islam both inside and outside its borders. The integration of Turkey would turn a minority issue into an identity one. From what we have seen above it seems that the citizens of the EU are more willing to address this question of whether an EU citizen can be Muslim, Turkish and European than its policy makers.

## Conclusion

The EU was originally formulated and constructed as a pragmatic tool to end the threat of European war. *"Far from a brotherhood driven by idealism, the European Union is an association of convenience between nation-states anxious to preserve their independence."*[24] The EU has so successfully achieved this goal that the idea of an EU identity threatening National identities was never conceived of until relatively recently in the integration process. The EU's success is part of what has been described as *"the supranational restructuring of the globe"*[25] and has led many to see it as the beginning of the end for the nation state and national identities. In a modern world which encapsulates multi-layered political communities, it is no wonder that confusion and over-lap in identity politics has developed. Increasingly, national identity has been reduced by, on the one hand the EU's symbolic identity creation and it's member states increasing willingness to surrender sovereignty and therefore legitimacy in the eyes of their own national populations. To put it clearly ideas of citizenship and identity are less and less "confined within the boundaries of the nation state." [26]

The EU has striven to create an identity for itself in order to promote its legitimacy and give it a solid reason for existence. As a Supra-national political entity with no clear agreed definition or end goal the EU's identity formation project is a threat to national identities while it simultaneously gives them new space and protection. EU member state leaders and the Turkish Government approach this from opposite sides. European leaders see a European Identity as a threat to their own power and legitimacy; Turkish political elites see EU membership as the best way of preserving their Islamic culture from being swallowed by Turkish nationalism.

The EU has chosen to frame this identity around universal values that can be regarded as European. *"Membership of the European Union is not open to just any country: every country wanting to join the European Union must undertake to respect a certain number of values, such as democracy, the rule of law, individual freedom and market economy principles. Values are therefore at the heart of the European project."* [27] The inability of some EU State leaders to apply this to the issue of Turkish integration seems to suggest the protection of national identity, and therefore their own legitimacy is paramount. For Turkey, the common values that are European provide no such barrier to their legitimacy as long as the Islamic cultural background can be integrated into the EU's diverse union.

The eastward expansion of the EU has shown the flexibility of what is European. The future integration of Turkey is the next step towards increasing recognition that the values that unite Europe are indeed universal, and that therefore, European identity cannot be culturally or territorially bounded. Europe's leaders have to recognize that the values that make up European identity are no threat to their national culture and should make space for the idea of Europe in their nation-state identities. This is already being done by their citizens. Eurobarometer polls consistently find that respondents define themselves as national and Europeans, and see no conflict in this description.[28] The EU's role in this has to be the promotion of integrated multiple identities rather than a standalone European identity. The need is to convince national policy makers and Eurosceptic populations that *"the extension of the political space beyond the nation-state provides a shelter for multiple identities be they local, regional or national."*[29]

If the leaders of the EU member states can agree that identity *"resides in such things as 'behavior', 'attitude', 'mores' or, in a word 'culture'"*[30] there can be no barrier to further EU Turkish integration.

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