

Which Identity for the EU? Implications Of and For Turkey's Accession

Written by Catherine MacMillan

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The prospect of a new round of EU enlargement inevitably provokes a debate on the EU's identity. An important point of discussion is whether EU integration needs to be supported by a strong cultural identity. While the EU has attempted to bolster a cultural identity, for instance through exchange programmes encouraging contact between young Europeans of different nationalities, and the development of cultural symbols such as the European flag, the anthem, Europe day, or, indeed through the Euro itself (Kaelbe, 2009: 206). However an examination of the Treaties upon which the EU is based reveals that there is no emphasis on a cultural identity beyond the acceptance of universal values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law. A glance at the official criteria for enlargement tells the same story. The Copenhagen criteria, set out by the European Council in 1993 demand that the candidate countries meet four conditions as follows:

“The stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union ... [and] the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union” (European Council, 1993).

As Ruiz-Jimenez and Torreblanca point out, then, ‘whether the candidate country is Turkey, Norway or Switzerland it should not make much difference’ (2007: 6). Thus, from this point of view, there is no cultural criterion for EU accession; instead any country that is accepted as geographically European and fulfills these criteria should be allowed to join regardless of broader identity questions such as religion or history.

However, in Sjørusen's view, the decision to enlarge to the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) was prompted by more than universalist arguments alone. While she does not argue that the EU is underscored by a ‘thick’ identity comparable to those underlying nation states, she does support the view that the arguments for enlargement to the CEECs pointed to a certain ‘sense of collective ‘us’ that encompasses the rest of Europe but not the rest of the world’. Thus, enlargement was seen as a way of overcoming the ‘unnatural’ division of Europe caused by the Cold War; it was, then, perceived as a way of reuniting Europe. Moreover, enlargement has also been put forward as a way of extending the zone of stability from Western Europe to Europe as a whole; in other words, of overcoming Europe's past characterised by intra-European conflict and war (Sjørusen., 2008: 7-9).

In contrast, such allusions to a common European heritage are difficult to find in discussions of Turkey's enlargement bid, with Turkey tending to be described as a ‘partner’ of Europe rather than a natural member of the European family (Lundgren, 2007). Instead, pragmatic arguments have predominated in the discourse in support of Turkey's EU membership. The European Commission, for instance, as well as those EU Member states such as Britain which support Turkey's accession, tend to cite the strategic and economic benefits that the EU would reap from Turkey's accession. The Commission Staff Working Document on Turkey, for instance, exemplifies this attitude;

“Turkey is situated at a regional crossroads of strategic importance for Europe: the Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean; its territory is a transit route for land and air transport with Asia, and for sea transport with Russia and Ukraine. Its neighbours provide key energy supplies for Europe, and it has substantial

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water resources" (Commission, 2004)

Another important pragmatic argument put forward in favour of Turkey's EU accession is the idea that, anchored in the EU, it could bolster European security by acting as a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia, and could even help to prevent a 'clash of civilisations' between Europe and the Islamic world (Aydın Düzgit)

Thus, from this point of view, while Turkish accession may not be viewed with the same enthusiasm as that of the Central and Eastern European countries in 2004 and 2007, there is no potential obstacle to Turkey's eventual accession assuming it fulfills the official membership criteria, particularly if it is seen as benefitting the EU in terms of security and/or the economy. Unfortunately for Turkey, this is not the whole story. There are those, particularly on the Franco-German right, who argue that the EU needs a cultural identity, not merely a civic one, if the integration process is to succeed. Due to the considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity within the EU this cannot be a 'thick' cultural identity of the type associated with nation-states. Instead, it can be termed a *civilisational* identity based upon elements of shared history and religion. European civilisation has often been understood as comprising Europe's classical Greek and Roman past, the Renaissance and/or the Enlightenment as well as Christianity. In Huntington's view, for instance, 'European' (or Western) civilisation' is informed by 'classical civilisation', which, for him, includes Greek philosophy and rationalism, Roman law and Latin as well as Christianity (1997: 69).

The importance of Christianity as a civilisational marker for EU identity has been particularly strong in Franco-German right-wing discourse. Yılmaz describes the role of Christianity here as an 'extinguished volcano'; thus Christianity is viewed not as a belief system but as a cultural marker. In this view, then, Christian heritage is viewed as the basis for some secular European values, including the separation of religion and the state, the idea of the natural rights of man and even the culture of capitalism. Therefore, conversion to Christianity is viewed as insufficient to acquire 'Judeo-Christian values', as the convert 'does not carry the Christian heritage in his or her 'cultural genes' (Yılmaz, 2007: 298).

In this discourse, then, Turkey is seen as inherently alien to European civilisation. This is succinctly put forward, for instance, by former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who argues that the EU is a 'civilisational project' in which 'Turkey has no place' (cited in Leparmentier and Zecchini, 2002). This is echoed, for example, by Sarkozy:

"I am in favour of signing a contract with Turkey. I am in favour of a joint market with Turkey. But I am against Turkey's integration into Europe. Turkey is a small Asia. And there is no reason for it to be a part of Europe. In 25 years, Turkey's population will be 100 million. Turkey is a great civilisation; but not a European one" (2007a).

In fact, the Franco-German right, particularly Sarkozy, has tended to securitise Turkey's EU accession; they view it as a security threat to the continued existence of the EU. As Sarkozy argues:

"Turkey's entry would kill the very idea of European integration. Turkey's entry would turn Europe into a free trade zone with a competition policy. It would permanently bury the goal of the EU as a global power, of common policies, and of European democracy. It would be a fatal blow to the very notion of European identity" (Sarkozy, 2007b: 189).

To conclude, therefore, it is clear that Turkey's EU accession bid has encouraged political actors in the EU Member States and institutions to consider which kind of organisation the EU is and should be. As has been discussed above, opinion is divided between those who support a 'civic' identity for the EU, and those who argue that the EU needs a thicker 'cultural' identity. This has important ramifications for Turkey's accession bid; while a 'civic' EU could easily include a Turkey which fulfills the political conditions for membership, proponents of a 'cultural' EU tend to exclude Turkey on account of perceived 'civilisational' differences.

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