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Not money, not politics; Europeans look to culture in Turkey debate

Europeans widely believe that it is a democratic political system and economic factors that define European identity and want candidate countries to fulfill these two criteria first and foremost to be able to join the European Union, but they tend to reject Turkey as a member, not on political or economic grounds, but on the assumption that it is culturally different, according to results of a new survey.



The survey -- a joint project of Boğaziçi University's Center for European Studies, the İstanbul-based Dialogue with Europe Association, the Autonomous University of Madrid and the University of Granada -- was conducted between June 2008 and November 2009.

According to the survey, conducted in five EU countries, culture is also the main reason why those who support Turkish membership do so. Some 40.4 percent of those surveyed said it was mostly cultural factors that shaped their stance -- negative or positive -- towards the possible membership of Turkey in the EU. Of those surveyed, 26.8 percent said it was mostly economic factors that determined their stance towards Turkey and 26 percent said it was mostly political factors.

"Europe looks at politics and the economy when defining its own identity, but focuses on cultural factors when it weighs Turkish accession," said Professor Hakan Yılmaz of the Center for European Studies at Boğaziçi University when announcing results of the survey at a meeting in İstanbul on Monday evening. Yılmaz thus said the arguments that Turkey's membership would be good for the EU because it would help Europe have better ties with the Muslim world or foster an alliance of civilizations might be counterproductive, strengthening the cultural concerns among Europeans over Turkey's membership. He said instead that the government should focus more on the legal aspect, reminding Europeans that the EU has made a promise to Turkey that, when it fulfills the objective criteria, it will join the union.

According to the survey -- conducted in France, Germany, Spain, Britain and Poland -- more than half of those who oppose Turkey's membership (51.3 percent) say Turkey should not join because it is a Muslim country and is culturally not in line with Europe's Christian roots; 15.8 percent said Turkey is not qualified because it is not located on the European continent.

Participants tended to disagree on whether Turkey's accession would prevent a clash of civilizations (54 percent disagreeing as opposed to 43 percent who agreed) but when asked whether Turkish membership would increase the EU's influence in the Muslim world, a majority of 59 percent said they agreed while 46 percent disagreed.

The participants also agreed that Turkey's strong military would contribute to EU security (47 percent versus 34 percent) but dismissed the claims that Turkey's young population would help Europe address its shortage of workers (50 percent) and that the Turkish economy would boost the EU's competitiveness in the global economy (53 percent).

When asked whether it would be unfair to break promises made to Turkey regarding its eventual membership, a majority of 57.8 percent agreed.

Turkey loses referendum on membership

The survey also revealed that majority of Europeans -- even in countries which officially support Turkish membership such as Britain -- would vote "no" if there was a referendum on Turkey's accession today.

A referendum is not a formal condition for accession, but public feelings affect lawmakers to a certain extent when they ratify membership of a

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new country in the EU. Additionally, politicians in France vowed to hold a public vote on Turkish accession when the country fulfills the objective criteria for entry.

According to survey results, 51.8 percent say they would vote against Turkish accession if there was a referendum today. Opposition was biggest in France (64.4 percent). France’s president, Nicolas Sarkozy, says Turkey should never be allowed to join because it is culturally and geographically not part of Europe. France was followed by Germany (62 percent) and Britain (46. 3 percent). In Spain and Poland, majority of the participants (53.2 percent and 54.1 percent respectively) said they would vote “yes” in a referendum on Turkish membership.

The survey showed the strongest opposition to Turkey was among the older segments of the European population. Only 35.2 percent of participants older than 65 said they have a positive view about Turkish membership. In the 18-24 age group, 57 percent of participants said they viewed Turkey’s membership positively.

18 November 2009, Wednesday  
FATMA DEMIRELLI İSTANBUL

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