

# Opinions of Students at Turkish and German Universities on Turkey in the EU Accession Process

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## **Abstract**

Turkey's candidacy for accession to the European Union (EU) dates back to many years and is still a current and highly disputed issue. This study was conducted to determine the opinions of students at Turkish and German universities on Turkey in relation to the European Union. Two hundred twenty six German students participated in the study from the departments of Turkish Translation and Interpretation and Asian Languages at the University of Bonn, Germany, and 270 Turkish students participated in the study from Ataturk Faculty of Education in Marmara University, Istanbul-Turkey. The research data were collected through a questionnaire created by Dartan, Nas, Akman, and Savran (2004). The questionnaire was prepared in both Turkish and German languages and consisted of 27 items. Five items of the questionnaire aimed at the collection of personal data and 17 items are responded with "yes, no, uncertain, no idea." These items were categorized under four dimensions consisting of "Turkey's general structure, Turkey's economic and political situation, Turkey's foreign policy, and general opinions on Turkey's accession to the EU." The other 5 items consisted of multiple or one choice questions, which investigated students' approach to the EU from different perspectives. According to the findings, responses given by two groups of students have been interpreted comparatively. According to the results of the study, Turkish students specified health issues, economic and political instabilities, and debates over secularism as the fundamental problems in accession of Turkey to the EU. Turkish students believe that Turkey's accession to the EU is a very long process and perhaps a process that would never end. German students had a more positive approach to Turkey's accession to the EU. However, students in Germany highlighted religion, population, and economic factors as the most important obstacles to the accession of Turkey to the EU. Furthermore, contrary to Turkish students, students in Germany believe that Turkey is ready to join the EU. Both groups confirm that Turkey is a secular and democratic country and that it provides a model for the other Islamic countries.

## **Key Words**

European Union, Education, Democracy, Political Situation.

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Globalization, creation of market-based international competition, as well as inter-sector/inter-region exchange and communication have become symbols of this century. With its member states, the European Union (EU) is a heterogeneous community in which different cultures, languages, and religions come together. The EU aims to create a European identity by creating common policies for controlling the security of Europe, coordination of economic development, promotion of democratic values, encouragement of social integration, struggling with problems such as narcotics, crime and terrorism, use of a single currency, and provision of right of free movement between the member states. To this end, the EU member states put forth efforts to develop collaboration among educational and training institutions through cultural integration programs and develop joint projects aimed at teaching and spreading languages of member states (Lange, 1992; Wallace, 1997; Field, 1998; Mitchell and McAleavey, 1999; Beukel, 2001; Sezgin, 2001; Çalıř; 2002 & De Neve, 2007).

Turkey's westernization movement that began in the Ottoman period gained importance with the establishment of the Republic and became an important goal of Turkey (Şener and Akdemir, 2006 & Kaya, Kılıç and Yıldırım, 2008). The present EU was established in Strasbourg in 1949 as a result of search for economic recovery and welfare among the Western European countries. Turkey's negotiations with the then-named European Economic Community started in 1959 and resulted with the Ankara (or Association) Agreement, which came into effect in December 1964. Turkey's full membership application was materialized on April 14, 1987. This treaty targeted the rapid improvement of life standards in Turkey and reducing the gap between European Union's economy and Turkish economy by giving aid funds, to ease the accession process. Furthermore, in the text of treaty, a series of precautions have been enumerated in the order Turkey to comply with the EU practices regarding global norms such as human rights and democracy (Ülger, 2003; Avrupa Birliđi Genel Sekreterliđi [ABGS] (2004a, 2004b); Canefe, & Uđur, 2004; Özey, 2006; Efeđil, & Erođlu, 2007).

The Maastricht Treaty signed in February 1992, the Copenhagen Summit held in June 1993, and the Treaty of Amsterdam signed in October 1997 are important events for the development of the EU.

Turkey obtained the right to participate in the full-membership meetings under the same conditions as the other candidate countries at the Helsinki Summit held in 1999 (Cini, 1996; Bolayır, 2000; Spence, 2000; Karluk, 2001; Ülger, 2003; Baydarol, 2003; ABGS, 2004a, 2004b; Collins and Salais, 2004; El-Agraa, 2004; Church and Phinnemore, 2006; Dış Ticaret Müsteşarlığı [DTM], 2007; İktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı [İKV], 2008; Treaty of Maastricht, 2007; Kopenhag, 2007; Dede, 2008 & Wimmel, 2009). Turkey prepared its national program, put forward a large scale of political and economical reform agendas and various reforms which are targeted for the most important component of Turkey's modernization and development plan, the improvement of the education system. The First Harmonization Package dated February 6, 2002 and other subsequent harmonization packages were implemented as a requirement of harmonization with the *Acquis Communautaire*. With the Customs Union agreement that entered into force in January 1996, steps were taken for perpetual and balanced strengthening of commercial and economic relations between the parties. The most crucial arrangements of these reform packages were individual rights and freedom, administrative, constitutional and structural transformations in juridical matters. Furthermore, these programs include short-term and mid-term priority calendars for the areas to be worked on (İnceoğlu, 2002; Erdemli, 2003; Vural, 2003; Öniş, 2003; Tezcan, 2003; Günöğür, 2003; Uğur, 2004; ABGS, 2004a; Güler, 2004; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi [TBMM], 2007; Günay, 2007 & DPT, 2008).

Turkey's membership in the EU attained its most concrete form on October 3, 2005 (ABGS, 2005). However, Turkey's problems such as the "the Kurdish problem, prevention of terrorism, education in Kurdish, Armenia issue, Cyprus issue, secularism and judicial principles, Turkey's economic structure and population growth" are considered obstacles that prevent, or slow down, Turkey accession to the EU (Bozkurt, 1997; Baç, 2001; Ilgaz and Demir, 2006; Rubin, 2003 & Togan, 2004).

Important resolutions were adopted with regard to "improvement of the quality of education and training systems in the EU to ensure better employment and social cohesion, and to enable everyone to benefit from the education and training system in the EU member countries until 2010" at the European Council meeting held in Lisbon in March 2000.

In line with the Accession Partnership Document, Turkey makes many arrangements such as Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius and Youth Community Action Plans conforming to the Acquis Communautaire in an attempt to enhance the quality of education (European Commission, 2006; European Commission, 2007b; Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı [DPT], 2004a; Hesapçıoğlu and Topsakal, 2007; Türkiye Esnaf Sanatkârlar Konfederasyonu [TESK], 2007; N. Çelebi, 2007& DPT, 2007).

It can be seen that there are gaps in many fields between Turkey and the EU. In the field of education, for example, while the rate of schooling at primary education and secondary education level is close to 100% in the EU, it is 97.37% in primary education, 58.56% in secondary education, and 20.14% in higher education in Turkey as of 2007-2008. While the number of students per teacher is 25,8 in Turkey, it is 11,6 in the EU countries. For this reason, the primary debate is to bring Turkey's education system to the EU standards in qualitative and quantitative terms (Tuzcu, 2006; Eurostat, 2007& Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [TÜİK], 2007). As can be seen from these figures, there is a considerable difference.

By purchasing power parity at prices current as of 2007, among countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is between 36.000 USD and 7.000 in the EU, while it corresponds to 8.200 USD in Turkey as of 2008 (Eurostat, 2007; TÜİK, 2008 & NTVMSNBC, 2008). Health services are also noticeably inadequate in Turkey. According to available data, the number of physicians per 1000 patients is 1,4 in Turkey, while the 3 in OECD average (Civan, 2007; OECD, 2005).

There is rapid population growth in Turkey. Fertility rate in the European Union is 1,53 births per woman but 2,14 in Turkey. Although unemployment rate varies from country to country, the average rate in the EU countries is 8.2% but around 13.6% in Turkey (Eurostat, 2007; Eurostat, 2008 & TÜİK, 2008). This is one of the obstacles slowing down Turkey's accession to the EU. However, the fact that forecasts predict that population growth rate in Turkey will decrease in the future, which will also be reflected in the employment market, and consequently the migration pressure will decrease (Şen, Akaya, Cryns, Goldberg, & Kakasoğlu, 1995).

The Progress Report dated November 06, 2007 on Turkey's progress towards accession to the EU draws attention to acceleration of political reforms by Ankara for full membership (European Commission, 2007a; Lungescu, 2007). A Number of countries showing disapproval to Turkey's membership in the EU lead by Germany and France suggest a privileged partnership model for Turkey in place of full membership. Particularly, the EU members argue that it would become difficult to adopt resolutions as the Union expands. Because the economic and security benefits of the expansion process of the EU cannot be satisfactorily explained to the member states, the EU citizens look on expansion with disfavor (Browne, 2005; International Crisis Group, 2007& Drulák, 2006). Surveys conducted in Turkey on the EU indicate that both university students and citizens of a variety of social classes support accession to the EU, but that this support has diminished in recent years (Aslanoğlu and Çelik, 2006;Avcı, 2007; Çarkoğlu, Erzan, Kirişçi and Yılmaz, 2002; Dartan, Nas, Akman and Savran, 2004; Kaya, 2005& Kaya, Kılıç and Yıldırım, 2008). As a matter of fact, even though Turkey has made noteworthy reforms in economic and political fields in the process of accession, problems encountered in practice delay accession to the EU (Saygılıoğlu, Bilgin, & Arı, 2003).

Islamic approach of the EU to Turkey's membership showed a considerable change toward the end of the 1990s. However, those who are skeptical about Turkey's candidacy still constitute quite high number both in Turkey and the EU (Banús, 2004; Duran, 2004; Hale, 2003& Laçiner, 2005).

The main objective of this study is to establish how Turkey's membership is perceived by students in Turkey and Germany within the framework of the problems discussed above. The reason why the study was conducted on students in Germany is the fact that the Turkish population in this country is the highest among the other EU countries, and that these students know Turkish language considering the departments they study at. It is believed that the results of this study will make a contribution, albeit small, to preparations to be made in the future for accession of Turkey to the EU.

## Method

In the current study, the data were analyzed using a general survey method, one of the descriptive research methods.

## Population and Sample

The population of the study was composed of students studying at the departments of Turkish translation and interpretation and Asian languages at the University of Bonn, Germany, and students studying at departments of foreign language education, social sciences and science education of Ataturk Faculty of Education in Marmara University, Istanbul-Turkey. The sample of the study was selected using random sampling from both populations. A total of 226 German students and 270 Turkish students participated in the study. 31% (70) of the the Germany students were male and 69% (156) were female. 33.7% (91) of the Turkish students were male and 66.3% (179) were female.

## Procedure

A questionnaire was used as a data collection tool in the current study. The questionnaire developed by Dartan et al. (2004) in a study on the EU by Marmara University European Union Institute was utilized in the preparation of the questions. Five items of the questionnaire consisted of questions aimed at collection of personal details of participants, and twenty two items of questions reflecting students' opinions about the EU.

The research data were analyzed using SPSS. Frequency, percentage and chi-square tests were conducted in statistical analyses (Büyüköztürk, 2007).

## Results

According to the results, the university students in Germany have a more positive opinion to Turkey's candidacy for the EU compared to Turkish students. However, it has been observed that responses given by German students to the questionnaire do not reflect Turkey's realities at all. Approaches of Turkish students seem more realistic compared to other comparable studies.

A majority of the German university students see Turkey as a country that has economic stability and think that the political situation in

Turkey is promising. They also think that the social and health services, as well as human rights applications in Turkey are sufficient. However, contrary to the German university students, the Turkish students do not agree with these opinions.

A majority of the German university students are of the opinion that Turkey is ready for accession to the EU, and that Turkey's accession would be beneficial in terms of their country. However, Turkish students think that Turkey is not ready for accession to the EU. While 68.4% of the German university students say "Yes" for Turkey's entry into the EU, this opinion is limited to 49.6% of the Turkish students. Students state that the biggest benefit of Turkey accession to the EU is "Turkey's young and dynamic population." Furthermore, students also think that Turkey's entry into the EU would provide benefits in the sense of creation of a new market, forming a bridge between Islam and the West, and of cultural diversity.

61.1% of the German university students want Turkey's accession to the EU by Germany, while only 30.9% of the Turkish students support this opinion. Turkish students want Germany, the United Kingdom and France to support Turkey's entry into the EU.

When we look at the gender factor with respect to accession to the EU, female students have rather negative approach to Turkey's accession compared to male students. Although German students' approach to the EU varies according to the age variable, 24-26-age-group has the most positive opinions.

### Discussion

Results of this study showed that Turkish students have a negative approach to Turkey's accession to the EU. It looks like Turkey's membership in the EU will be debated for many years.

Two student groups highlighted "religious, population, health, economic and political instabilities" in Turkey as the factors that make the process of the country's accession to the EU. Students emphasized the same problems in the studies conducted by Dartan et al. (2004), Avcı (2007) and Kaya et al. (2008). It worries that the large population of Turkey would be a heavy economic burden on the EU (Bozkurt, 1997; Ülger, 2003; Günay, 2007).

A majority of the students in Germany (77.9%) support the EU politicians' approach regarding Turkey, while 6.3% of the Turkish students support the attitudes of EU politicians. The EU states that Turkey is not ready for accession yet. The EU further states that even though Turkey fulfills all conditions specified for any candidate, some countries, e.g. France, would exercise their veto right (Browne, 2005; International Crisis Group, 2007). Students are also of the opinion that the Cyprus and Armenian problems must be solved before Turkey's accession. Even though the leaders of Northern and Southern Cyprus have declared that they started negotiations for "a federation with single international identity," no concrete developments have been achieved yet (Bilge, 2008).

A majority of the students in Turkey and Germany believe that the most significant contribution of Turkey's accession to the EU would be "the creation of a new market in the EU with its young and dynamic population, cultural diversity, forming a bridge between Islam and the West." A large portion of the Turkish students believe that the EU membership would provide "the chance to live in the EU countries, to benefit from rights to education, health and social rights, the right to move freely throughout the EU, and to hold a EU passport." Dartan et al. (2004), Kaya (2005), Avcı (2007) and Kaya et al. (2008) obtained similar results in their studies. In a public opinion survey conducted by Eurobarometer in the EU countries (27 countries) in the fall of 2008, Turks emphasized that the EU membership meant "economic welfare, freedom to travel, and social security" the most. 65.5% of the students in Germany said "Yes" to Turkey's accession to the EU, while 23.3% of the Turkish students gave the same response. According to public opinion surveys conducted, Turkish people's support to EU membership was 64% in 2002, 62% in 2004, 59% in 2005, 55 % in 2006, 52% in 2007, and 49% in 2008 ( Eurobarometer 62, 2004; Eurobarometer 63, 2005; Eurobarometer 66, 2006; Eurobarometer 67, 2007& Eurobarometer 70, 2008 ). According to the Eurostat (2007), 43% Turkish citizens are positive to the EU and 45% Turkish citizens supported developing relationships between the two parties.

Students believe that Turkey's accession to the EU is a very long process. Even, 33.3% of the Turkish students are of the opinion that "Turkey will never enter the EU." In this study, Turkish students, albeit a small number, believe that the EU membership would lead to loss of cultural identity. In a Eurobarometer survey (2008), 19% of Turks stated Turkey would suffer loss of cultural identity. This rate is only 11% among EU



citizens. At the same time, Turkish students and Turkish people see the EU as a “Christian Club” (Çarkoğlu et al, 2002). Witzens (2005) emphasizes that the European Union is not a “Christian Club”, on the contrary, it is a Union formed by sub-cultural communities of countries. As a matter of fact, the philosophy of the European Union is to ensure that religion and state do not eliminate or put pressure on each other, remain within their own domains, and live in peace (Çelebi, 2007).

However, the European Citizenship concept included in the fundamental philosophy of the EU shows that it is very difficult and time-consuming for different cultures, religions, and languages in and of itself to come together and involve in a mutual interaction (Lange, 1992; Yel, 2004 & Laffan and Mazey, 2006). The EU can become a real union in political and economic terms only through the creation of a supra-identity that has adopted the common goals of Europe. Turkey’s full membership in the EU would make significant contributions to the creation of a European identity based on cultural pluralism (Morley and Robins, 1997; Özsoy, 2002; Kula, 2003& Ilgaz and Demir, 2006). When Turkey becomes a full EU member, the effects of Turkey, due to its geographic and demographic structure, will have on the European Union would be much more than those any country would have (DPT, 2004b; Ülger, 2005). However, Turkey should make the required reforms not as a requirement of accession to the EU, but to secure its position in the changing global conditions.

Turkey should display its determination and use every possible means for accession to the EU, and promote itself by organizing events in a number of European countries through non-governmental organizations, Turkish businessmen associations and tourism, and by preparing and distributing promotional brochures and booklets.

It has been observed that the university students in Turkey and Germany are not so much informed of Turkey and the EU. Seminars, panels, symposiums, etc. are needed to be organized at universities both in Turkey and the EU countries to raise students’ awareness of the EU.

Scientific research on the EU should be conducted on a larger scale at universities in other EU countries as well. These research should be utilized in progress calendar.

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