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A Clash of Civilizations, or Differences in Economic Modernization? Examining Liberal-Democratic Values in Turkey and the European Union

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Real and perceived political and cultural differences between Turkey and the European Union (EU) have undermined Turkey's EU application. The EU has rebuffed this predominantly Muslim, relatively poor country for failing to live up to the values of democracy, rule of law, and respect for and protection of human and minority rights. As part of the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), these values are yardsticks against which Turkey and other candidate states are judged for entry. Since its founding in 1923, Turkey has experienced three military coups and one soft coup, the latter as recent as 1997, putting its democratic status and rule of law in doubt. Further, Turkey's newly elected government in 2002 has strong Islamic roots and has been viewed by some with skepticism in Europe. Turkey's human rights abuses are also well known, even in popular culture, partly due to the portrayal of the Turkish justice and prison systems in the 1978 film, *Midnight Express*. Turkey also has a long history of conflict with its Kurdish citizens, which escalated in 1984 when the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) declared war against the state.

After earning EU candidate member status in 1999, Turkey accelerated political reforms. Meanwhile, the capture and imprisonment of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, paved the way for even bolder political reforms. In 2003, Turkey signed the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Cultural and Social Rights. The Turkish Parliament passed legislation limiting the role of the military in 2003; other legislation abolished the death

penalty. Between October 2003 and July 2004, in fact, the Turkish Parliament passed 261 new laws, many relating to democracy, rule of law, and human and minority rights.¹ Given these other changes, some reservations about the Turkish *government* have been answered.

Instead, much of the present debate concerns whether people in Turkey and in the EU are *culturally* similar or different, particularly in terms of the liberal-democratic values in the Copenhagen criteria. Some European officials' comments indicate this: Former German Chancellor Schmidt asserted that "fundamental cultural differences" between Turkey and the EU are of "decisive importance."² Former French president Giscard d'Estaing said, "[Turkey's] capital is not in Europe ...and 95 percent of its population is outside Europe. [It has] a different culture, a different approach, and a different way of life. It is not a European country."³ The former president of the European Union of Christian Democrats, Wim van Welzen, said the EU had "cultural, humanitarian and Christian values different to Turkey's."⁴

Evoking debates about Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis and modernization, prominent Europeans point to Islam and economic factors as explanations of value differences between people in Turkey and the EU. For example, Pope Benedict XVI said:

The roots that have formed Europe...are those of Christianity. Turkey has always represented another continent, in permanent contrast to Europe...It would be an error to equate the two continents...Turkey is founded on Islam...Thus the entry of Turkey into the EU would be anti-historical.⁵

One European official put it bluntly: "Turkey is ... too poor...too Muslim, too harsh, too culturally different, too everything."⁶

Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis implies that Turkish people's values are different because Turkey is the only predominantly Muslim EU member or candidate state. What separates "the West from the rest"—Islamic, and to a lesser extent, Orthodox civilizations—is Western Christian nations' emphasis on liberal-democratic values: separation of church and state, rule of law, social pluralism, representative bodies, and individualism. Islamic tenets, according to Huntington, hold that God rules the universe (and hence society); there is no separation of church and state; law reflects God's, not humans', desire; and, humans are treated as unitary, without regard to any social divisions.⁷ As such, support for liberal-democratic values should be highest in Western Christian countries and lowest in Muslim countries.

Modernization theory also implies that Turkish people's values are different, not because of religion, but because of Turkey's relatively poor economic situation among EU member and candidate states. The famous sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, argues that economic modernization is a requisite of democracy. As economic conditions improve and people become more financially secure, they want more of a say in government.⁸ Consequently, people in relatively well-off countries should hold liberal-democratic values in the highest regard.

Although policymakers and scholars have assumed cultural differences and attempted to explain them, these assumptions and explanations have gone untested. In this policy brief, I report and discuss selected results based on a larger study which asks the following questions:

1. Do Turkish people have the same values regarding democracy, rule of law (versus religious and authoritarian rule), and human and minority rights as people in EU states?
2. What factors best explain these value similarities and differences?

Do Turkish People Have Similar or Different Liberal-Democratic Values?

To answer the above question, I used t-tests of statistical significance on data for 27 of the 28 EU member and candidate states (as of 1999) from the 1999-2002 wave of the World and European Values Surveys.⁹ I selected questions based on their content resemblance to the liberal-democratic values in the Copenhagen Criteria and combined them into scales. There are five scales, all of which range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating more favorable views.

Global evaluations of democracy is a scale comprised of questions asking people whether or not a democratic political system is a good way of governing the country and whether or not a democratic political system is better than any other political system. *Specific evaluations of democracy* consists of questions asking about the economy, political decisiveness, and maintenance of order in a democracy. *Secularism* includes questions asking about whether or not politicians who believe in God are fit for public office and whether or not more people with strong religious beliefs should hold public office. *Anti-authoritarianism* is comprised of questions asking about people's impressions of "having a strong leader who does not have to deal with parliament and elections," "having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country" and "having the army rule." Finally, *tolerance* is a scale comprised of questions asking people whether they would like to have people of a different race, people who have AIDS, homosexuals, and immigrants/foreign workers as neighbors, where tolerance indicates their willingness to have these groups as neighbors.¹⁰ [Figures 1-5 report the country-level averages for these respective scales and can be found here.](#)

Are Turkish people as "democratic" as people in other EU member and candidate states? Figure 1 reveals that while 12 countries have statistically significant (or, "significantly" for short) higher mean global evaluations of democracy than Turkey, nine countries have significantly lower evaluations. In fact, the mean global evaluations of democracy score of 84 for Turkey is not significantly different from Europe's score of 84 (t-score=-1.33; p=.19). In Figure 2, twelve countries have significantly higher mean specific evaluations of democracy than Turkey, but 10 countries have significantly lower means. While Turkish people's specific evaluations of democracy appear to be on par with the rest of Europe's, they are slightly less favorable than Europe on average (t-score=-2.452; p<.05). In general, these results indicate that Turkish people are just as democratic as people in EU member and candidate states. As such, they run counter to what the clash of civilizations thesis and modernization theory would expect.

When it comes to "rule of law" (versus religious or authoritarian rule) and respect for human/minority rights, though, Turkish people are different. Turkish people are significantly less secular than people in every European country except for Romania and than Europe as a whole (t-score= -28.801; p<.001), as is indicated in Figure 3. Moreover, Turkish people are more authoritarian than people in every European country, except for Romania, and than Europe as a whole (t-score=-31.266; p<.001), as Figure 4 shows. Looking at Figure 5, we see that the

largest differences concern tolerance, as Turkish people hold less tolerant values than every single European country as well as Europe as a whole (t-score=-42.181; $p < .001$). These findings are what the clash of civilizations thesis and modernization theory would expect, but it is unclear which theory offers a better explanation of these cultural differences. This is answered below.

What Factors Best Explain These Value Similarities and Differences?

The clash of civilizations thesis suggests that these value differences are due to the fact that Islam is Turkey's predominant religion (97% of Turkish people identify as Muslims). Modernization theory suggests that differences are due to Turkey's lack of economic modernization: Its per capita gross national income of \$6440 (in 1999 U.S. dollars) is low compared to the EU member and candidate state average of \$17,138.33. The Turkish population is also generally younger, less educated, and less urban than its European counterparts. To answer the above question and disentangle these explanations, I ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, which controls for religious, economic, and population differences between countries.

After controlling for demographic and other differences, I find that Turkey does not have significantly less favorable evaluations of democracy than Orthodox (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, Greece) and Western Christian nations, which refutes the clash of civilizations thesis. Though people in Turkey are less secular and more authoritarian than people in Western Christian countries, which the clash of civilizations thesis would expect, they do not differ from people in Orthodox countries. In fact, tolerance is the only value for which I see the ranking in countries that the clash of civilizations thesis would expect (e.g., Western Christian, Orthodox, Islamic).

Instead, modernization theory is a much better and more consistent explanation of values, as gross national income is positively related to every liberal-democratic value. In fact, after controlling for demographic differences and gross national income, people in Turkey actually hold more favorable global and specific evaluations of democracy than people in Western Christian and Orthodox countries. Although economic modernization does not explain away the differences in secularism, anti-authoritarianism, and tolerance between Turkey and EU member and candidate states, it accounts for some of the differences. For example, economic modernization explains away about a third of the difference in secularism and tolerance between people in Turkey and EU member and candidate states. Economic modernization also accounts for about half of the difference in anti-authoritarianism.

Conclusion

Academics, politicians, and pundits have had much to say about Turkey's proposed entry into the European Union. In particular, there is great concern over whether Turkey lives up to the liberal-democratic values codified in the EU's Copenhagen Criteria. Many answer in the negative and point to Islam and economic modernization as possible explanations of these differences.

Some assumptions of cultural difference are not valid, and as such, it would be wrong to base policy on these assumptions. Despite political rhetoric suggesting otherwise, for example, Turkish people hold similar evaluations of democracy as people in EU member and candidate

states. Other assumptions of cultural difference, though, have some merit: Turkish people are more authoritarian, less secular, and less tolerant than their counterparts in the EU.

Where cultural differences between Turkey and EU member and candidate states are apparent, they are not as firmly rooted as some politicians and others suggest. The best explanation for these value differences is not religion, but rather economics. As such, more liberal economic policies may help Turkey change: Based on the results presented here, if Turkey's economic situation improves relative to the average EU candidate or member state, Turkish people will be more democratic than people in an average EU member and candidate states; their anti-authoritarian scores will improve by about half; and, their secularism and tolerance scores will improve by about a third. Turkey's political culture would thus be much more conducive to the liberal-democratic values codified in the Copenhagen Criteria.

¹ European Commission, "2004 Regular Report on Turkey's Progress Towards Accession," available: http://www.euturkey.org.tr/abportal/uploads/files/rr_tr_2004_en.pdf (Accessed 15 October 2004), 20.

² Ali Tekin, "Turkey's Place in Europe's Future," Paper No. 173, presented at the Second Pan-European Conference, Bologna, June 24-26, available: www.jhubc.it/ecpr-bologna/docs/173.pdf (Accessed 1 September 2005), 10.

³ Michael S Teitlebaum and Phillip L. Martin, "Is Turkey Ready for Europe?" *Foreign Affairs* 82 (2003), 97.

⁴ Chris Rumford, "Human Rights and Democratization in Turkey in the Context of EU Candidature." *Journal of European Area Studies* 9 (2001), 95

⁵ Jim Bencivenga, "Examining the New Pope's Old Comments on Turkey's Entry into the European Union." *Christian Science Monitor*, available: www.csmonitor.com, (April 22, 2005), no page number.

⁶ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address," *American Sociological Review* 59 (1994), 1-22. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁹ Cyprus is an EU member state, but was not sampled in the 1999-2002 World or European Values Survey.

¹⁰ For more information on the surveys, see www.icpsr.umich.edu and <http://www.europeanvalues.nl/index3.htm>.

