Cultural differences and the european union politics essay

The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a country is what we call culture. Cultural differences have always existed between friends and families, but when it comes to countries their integration and relations can get a little messy.

The European Union has always been known not only by its political and economic fusion, but also as a very diverse cultural union between countries. But when it comes to Turkey's integration to this conglomeration of states, cultural problems have become to be a sensitive barrier preventing their fully incorporation.

This problem ranges from Turkey's non-European geographical location, its large and poor population affecting the European Union's financial budget to its diverse and complicated culture compared to the Christian-based EU's culture.

Turkey is the only pluralist secular democracy in the Muslim world and has always attached great importance to developing its relations with other European countries. Turkish culture has had a profound impact over much of Eastern and Southern Europe becoming the bridge connecting to different continents, Europe and Asia.

Therefore the question simplifies to; until what extend does Turkey's culture affect its entrance to the European Union?

The European Union and its new members

The European Union is a coalition of twenty-seven independent states based on the European Communities and founded to enhance political, economic

and social co-operation. This union aims peace, prosperity and freedom for its 948 million citizens in a fairer and safer world. EU also aims to create a new economic growth based on regional specialties and the rich diversity of traditions and cultures. " Unity is strength; the process of integration has not smothered the different ways of life, traditions and cultures of its peoples" (Europa, 2010). The most important objectives of the EU are to establish European citizenship, guarantee freedom, security and justice, encourage economic and social progress and affirm Europe´s role in the world.

Its integration consists of most of Western Europe's countries, being Bulgaria and Romania the two last members to enter EU in 2007. In the candidate list still remains Croatia, Former Yugoslavia Republic and Turkey, being this last one the most controversial case in the EU.

Moreover, this confederation of countries makes their decision in treaties; known as primary legislation. These laws are decided by the institutional triangle formed by the Council of Ministers, European Parliament and the European commission. They represent the national governments, the people and a body independent of EU governments. One of the most dominant achievements of the EU is the single market and the economic and monetary union.

In the other hand, each citizens of the EU has the right to travel, live and work anywhere in Europe. Thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, every citizen of the Union has voice and votes in the local elections of their countries and in the elections to the European Parliament. Every citizen has to feel European with its own culture and education. This is why the EU has a lot of programs

to help the people to adapt in the different cultures; " We are not bringing together states, we are uniting people", (Monnet, 1952).

Turkey and its culture

To understand why Turkey has been one of the most controversial cases in the EU, one has to identify its background. Since the beginning its been know that Turkey wanted to be part of European Union. In fact they have 9% of its country inside Europe. It's neighbored to the west with Greece and Bulgaria.

This country combines a diverse and heterogeneous set of elements that form their rich and complicated culture. They have been one of the countries that have every extreme of Eastern and Western culture. It all started with the Ottoman system in which they cannot mix with each other and thereby retain separate ethnic and religious identities within the empire. When the empire fell and the Turkish Republic arose they adapted a unitary approach that forced all of the cultures to mix with each other to make the " Turkish" national and cultural identity. This was a total failure that derived in more separation between the traditional Muslim cultures versus the cosmopolitan modernity of Istanbul.

This gap made a collectivist political culture which is defined by fear of disagreement and disharmony, this derivates in citizen more concern as a group and not as individual justice. Furthermore, another aspect in this type of culture is in the way they dealt with conflict. In this case they have a lot of social division and they are suppressed by dominant elites resolving the entire disputes by the acceptance of authority figures. Since the beginning the Republic was well know as a father state, so this would then point to

deep commitment of the people to the state, since fathers are often perceived as incapable of wrong-doing especially by their children, or in this case the Turkish civil society.

This conflict in cultural differences has become a barrier to its entrance to the EU, so this past decade Turkey has determine itself to change it to a more Polyarchal political culture. This proposes a more predominant tolerance to religious and political values. Even though it's not perfect people started to see the change, especially as the Delegation in European Commission (2007) said " Concerning human rights and the protection of minorities, the legal framework to fight against torture and ill-treatment is established". When Turkey's political culture can finally assume the full colors of a Polyarchy, the democratic norms of the EU will be deeply and unshakably embedded in the minds of the Turkish people.

In addition, taking in mind the Christian-based Europe it is important to establish that Turkey's Muslim predominance makes a very important impact in the culture. The 99. 8% of the population is Muslim. They have a secular government but the religion is a really important factor to look at, because their traditions affects in the way people developed and in the form the government acts. It is a really divided society with a lot of really attached ways of seeing things that makes it a really complicated country. It's the fight between the past and the future.

These differences existing in one same culture and country have created a series of debates and concerns from the European Union's part, strongly questioning the candidacy of this half-Asian half-European country.

Turkey the eternal European Union Candidate?

Turkey is considered to be a country divided by two continents, Europe and Asia. It occupies a small part of southeastern Europe, all of the Anatolian Peninsula, and the rest of it is located in the Asian continent. The official negotiations between Turkey and the Union began in October of 2005, considering Turkey at last as a formal possible member of the EU in the future.

Turkey's story with the European Union goes back for years. Since 1963, when it was accepted for the first time as an associated member of the European Community, Turkey has tried to become a full member of this twenty-seven states union that comprises the world's wealthiest and most successful trading bloc.

Even though its intentions where known since the beginning, it wasn't until 1987 that Turkey officially applied for a full membership. Although they did not get what they really had in mind, Turkey's application strengthen their relations, meaning with this that efforts to widen relations intensified on both sides and actions to complete the Customs Union in time began again.

Further in time, in 1997 one could say that the Costumes Union was functioning acceptably and that it had demonstrated the ability Turkey had to adjust to the EU standards in many areas, but that didn't prevented the commission to cite numerous political issues as pre-conditions for moving forward their relations.

It is easy to imply that EU's claims, saying that all candidates would be evaluated according to the same objective criteria and that there would be

no discrimination in their evaluation, made Turkey find the Commission's approach unjust and prejudicial.

It wasn't until 2005 that negotiations formally began and have extended until today with different kinds of issues or " excuses" from the European Commission. This has given hope to some Turks, as Gluf News said in Turkey's European Membership (2008): " No one expects this to happen for at least ten years, but there is no denying that this is a significant moment in European history. No country that has started the process of EU accession has ever failed to be granted membership. (...)."

Barriers to Turkey's EU entrance

As said before, the relations between Turkey and the EU date back since their application for an association in 1959. The problem of its geographical location is not the only barrier this country is facing when talking about becoming a full-integrated member of the European Union.

Some of the arguments against Turkish's membership to the EU include their public opinion progressively turning against EU, arguing that their relations are not based on reciprocity and shared interest. Saying that the EU is known to benefit more than Turkey, seeing from these relations with not established motivation to help Turkey with some of its problems and main worries.

Furthermore, Turkey's large and poor population would directly and indirectly be a burden in the financial aspect to the other members, specifically referring to the EU budget, structural funds, flow of Turkish workers, among others. And it's important to take in mind that its population

would create preference in favor of Turkey in the European Union decision-making, making Turkey, in terms of the number of votes, the second most powerful state.

But maybe it can be said that the argument most sensitive centers on the cultural and religious differences existing between Turkey and this agglomeration of states. Cultural and religious mixture is one of the European Union self identities that recognizes and respects variety, but it is well known that Turkey's differences in this subject have been one of the biggest barriers for its entrance.

The differences in relations between people and nations and culture can be greater than disparity between groups. Things involved like education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, past experiences, affections shown in the home, and countless of other factors affect without doubt human behavior and its relation with other cultures.

This specific subject was more and more used as an argument in opposition to Turkey's integration into an organized Europe since at least 1987, when Turkey, already an associate member, made the application for full membership of the European Community.

This community, in the direction of a political unit with common democratic decision-making, as the European Union expressed, was based on common decisions according to values. With this it can be said that values are indispensable components of culture. The more cultural diversity there is in an association, the bigger probability there will be that either decisions don't

get made or minorities get outvoted by majorities creating with this more problems.

Therefore, the importance does not relay on how values, norms or goals are formulated but in the functional performance of the institutions dealing with them. Integrating a different social system is not only an incorporation of norms but also an integration of organizations.

When talking about culture, one can say it's known as an accessory of a society. Since this twenty-seven state community is not a society but more of an institution of states that represent different societies, it would be a mistake to speak of a culture in the strict sense of the word. One could rather think of a cultural area, maybe Christian-occidental, which linking it to a particular social system must not be done.

The Muslim preponderance in Turkey has complicated and slowed down the action process, even though their presence is in the whole Europe, still some argue that given Turkey's " Muslim character," Turkey is not even European at all. As R. Michel said (2005): " Beneath the thin veneer of the European-identity argument is a deep-seated but seldom acknowledged belief among the European elite that Muslims cannot be fully European."

Therefore the performances in music, poetry and arts, is not only what culture includes, but also the circumstances of everyday life. The difference will exist and be noticed, especially in the areas where religious norms and traditions have their impact on everyday life. But, according to the Turks, these are not always extremely important.

Discussing Turkish's membership to the EU with reference to cultural and religious factors, it is important to notice that Turkey is known as a secular country, as in a strict separation of religious and states affairs. However, Turkey is not the same as the rest secular countries, saying that the separation concerning the state and religion exist, but the religion is under the control of the government.

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that including Turkey to the process of incorporation to Europe will constitute an answer to one of the most well-known global problems now a days: Islam can co-exist with democracy and secularism. Giving out not only a global message, but also one that would be favorable for the immigrant population that forms the minorities in several EU states.

In addition, the human rights record that Turkey has had is another question that has risen regarding to its incision. Turkey, because of its Muslim yet secular standards, has to answer about human rights abuses in the form of inadequate vision of women's rights, unequal rights to the minority Kurds, and even nationalistic legislation of the Turkish Penal Code that reprimands people for insulting ' Turkishness'.

Consequently, in views of the tremendous efforts undertaken by the Turkish Government and society to adapt to European standards in all aspects, there is an expectation that in some time an irreversible step towards EU membership will be taken. They state that their society is ready to embrace Europe and that the fact that the ties between Turks living in Europe have helped the mentality in Turkey to change.

And finally, besides of all the mess between cultural problems and their entrance to the EU; Turkey would become a bridge between East and West, between Islam and Christianity, between different cultures and civilizations. This country will become an inspiration for all the Muslims in the west, that they have been pushed away by Europe. So in fact it would be a great revelation for the whole world because of the disparity of culture. It's a gun that can backfire, because Europe has always been the rulers above cultures, so giving space in the EU to a Muslim country would change this entire image, and can make them in some way to loose power.

To sum up, cultural differences have come to be known as one of the biggest barriers to Turkey's entrances to the EU. Its religion based, traditional and in ways dominant culture have created a fear of cultural disparities in Europeans.

Conclusion

Once analyzed the different positions that Turkey has played as a EU candidate and the long list of demands this conglomeration of states has asked, it poses a big question mark on the sincerity of the EU about accepting Turkey as a member.

None of the member states were given such a long list of ever lasting demands that are not part of the original list of criteria. Given these complicated issues, it seems that many of the EU member states have no intention of embracing Turkey as a member.

Having Turkey as a member of the EU offers a vital opportunity to start the process of understandement and support the potentially serious cultural

diversity along religious lines; and will decrease the future global problems. In so many ways it would be a factor de win-win but also loose, because the EU need´s Turkey´s handwork and borders but they don't need to bring more cultural problems to de EU members. If they accept them they will have to make a full recognition of its multi-cultural diversity and find a way to make them homogeneous.

Therefore, Turkish people already in the EU will have a big role to play in this process because they represent the cultural diversity. So the European Union will have to confront and encourage the area of national identity and intercultural relations.

As Stephen Twigg (2005) said, the effects of Turkish immigration into the EU are a part of the Union's future. There is no going back to an imagined mono-cultural past that tries to submerge immigrant communities into some imagined " pure and homogenous cultural identity"

As said before and to summarize this, if the European Union really wishes Turkey's future integration its tolerance for cultural diversity and acceptance should be open and acquiescent enough to let this country join its close and exclusive group.