

# “US VERSUS THEM, OVER AND OVER AGAIN...?”\* NATIONAL IDENTITY CONTESTATION IN TURKEY’S EU STALEMATE

*This article argues that a central reason for Turkey’s EU stalemate can be located in domestic debates over what constitutes an appropriate definition of Turkish national identity. Three oft-cited understandings of Turkish identity –Pan-Turkism, Kemalism, and Islamist Ottoman-nationalism– all have components that are incompatible with EU accession criteria. This article demonstrates how each understanding of “Turkishness” has obstructed Turkey’s EU membership bid for in its own way. Underlining that identities have an inherent capacity for change, however; the article argues that Turkey’s seemingly ossified “Us v. Them” relations at both the domestic and international levels contain the potential for reconciliation.*

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\* “Us v. them, over and over again,” in “Us v. Them,” by LCD Soundsystem, Sound of Silver, 20 March 2007.

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**T**he recent stalemate in Turkey's bid for EU membership puzzles and frustrates many. Armchair critics deriding those who ever believed the EU would actually accept Turkey as a member highlight obstacles from the EU side of negotiations, but cannot explain Turkey's failure to implement the requisite reforms despite the ruling party's articulation of EU membership as a primary foreign policy goal. Debates over whether Turkey is "European" enough for the EU therefore not only belie seriously worrying Orientalist undertones but also wrongly assume there is a single "Turkish" identity to be evaluated.

Stating this article's puzzle simply: the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* in Turkish, or AKP) undertook significant reforms towards its stated foreign policy goal of accession.<sup>1</sup> The EU also made an institutional commitment—or in Frank Schimmelfennig's language engaged in rhetorical entrapment<sup>2</sup>—to accept Turkey should it comply with accession criteria. What, therefore, accounts for this stall in accession progress? This article argues that explaining the dynamics behind Turkey's mired accession path requires problematizing not only the EU's hesitation but also a unitary actor understanding of Turkey.

While the practice of international relations is often depicted as a stark "Us versus Them" strategic competition among hostile actors, domestic debates often reflect internal ethnic, religious, and/or ideological divisions that become first politicized and then ossified in the form of Us v. Them as well. To get at the actual substance behind the political rhetoric of these debates, this article focuses on competing understandings of "Turkishness" held across Turkey's population. Turkishness has been argued to be racially, ethnically, linguistically, religiously, politically, and territorially-based—in different combinations at different times.<sup>3</sup>

This article argues that present-day Turkey encompasses multiple different understandings of Turkish identity, each of which prescribes appropriate standards of behavior and delineates "Us" and "Them" in particular ways. Examining how the appropriate behaviors and definitions of Turkey in relation to other states differ across these identity understandings can therefore provide insight into how Turkish identity debates at the domestic level affect Turkey's foreign policy. This article analyzes the impact of three oft-cited understandings of Turkish identity—Pan-Turkism,

1 The AKP's EU accession process has been cited as "the backbone of its domestic and foreign policy." Ali Resul Usul, "European Union Dimension," in Ümit Cizre (ed.), *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 189.

2 Schimmelfennig notes that "to the extent that Turkey complied with liberal-democratic norms, member states opposed to Turkish membership for economic or cultural reasons could not legitimately block the path to accession." Frank Schimmelfennig, "Entrapped Again: The Way to EU Membership Negotiations with Turkey," *International Politics*, Vol.46 (2009), p. 415.

3 Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Kemalism, and Islamist Ottoman-nationalism— on Turkey's EU relations. Finding components of each of these identities incompatible with EU accession criteria, the article locates a key explanation for Turkey's EU stalemate in domestic identity debates.

As a subjective and shape-shifting concept, the study of any identity poses significant challenges. In the interest of generating concrete findings for informed policy-making, employing a clear analytical framework helps in understanding the impact of Turkey's numerous identities on its foreign policy initiatives. Taking a cue from political scientist Rawi Abdelal's analysis of national identity debates, and in the spirit of developing a coherent and replicable model for the study of identity,<sup>4</sup> this article examines Pan-Turkism, Kemalism, and Islamist Ottoman-nationalism in terms of the actual stuff or "content" of these identities.

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Breaking down any of Turkey's competing identity understandings into specific components of identity content essentially involves defining what it means to be a Turk—the word itself being a subject of intense debate in the ongoing constitutional reform process<sup>5</sup>— for the members of a group sharing a common definition of Turkish national identity. This involves defining a particular identity's four basic components—constitutive norms, relational meanings, social purposes, and cognitive worldviews—to help make this nebulous concept easier to grasp. In even more basic terms, constitutive norms provide guidelines for membership and appropriate behavior for those members— who belongs to the group and how should they behave? Relational meaning defines the group in relation to other specific groups— how should they get along with others? The social purpose of an identity defines the group's interests and goals— what should they strive to achieve? Finally, cognitive worldview provides a sense of the group's broader place in the world— how should others perceive the group's role in the international community?

In applying this idea to Turkey in concrete foreign policy terms, consider a European-oriented understanding of Turkish identity commonly offered by

4 Abdelal et al, (eds.), *Measuring Identity: A Guide to Social Scientists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

5 “The Issue of ‘Turkish’ and ‘Türkiyeli’ (‘Turkey National’; ‘From Turkey’),” *Today's Zaman*, 11 January 2011.

Turkey's advocates of EU accession. Breaking this identity down into its constitutive components as outlined above we see that it is arguably based on i) geographical positioning in Europe and shared European cultural norms of behavior, ii) civilizational equality with and therefore natural inclusion in Europe, iii) cultivation of economic and political ties with "Western" countries, and iv) Turkey's role as defender of the West against Soviet/communist incursion or radical Islam (depending on the time frame, as identities are produced and shaped by social context).

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Such an identity understanding of Turkey might seem obvious for those who see Turkey's rightful place in Europe, and might easily be expected to prescribe pursuit of EU and NATO membership as natural foreign policy priorities for Turkey as a collective member in a Western "Ingroup" against an Eastern, Soviet, or radically Islamist "Outgroup". Conclusions from what seems obvious, however, invariably benefit from a closer look.

To paraphrase Abdelal, what we want depends on who we think we are.<sup>6</sup> For those with even slight variations in their own understanding of Turkish identity, therefore, foreign policy goals look vastly different.

In clear contestation with the "Eurocentric" identity understanding of Turkey as outlined above is one that could be defined as "Pan-Turkic" (*Turançı*). Those holding a Pan-Turkic understanding of Turkishness define themselves in opposition to Europe and subscribe to beliefs incongruent with European norms. Minority rights, for example, are prominently emphasized by the EU and are a constitutive norm of the Eurocentric Turkey identity understanding. Adherents to Pan-Turkism, however, have rejected the recognition of minority rights (and even the idea that groups like Kurds, Laz, and Circassians are indeed minorities). The Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* in Turkish, or MHP) —a main political advocate of Pan-Turkism— specifically cited extension of minority rights to the Kurdish population as compromising "Turkishness" in denouncing Turkey's EU membership bid.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Rawi Abdelal (2009), p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> Sinan Ciddi, *Kemalism in Turkish Politics: The Republican People's Party, Secularism, and Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 91.

An anti-European dimension also comprises the relational meaning component of the Pan-Turkic identity understanding. The nature of relations between the EU and Turkey from this perspective is one of exclusion and resentment. Rather than identifying as a member of a larger European group, or having friendly relations with Europe, subscribers to a Pan-Turkic identity understanding combat what they perceive as “unfounded and unjust” rejection from Europe<sup>8</sup> by identifying themselves along Pan-Turkic lines instead.

The social purpose and cognitive worldview of Pan-Turkic components –while less overtly anti-EU– also prescribe a Turkish foreign policy that focuses substantial economic and diplomatic resources on Central Asia, arguably to the detriment of Turkey's EU relations. This social purpose component privileges promoting the well-being of all Turkic peoples as well as striving for unity among these members.<sup>9</sup> While a single political institution governing all Turkic peoples may never materialize out of the pan-Turkic “romantic desire for Turkish unity,”<sup>10</sup> subscribers to this identity understanding share a belief in the desirability and even the naturalness of a union of Turkic peoples. Süleyman Demirel's –then the President of the Republic– statement that “our history, which was divided by various events, has overcome the obstacles in its path and has returned to its *natural* course,” rhetorically echoes this belief.<sup>11</sup> Many current MHP and (more extreme) Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* in Turkish, or BBP) supporters continue to profess an understanding of Turkish national identity that is inextricably linked with its Turkic neighbors.

The cognitive worldview of a Pan-Turkic identity therefore considers Turkey's role in the region as that of “big brother” (*ağabey* in Turkish) to its long-lost Turkic siblings of the former Soviet Union. Demirel's references to the “rebirth” of the five “brotherly republics” as well as a “genuine spirit of pride and joy in Turkey” upon their liberation<sup>12</sup> connoted a warmly fraternal connection between members of a Pan-Turkic identity understanding, if only in the service of foreign policy efforts. In an attempt to promote this relationship, Turkey supported these Turkic republics in their initial years as independent states. This support included providing substantial economic aid and establishing schools and universities to “teach” the Turkic republics how they should behave as new/newly restored members of a Turkic Ingroup.

8 David Kushner, “Self-Perception and Identity in Contemporary Turkey,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.32, No.2 (1997), p. 231.

9 Kushner documents an “open and growing concern with the fate and well-being of all Turkic communities.” See: David Kushner (1997), p. 228.

10 Bülent Aras, “Turkey's Policy in the Former Soviet South: Assets and Options,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol.1, No.1 (2000), p. 38.

11 *TRT TV*, Ankara, 18 October 1994, quoted in “Daily Report – West Europe,” *FBIS*, 20 October 1994. Emphasis added.

12 David Kushner (1997), p. 228.

Whether and how the goals prescribed by a group, that shares a particular identity understanding –i.e., its social purpose– are realized at the international level depends on a process of identity contestation. This process essentially takes the shape of an *Us v. Them* contest over which understanding of identity can gain the most support. In this process, each identity group firstly struggles to persuade more potential members to “buy into” its particular understanding of identity domestically. In the Pan-Turkic case, this means trying to convince Turks that an understanding of Turkishness based on shared Central Asian Turkic lineage and culture is the correct and legitimate way to identify as a Turkish person, and that identifying oneself as European constitutes a denial of one’s true heritage. Domestic identity groups also attempt to “sell” or “convince” groups abroad that they, too, share this identity. Demirel’s rhetorical overtures to what he framed as brothers sharing a common pan-Turkic identity noted above demonstrate this attempt well.

When applying a lens of identity content and contestation to this foreign policy initiative, it becomes clear why Turkey’s “brotherly” outreaches to the Turkic Central Asian republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union failed so miserably. The Pan-Turkic identity understanding was (and remains) relatively unpopular domestically, as its supporters are often associated with ultranationalist (*ülküciü*) fringe groups and many Turks did (and perhaps to a lesser extent today still do) consider themselves European.<sup>13</sup>

The military and main opposition Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* in Turkish, or CHP), for example, favored a more European-oriented foreign policy and thus deplored the coalition government’s decision in the early 1990s to invest in such “economic backwaters”.<sup>14</sup> Pan-Turkism was equally unpopular in the Central Asian republics. Having been under the yoke of Soviet rule for nearly 70 years, these republics were little enthused by the prospect of a big brother rushing in and teaching them how to be Turkic. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Uzbek President Islam Karimov were both categorically dismissive of the idea.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear from this analysis that Pan-Turkism would have greatly hindered Turkey-EU relations had it gained greater political support at home and been received more positively abroad. What of Turkey’s other, more widespread identity understandings however? Can breaking down the identity understanding shared by the critics of Pan-Turkism mentioned above, for example, provide insight into Turkey’s stalled

13 “Avrupa Birliği’nde Kamuoyu,” [Public Opinion in the European Union], *European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 74*, 2010, p. 5.

14 Fuller et al., *Turkey’s New Geopolitics: From the Balkans to Western China* (Oxford: Westview Press/RAND: 1993), p. 67.

15 Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the End of the Cold War* (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 286-7.

EU accession process? Like answers to most questions as complex as those of identity contestation, the answer is: partly.

Those who have objected to and at times successfully obstructed some of the AKP's EU-oriented reforms are indeed often encompassed under a "Kemalist" identity, including members of the military and the CHP as noted above, as well as (traditionally) high-ranking members of the judiciary and academic community. This identity understanding can arguably be broken down into constitutive norms derived from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's six guiding principles: republicanism, nationalism, secularism, populism, statism, and reformism/revolutionism; a relational meaning that

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orients Turkey toward the West and away from its Ottoman legacy;<sup>16</sup> and a social purpose that prescribes the protection of Atatürk's principles as well as the absolute maintenance of the borders of the Turkish Republic. The cognitive worldview component is tricky, given this identity's primarily inward focus; derived from a shared principle of non-intervention outside of Anatolia,<sup>17</sup> a "non-aggressor" Turkey would be a fair characterization of the Kemalists' view.

Adherence to the norms of appropriate behavior prescribed by this Kemalist identity understanding –despite its Western/European relational meaning– has in fact obstructed EU-mandated reforms in areas such as minority rights and freedom of religion. AKP-led reforms that were aimed at providing language rights to ethnic minority groups and increasing freedom of religious expression in the public sphere –issues repeatedly cited by international NGOs and EU reports as imminently in need of reform if Turkey is to comply with the Copenhagen criteria– were met with vociferous opposition from Kemalists.

The reforms' perceived threats to secularism provoked the strongest objections, a response that becomes understandable when viewed through the lens of identity content and contestation. As the party founded by Atatürk, the CHP –and in particular its more overtly nationalist (*ulusalci*) wing– and the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk*

16 Kevin Robins, "Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe," in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996).

17 Morton Abramowitz, "Dateline Ankara: Turkey After Ozal," *Foreign Policy*, No.9 (Summer 1993).

*Silahlı Kuvvetleri* in Turkish, or TSK) both consider the task of protecting Atatürk's principles such as secularism to be a fundamental social purpose of their respective institutions. Tellingly using the language of contestation, a post on the TSK's website in 2007—in response to the AKP's nomination to the presidency of Islamist Abdullah Gül—declared “it should not be forgotten that the [TSK] is a *side* in this debate and is a staunch *defender* of secularism.”<sup>18</sup>

Viewed in this context, the AKP's 2008 legislative attempt to lift Turkey's so-called “headscarf ban” in the name of religious freedom and the right to education<sup>19</sup> can be understood as antithetical to core constitutive norms and social purposes of Kemalist identity. This *de facto* ban was “fiercely defended” by the TSK, later upheld by the Turkish Constitutional Court, and enforced by the majority of university rectors even following the AKP's legislation allowing the headscarf.<sup>20</sup> The CHP, explicitly using language of *Us v. Them* contestation, “demonized” those who called for the ban to be lifted as religious reactionaries.<sup>21</sup>

This self-ascribed institutional duty entails not only protecting secularism from the encroachment of religion in politics, but also enforcing the ideas that Kurds do not constitute a separate minority from Turks and that Alevi Muslims' beliefs do not constitute a legitimate form of Islam separate from the Sunni Islam institutionalized within the state. In a speech revealingly entitled “There Are Those Who Do Not Want Turkey in the EU,” Commander of Armed Forces Academy and Brigadier General Halil Şimşek declared that the EU Accession Partnership Document aimed at “breaking up our country in the name of ‘cultural rights’, ‘broadcasting in mother tongue’ and ‘educational rights’.”<sup>22</sup> The Kemalist identity's social purpose of protecting Turkey's borders traditionally shaped the CHP's non-recognition of minorities and refusal to accept EU-mandated minority rights reforms in a similar fashion.<sup>23</sup> These policies were informed by a belief that recognition of minorities such as the Kurds will spur separatist movements that would threaten the territorial integrity of the Republic. Both the belief and the policies that followed from it have begun to change, as discussed below.

18 Cited in Ümit Cizre, “Introduction,” in Ümit Cizre (ed.) (2008), p. 189. Emphasis added.

19 The AKP-sponsored legislation amended Articles 10 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution in order to prevent the denial of public services and higher education to individuals based on anything not explicitly banned by law. This was meant to counteract an interpretation of the Constitution known as a “headscarf ban” that justified requiring women to remove headscarves before entering campuses. However, the Constitutional Court annulled the amendment. “*Türban Düzenlemesi İptal Edildi*,” [Turban Amendment is Annulled], *NTVMSNBC.com*, 5 June 2008.

20 See: “Rectors Disobey Lifting of Headscarf Ban,” *University World News*, 8 March 2008, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=2008022910002217>

21 Berk Esen and Sinan Ciddi, “Turkey's Republican People's Party and the 2011 Elections: Politics of ‘Change’?,” Forthcoming Publication, p. 2.

22 Cited in Ümit Cizre (ed.), (2008), p. 224. Emphasis added.

23 “*Yeni Hedefler Yeni Türkiye*,” [New Goals New Turkey], *CHP Party Program 1994*.



Standing in contravention of EU human rights reforms, the historical cultural suppression of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey and the restriction of religious expression have been legitimized in the name of protecting Atatürk's legacy under a Kemalist ideology. This legitimization represents one –but by no means the only– understanding of Turkish national identity content. But here's the problem with many *en vogue* discussions of Kemalism: they forget Kemalism's own principle of reformism/revolutionism – i.e., the process of replacing traditional institutions and concepts with modern ones. Inherent in any identity, and explicitly in Kemalism, is the capacity for change in identity content over time; in essence, how Kemalists understand what it means to be Turkish can, and has, changed.

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Norms of behavior, definitional membership criteria, prescribed relations with other actors, and the definitions of group interests are all open to either reproduction or innovation. Actors still possessing many of the components of the Kemalist identity outlined above –Atatürk's principles as constitutive norms, Turkey's understanding of itself as part of the West as its relational meaning, and the protection of Turkey's borders as its fundamental social purpose– exhibit revised understandings of what are acceptable behaviors in line with this identity.

Under the new leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, for example, the CHP has increased its Alevi representation within the party, revised its position *vis-à-vis* Kurds to address the minority rights question “head on”<sup>24</sup> and reduced its opposition to the wearing of the headscarf in universities. While such moves might be dismissed as pure electoral strategy, it is important to keep in mind steps parties cannot take due to their identity constraints, even if they might garner more votes. Can we imagine the AKP offering subsidies to drinking establishments in the hopes of gaining support in Izmir? Big-tent party it may be; all-inclusive it is not.

To the extent that Turkey's identities can in fact become more inclusive, the *Us v. Them* dynamics currently characterizing both Turkey's domestic politics and international relations can be ameliorated. Indeed, the identities outlined here are not

<sup>24</sup> Berk Esen and Sinan Ciddi, p. 18.

mutually exclusive. Breaking down identities can show elements that are shared among groups as well as those that are contested. As broad of an electoral base as the AKP enjoys, however, the identity understanding it shares with its followers and which shapes its policies domestically and abroad appears far from inclusive or even tolerant. Indeed, it is the policies prescribed by and justified in the name of what might be termed “Islamist Ottoman-nationalism” are not only provoking immense contestation within Turkey, but are currently the biggest threat to Turkey’s EU membership.

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A quick breakdown of the components of this identity reveals the reason for this. Islamist Ottoman-nationalism’s constitutive norms include social conservatism, Muslim piety, and firm rule by a patriarchal figure. Its relational meaning consists of cultural solidarity and historical ties with other Muslim countries and former Ottoman territories – with ambivalence bordering on resentment toward the West. This identity group views its social purpose as promoting the expansion of Islam in the public sphere domestically and glob-

ally, while reasserting Turkey’s historical legitimacy as a great civilization independent of the West. Finally, Islamist Ottoman-nationalism’s cognitive worldview sees Turkey as both a powerful regional player and a uniting force in the Islamic world.

While the AKP government officially remains part of the EU accession process, its actions reflect identity components outlined above that do not align with EU conditionality. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s very recent hint that Turkey might be more interested in joining the Shanghai Five than the EU,<sup>25</sup> as well as his insinuation to Jordan’s King Abdullah that democracy is merely a vehicle rather than a goal,<sup>26</sup> suggest the AKP is not fully committed to the EU’s reforms. Despite initial promises to the Alevi community, for example, the AKP’s gestures to non-Sunni Muslims remain precisely that: gestures.<sup>27</sup> Statistics regarding the increasing number of jailed journalists, academics, and artists are both worrying and familiar to followers of Turkey. The recent sentencing of pianist Fazıl Say for remarks deemed

25 Sedat Ergin, “Our New Foreign Policy Target: The Shanghai Five,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 January 2013.

26 “Ürdün Kralı’nın Erdoğan’a İki Yüzlülüğü,” [Jordanian King’s Hypocrisy to Erdoğan], *Haber7*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.haber7.com/dis-politika/haber/1003670-urdun-kralinin-erdogana-karsi-iki-yuzlulugu>

27 Daan Bauwens, “Alevi Future Bleak Despite Equality Moves,” *Inter Press Service News Online*, 16 February 2010.

offensive to Islam is yet another source of concern.<sup>28</sup> Multiple attempts by the AKP to legislate based on its norm of social conservatism in areas ranging from women's rights to television viewing further demonstrate the incompatibility of its Islamist Ottoman-nationalist understanding of Turkish identity, and in particular the policies this identity prescribes for Turkey's governance, with EU accession criteria.

As the initial driving force behind EU reforms, the AKP has in recent years become its greatest obstacle. This is due largely to continuing electoral successes giving it the confidence to legislate more and more based on its own identity understanding – to show its true self, if you will. This identity, like Kemalism, has also changed over time both in its content and in the fervor with which it is supported and defended. This evolution demonstrates the potential for change in how a group defines itself and its relations with others any direction, including one in which norms of group membership become more inclusive and relational meanings between groups become more amicable.

Identities at the domestic and international levels become constructed and ossified through contestation, but can be altered through other forms of communication. Rather than becoming further entrenched in *Us v. Them* debates perpetuated over and over again by those seeking political gain from the defeat of the “Other,” the process by which differences become demonized, should be examined. A critical assessment of the concept of “Us” –how did we come to define ourselves as we do– and a reconsideration of how “They” became constituted as a hostile “Them” creates possibilities for new forms of intergroup understandings and thus for new terms of interaction shaping relations domestically and abroad.

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28 Şebnem Arsu, “Pianist's Posts on Twitter Spur Penalty from Turkey,” *The New York Times*, 15 April 2013.



# ***Turkey and its Neighborhood: Trending East or West?***

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