Measuring Cultural Differences and the Significance of Public Perceptions: Studying the European Union’s Relationship with Turkey

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For the 2012-2013 term at Bowdoin, I spent a large amount of my time trying to answer one question: why has Turkey been so consistently and, at times, vehemently rejected from the European Union for a multitude of economic, institutional, security, and cultural reasons while similar issues have been overlooked in the past when accepting EU membership bids of other states such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Spain? I largely developed this question during a semester I spent abroad in Europe on an EU-focused program in 2011. While traveling between EU institutions, I was struck by the interesting discord I noted between the very liberal-democratic rhetoric of the EU and the far more unreceptive way that Europeans I encountered spoke about Turkish immigrants and Turkey’s prospects of accession. Upon my return to Bowdoin and under the mentorship of Professor Laura Henry, I was lucky enough to get to examine this question in quite some depth through the completion of an Honors Project.

I began my analysis by extensively studying existing literature on Turkey’s EU accession process. Generally unsatisfied by many of the economic, institutional, and security based arguments against Turkish accession, I focused my research on those pertaining to the “clash of civilizations” between Turkey and Europe. Samuel Huntington’s famous thesis, while largely contestable, provided an interesting starting point for exploring how European citizens perceive Turkey as culturally incompatible. My focus on the European public’s perceptions of Turkey in particular was driven by the currently increasing attention on the “democratic deficit” in the EU, leading to the rising significance of public opinion due to movements for referenda and calls for greater citizen involvement at the EU level. Throughout the course of the year, I also examined European Values Survey and Eurobarometer data to gauge not only how Europeans perceived Turkey, but whether their perceptions were based on actual value differences between the two societies.

During the preliminary phase of developing my honors thesis, I applied to attend the 2013 Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union and was lucky enough to be able to fund this trip through the Peter J. Grua and Mary G. O’Connell Research Award. Using the research I had been engaged in for the year, I submitted a (very) abridged version of my honors thesis for this conference and made the trip out to California in April.

Presenting my paper was invaluable. Receiving feedback from EU specialists and being forced to defend my thesis helped me nuance my arguments and even prepare for my final honors defense. An additional benefit from this conference was that my paper was selected for the conference publication and I was thus awarded a fully-funded spot on an EU study tour to Brussels for the following summer. On this study tour, I was able to visit multiple EU institutions, European think-tanks, and speak with many EU and American politicians, diplomats, and technocrats.

Faculty Mentor: Laura Henry

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