

# Feeling “European” and European identity: Public Perceptions in Turkey – EU Relations

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**Abstract.** *The debate over the emergence of a European identity and its reconciliation with the different national identities of the European citizens has raised numerous questions and a range of opinions and theories, especially during the last years. In this context, the integration of Turkey not only poses a series of challenges, but it has also crucial consequences for the future of Europe and for shaping the European identity. By debating on Turkey’s membership, Europe debates also on its own identity. Starting from the existing theoretical background and using the empirical data available through the quantitative researches made over the recent years, this article brings forth a comparative analysis of the perceptions related to the European identity and to the integration of Turkey in the EU. How “European” people feel, how Europeans perceive Turkey integration and how Turkish people see the European Union are the main questions this article tries to give answers to. As methodology, this study is based on the official data of the Eurobarometer. We chose for comparison data from Germany, France, Romania, Turkey, as well as the EU average, where available.*

**Keywords:** European identity, Turkey EU accession, perception of Europeans about Turkey, perceptions of Turkish about EU.

**Cuvinte cheie:** identitate europeană, aderarea Turciei la UE, percepția europenilor despre Turcia, percepțiile turcilor asupra UE.

## Introduction

The debate over the emergence of a European identity and its reconciliation with the different national identities of the European citizens has raised numerous questions and a range of opinions and theories, especially during the last years. In this context, the integration of Turkey not only poses a series of challenges, but it also has crucial consequences for the future of Europe and for shaping the European identity. According to Baban (2006, 2) Europe, in fact, is deciding about its own future while attempting to decide the future

of Turkey’s integration to EU. Identity-based arguments have been used by the opponents of Turkey’s integration, although, generally speaking, the European identity is seen as related rather with (or even defined mostly by) non-cultural variables, such as democracy and a functional market economy or economic welfare.

Thus, starting from the existing theoretical background and using the empirical data available through the quantitative researches made over the recent years; this article brings forth a comparative analysis of the perceptions related to European identity and to Turkey’s integration in the

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## Data collection and methods

This study is based on the official data of the Eurobarometer. We also used the results of a large opinion poll conducted in September 2009, under the EU – Turkey Civil Society Dialogue program.

We chose for comparison data from Germany, France, Romania, Turkey, as well as the EU average, where available. Our choice is both objectively and subjectively motivated. On one hand, besides being major powers within the European Union, Germany and France have been quite vocal in using identity arguments to question the integration of Turkey in the European Union. On the other hand, we chose to see also how Romanian public feels about EU, in terms of expectations, identity and its enlargement.

## Discussions

### European identity: How “European” do you feel? National vs. European identity; elements of European identity

One of the main questions, when it comes to European identity, is its relation to national identity, whether they are conflicting or complementary and which of them would prevail. Before shortly examining some of the concepts and theoretical approaches relevant to this subject, we should emphasize that identity itself should be seen as dynamic, not static (Jacobs and Maier, 1998, 3), evolving in time and being shaped by different contexts and environments. On

the other hand, an individual can have multiple identities, in so far that different reference points can be found for defining the identity. Any individual can belong to different groups and communities, which may represent complementary sources of identity. As individuals may have multiple identities, specific circumstances determine which of them become more relevant at a particular time. Finally, the individual identity is constructed within its cultural environment. The real question is how the dominant reference points of individual identity change over time and with the changing of institutional environment.

These are the premises that the examination of the relation between national identity and European identity should take into account. When it comes to describing this relation, two main approaches are most relevant.

Smith (1992, 73) emphasizes the conservation of the national identity as it is established by the ethnical cultural values and should be sacrificed at the expense of European identity.

Cinpoes (2008, 8), referring to ideas of Habermas, considers that national and European identities are compatible and can coexist, as the bases of identification with the European community are radically different from those with the national community.

One sees national identity and European identity as mutually exclusive or competing to one another, while the latter sees them as compatible and coexistable.

### What quantitative research says?

“How often do you think yourself as European” is a question meant to assess the overall perception and personal identification as European. In September 2006, 17% of the Germans and 20% of the French declared they “often” feel like being European, while 40% of the Germans and 35% of the French had the same sense of identity “sometimes”. These results show that more

than a half of the respondents recognize and feel themselves as European, at least sometimes. The same trend is confirmed for Romania, although at that time this country was not a full EU member. Among Romanians, 11% “often” and 46% “sometimes” felt Europeans. As far as Turkey is concerned, a year after the beginning of accession negotiation, 68% of the respondents declared they never felt European, 20% did “rarely” and only 9% “often”.

When compared to previous Euro barometer results, back from 1992, a growing

awareness of European identity is obvious. As an average, the percent of those who declared they never had a sense of being European dropped from 51% to 43%, with a significant 18% difference in the case of Germany.

An important part of the population (more than a half in Germany and France) see themselves with two defining identities, both national and European, which shows that, in these cases, the two distinct identities are not seen as irreconcilable, but rather as complementary.

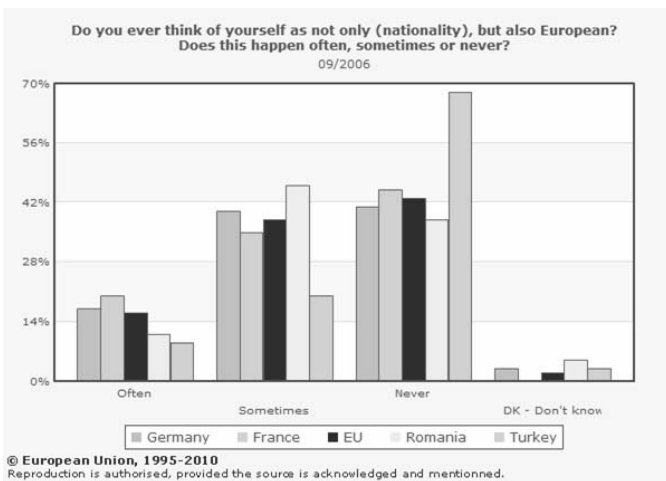
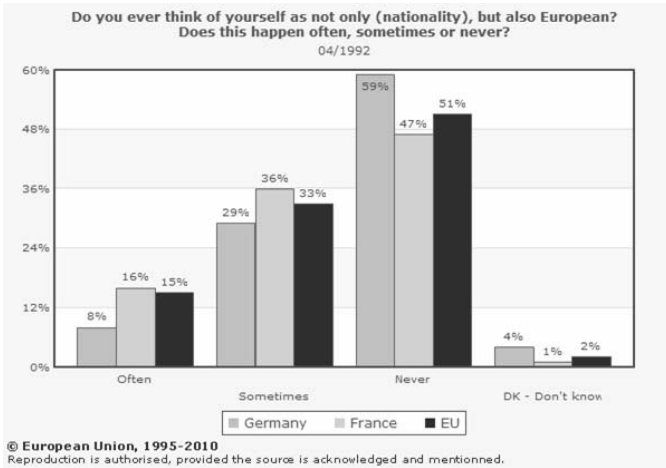


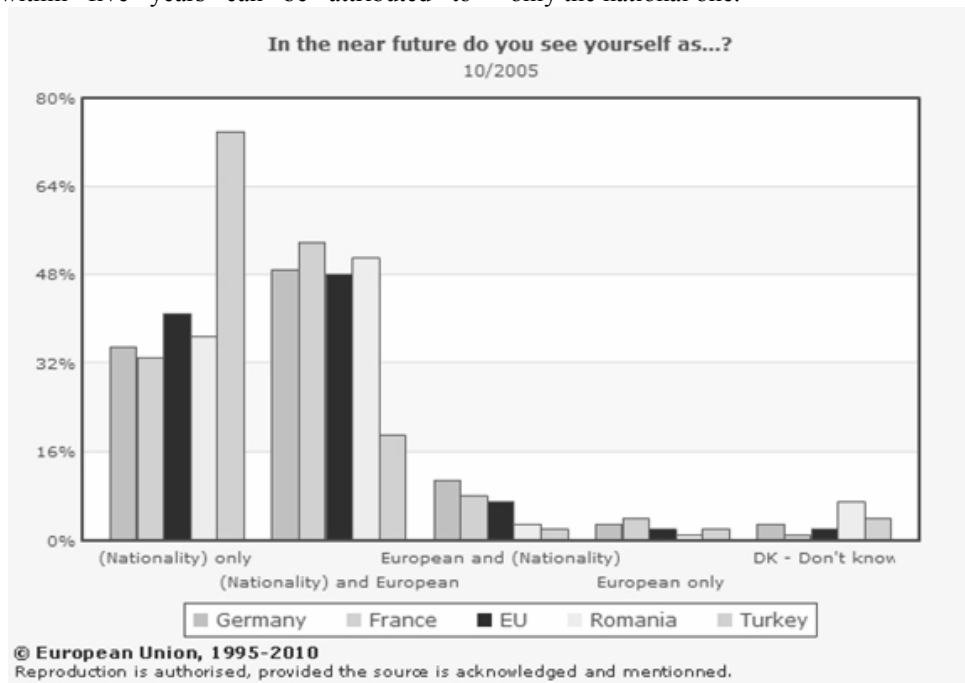
Figure 1: *Do you feel European?* – Eurobarometer, April 1992 – September 2006.

A more recent measurement, made in June 2010, revealed interesting results and the persistence of the national feeling. The figures showed the prevalence of national identification, when compared to the European one. The results are even more interesting, when compared to 2005 measurement, as they reveal a reinforcement of national feeling, as now more people than five years ago appreciate they define themselves exclusively by their national identity in the future. Thus, in 2005, 35% of the Germans, 33% of the French, 37% of the Romanians (and a 41% EU average) considered that they would be defined by nationality only, while in June 2010 the numbers increased to 39% of the Germans, 42% of the French, 50% of the Romanians (with a EU average of 46%).

The 5% increase in the EU average within five years can be attributed to

several factors. Firstly, it took some time for the people in EU countries to adapt to the new identity until they get used to it. Secondly, the advantages of being “European” became more obvious as the opportunities became available to many, such as the case of Romanian workers who had new job opportunities in other EU countries. As Sandu (2009) explains, visa free regime, traveling, studying, and export-import opportunities which are offered by EU, can be regarded as some of the factors increasing the feeling of “belonging” to the new identity of “European”.

The figures available for Turkey are from 2005, the year when this country began accession negotiations. At that point, only very few of the respondents considered the European identity as defining for themselves, while 74% took into account only the national one.



**Figure 2:** *In the near future do you see yourself as...?* Eurobarometer, October 2005 – June 2010.

In principle, the ‘withering away’ of national identity is not a prerequisite for the

construction of European identity (Cinpoes, 2008, 11).

Thus, nation could still be the place of "affectivity", where the same history and culture are shared, while the European public space could become the place for "law". The national identity, together with its historical, ethnic and cultural dimensions, could be separated from civic and political participation. The patriotic feeling could thus be connected not only to a particular nation, but to the state of law principle itself. Conceived as a pure civic practice, detached from national identity, constitutional patriotism, in Habermas's terms, could reshape identities (Schnapper, 2001, 168).

Bruter, who conceptually confirmed and empirically demonstrated the complementarity between various political identities, considers that there is no reason why there should be any contradiction between a European identity and a national identity. Citizens identifying civically or culturally to Europe can, at the same time, look at their nation-state as another relevant political system for them and feel closer to fellow nationals, for example, than to other Europeans. In exactly the same way, national identity will not prevent citizens from feeling closer to fellow town persons than to fellow nationals from a different town (Bruter, 2005, 166).

Such an approach, based on complementarity of identities and relating European identity to a "civic" conception of "Europeanness" and to "constitutional patriotism", could provide a more favorable background for Turkey integration, as questions related to history, culture and ethnicity come second.

At the time being, data show a rather low feeling of "being European" and a higher sense of national identity among

Turkish people, when related to the European Union.

## How Europeans feel about Turkey

In 1995, Marc Gale, a former member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee in the 1990's wrote a book entitled *Turkey, the disliked country*. The title gave a glimpse of the perception that has persisted for a long time regarding Turkey integration. A number of opinion polls conducted in Turkey and Europe confirmed this supposition. Thus, a 2006 survey, in nine EU member states (UK, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain) measured the degree of "affection" for certain countries, ranking from "0", meaning "no affection", and 100 – "full affection". Among these states, Turkey was one of the least liked countries, with an average "affection grade" of 42, above only Palestine (38) and Iran (28). European "affection" towards China (46) and Russia (47) remained low, but above that for Turkey.

One of the consequences of this perception is that Turkey is one of the least wanted countries, when it comes to European integration. In April 2008, only 16% of Germans and 19% of French favored Turkey integration, while more than 70%, in both cases, were against it. Turkey seems to receive more public support from the Romanian respondents, who declared themselves supporters of Turkey's integration in the same percent as the Turks themselves.

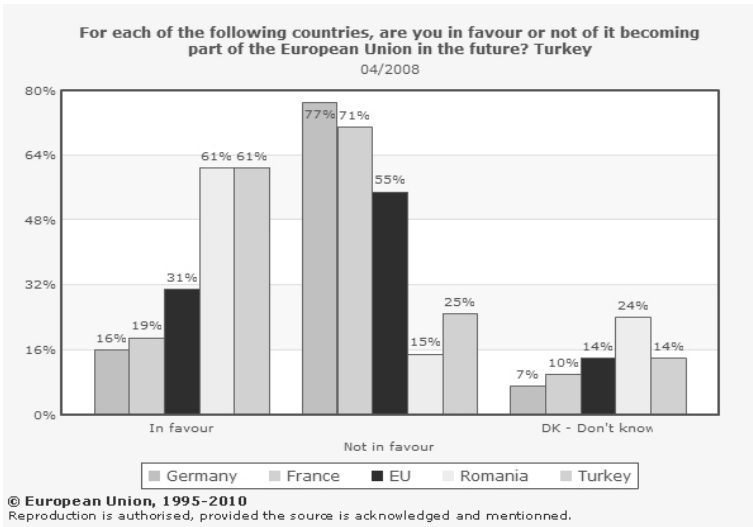


Figure 3: In favor of Turkey becoming EU member – Eurobarometer, April 2008.

### How Turkey feels about EU?

The public opinion in Turkey is divided into three relatively equal groups of perception, with 37% of the population having a good and very good impression about EU, 33% regarding the European

Union very or fairly negative, while the rest is either neutral or has no opinion. In comparison, EU has a good image inside the member states, with very high numbers in Romania, where 54% of the respondents declared they see in fairly good or very good terms the European construction.

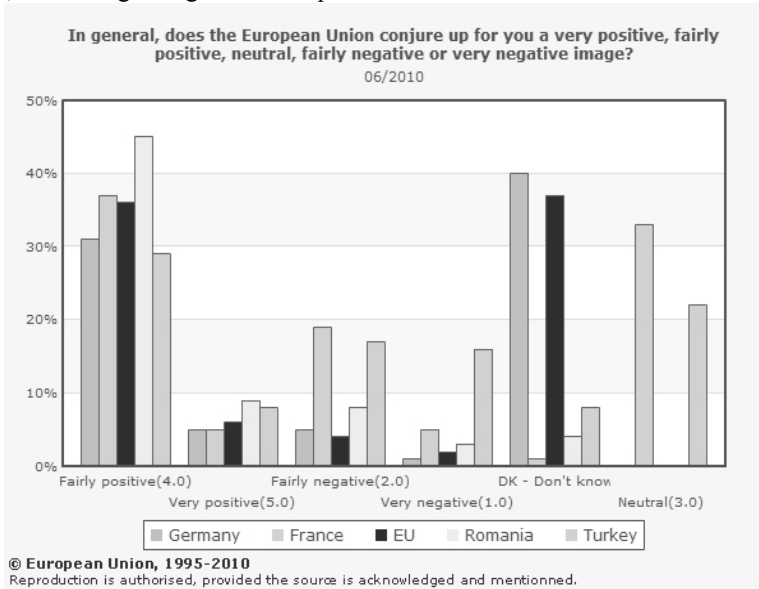


Figure 4: Image of the EU – Eurobarometer, June 2010.

When it comes to fears related to the building of EU, Turkish people keep certain reluctance. Half of them considered that EU membership might trigger the loss of national identity and culture, with only 25% declaring they would not be afraid of such an issue. As a comparison, the same fear was expressed by 39% of the Germans, 41% of the French and only 22% of Romanians (with a 39% EU average). However, this numbers show that a certain concern about losing one's identity and culture inside a larger, unified European construction, is specific not only to a non-member country, with a different culture, such as Turkey, but also to important parts of the

population in member countries with strong ties to the EU project.

Romanians seemed less concerned about identity issues or about the consequences of EU integration for the national identity and culture.

Same trends were visible also when it comes to a complementary issue, that of national language. Early data from October 2005, showed 52% of the Turkish people feared their "language would be used less and less" as a consequence of building the European Union, while 42% of the Germans and French people feared the same thing. EU integration raised such a concern only for 23% of the Romanians.

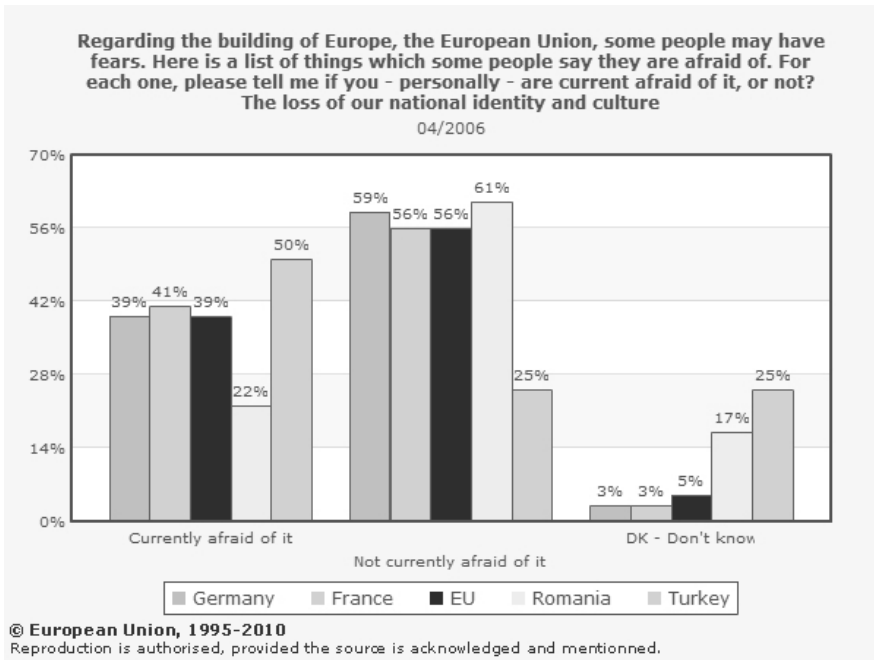


Figure 5: *Fear of the loss of national identity and culture – Eurobarometer, April 2006.*

## Conclusions

The article examined the identity-oriented public perceptions in Turkey – EU relation, by using available official data in four countries: Germany, France, Romania

and Turkey, as well as the EU average. The data were interpreted in the light of several important questions: how the citizens of these countries feel when it comes to their national and European identity, which one prevails, how they see themselves in the

future and whether they fear losing their own cultural and national identity, as part of the European Union. At the same time, by focusing on Turkey – EU relations, we examined how Turkey “feels” about EU and how EU “feels” about Turkey. In order to analyze the presented data, it was used the existing theoretical background concerning national and European identity.

Several conclusions could be drawn from analyzing these public perceptions. A sense of “*Europeanness*” is, indeed, emerging and more people in the EU relate themselves not only to their national identity, but also to the European one. The two different identities are not conflicting, but complementary. The national identity, based on culture, history, ethnicity cannot

be erased and remains the major reference point, but it can be completed by the European one.

This “European feeling” is less shared by Turkish people, who keep a strong sense of their national identity. While Turkish people regard the European Union, as well as their integration in the EU, in rather favorable terms, most of the EU countries have serious objections on Turkey’s being part of the European project. The arguments against Turkey are generally identity-based.

However, if being European is more about democracy and human rights rather than about cultural or ethnic issues, then, a major barrier in Turkey’s EU integration could be more easily overcome.

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