Journal of Al-Tamaddun, Vol. 20 (2), 2025, 375-390
https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol20no2.26

Revisiting the Failure of Turkiye's European Union (EU) Accession Process: Islamophobia and Civilizational Discourse in Europe

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Abstract

Since being declared eligible for European Union (EU) membership in 1999, Turkiye has undertaken numerous reforms toward accession. Despite meeting several criteria, its accession negotiation has stalled. Existing analyses typically adopt an institutional lens, arguing that the country fails to meet EU benchmarks. Rather than focusing on institutional explanations, this article aims to revisit the failure of Turkiye's EU accession process through the lens of civilizational discourse in Europe. Methodologically, it employs Critical Discourse Analysis approach by examining statements from several key European political elites and religious leaders, as well as official EU reports. It examines how cultural and religious narratives were shaped in the context of the rejection of Turkiye's EU membership. This article argues that civilizational discourse has been a prominent lens through which Turkiye has been perceived in the sense of EU accession and European public opinion as a whole. Europeans' rejection of Turkiye is grounded in the perception of "non-Europeanness" and its incompatibility with Europe's cultural and religious traditions. While Turkiye's institutional backsliding has contributed to the accession process being stalled, identity factors remain a persistent barrier. Overall, this study revisits Turkiye's failed bid to join the EU from a civilizational perspective; the often-overlooked dimension in examining the failure of the accession process. It highlights the need to recognize civilizational Islamophobia as a critical, yet under-analyzed, determinant in the context of EU enlargement policy and broader relations between Europe and Muslims.

Keywords: Turkiye, EU, Europe, civilizational discourse, Islamophobia

Introduction

As a modern nation-state, Turkiye's dynamic historical trajectory and its complex identity deserve closer and critical examination. Having been the center of the Ottoman Empire (*Osmanlı Devlet*), Islam once served as the political, legal, and social identification of Turkiye.[1] The Islamic identity endured until Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), Turkiye's first president, established the new republic and institutionalized secularism. The establishment of a nation-state marked a new phase for Turkiye, as its founding fathers were enthusiastic to portray it as a modern, secular, and progressive nation.

In this vision, Kemalists aimed to forge a modern and progressive Turkiye. Europe, the center of Western civilization at the time, was treated as a reference point. Hence, numerous efforts have been undertaken by political elites to ensure that Turkiye can be accepted as part of the "big family of Europe." During the early phase, Turkiye's state regime adopted legal codes inspired by European models, replaced Arabic writing with Latin, introduced Western fashion and lifestyle, and institutionalized a secular and rational education in schools. The eruption of the Cold War and Soviet expansionism in the Balkan region led the West to see Turkiye as a strategic ally, making the country's path to European integration smoother.[2] Later, Turkiye became a member of the Council of Europe in 1950,[3] joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952,[4] and signed the Ankara

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[1] For a constructive discussion on the six centuries of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, please refer to Mehmet Maksudoğlu, *Osmalı History 1289-1922: Based on Osmanlı Sources* (International Islamic University Malaysia, 1999).
[2] Kemal Kirişci, *Turkey and the West: Fault Lines in a Troubled Alliance* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 28-36.
[3] "Türkiye," *Council of Europe*, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/turkey.
[4] "Türkiye and NATO," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_191048.htm.

Agreement as its commitment to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963.[5] A new milestone was reached when Turkiye and the European Union (EU, i.e., the successor to EEC) signed a Customs Union agreement in 1996, which later made Turkiye eligible as a candidate in 1999.[6] Since then, Turkiye has undertaken numerous efforts to become a member of the EU by meeting the accession criteria outlined by the Union.

Despite its long journey, Turkiye's EU accession negotiations have ultimately stalled. According to the EU official statement, this is "…due to continuing backsliding in reforms in the key areas of the enlargement strategy, in particular in the functioning of the democratic system, respect for fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary."[7] In other words, from the EU's side, the reason for this standstill is that Turkiye has not met all the conditions that have been set, in the sense that it is not "institutionally ready" to become a member. Analysts and scholars who share this view argue that factors such as democratic and judicial deficits, authoritarianism, and the weakening rule of law contribute to the pending of the further Turkiye-EU negotiation process.[8] Several explanations have been offered to provide insight into this institutional backsliding. For instance, the emergence of Euroscepticism among the Turkish political regime and public has been cited as a reason for the declining motivation for the accession bid.[9] Euroscepticism lies within a diverse spectrum, from views that Turkiye shouldn't join the EU due to economic reasons to perceptions of the latter's "non-Europeanness." Alternatively, Turkiye's institutional backsliding has been argued as a reaction to the opposition, rejection, or hostility toward Turkiye's accession to the EU, i.e., Turcoscepticism.[10] Both Euroscepticism and Turcoscepticism have contributed to the de-Europeanization process, particularly the weakening of institutional compliance with EU conditionality. In sum, some observers identify this "institutional deficit" as a key factor behind the accession standstill.

Rather than focusing on institutional factors, this article examines the often-overlooked cultural and identity dimensions as an alternative perspective on Turkiye's stalled EU accession process. While previous studies have addressed the issue from a civilizational perspective, they do not analyze in depth how civilizational narratives in Europe contribute to Islamophobic discourses and the perception of Turkiye as "the Other," thereby justifying its exclusion from the Union.[11] Therefore, this paper aims to address a crucial question regarding this matter: *Why has Turkiye's EU accession stalled, and to what extent can civilizational Islamophobia explain this outcome?* By answering this question, this article aims to revisit the failure of Turkiye's EU accession process through the lens of Islamophobia and civilizational discourse in Europe. Methodologically, it employs Critical Discourse Analysis approach by examining statements from several key European political elites and religious leaders, as well as

[5] "EEC – Turkey Association Agreement (1963)," *Electronic Database of Investment Treaties*, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://edit.wti.org/document/show/9b617812-e644-4cc3-9dc8-c6c7578bd812.

[6] "Briefing No 7: Turkey and Relations with the European Union," *European Parliament*, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/7a1_en.htm.

[7] "Türkiye – Membership Status," *European Commission*, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/turkiye_en.

[8] See, for example, Meltem Muftuler-Bac, "Backsliding in Judicial Reforms: Domestic Political Costs as Limits to EU's Political Conditionality in Turkey," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27, no. 1 (2019): 61-76; Galip L. Yalman and Asuman Göksel, "Transforming Turkey? Putting the Turkey-European Union Relations into a Historical Perspective," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 14, no. 56 (2017): 23-37; Bertil Emrah Oder, "Turkey's Democratic Erosion: On Backsliding and the Constitution," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2021): 473-500; Kemal Kirişci and Amanda Sloat, *Policy Brief: The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West* (Brookings Institute, 2019); Vedat Demir, "Public Diplomacy and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2024): 42-57; Adam Michalski, "Turkey and the European Union: In a Maze of Disputes," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, updated on April 3, 2024, accessed on July 11, 2025, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-04-03/turkey-and-european-union-a-maze-disputes.

[9] See, among others, Seçkin Barış Gülmez, "Rethinking Euroscepticism in Turkey: Government, Opposition and Public Opinion," *Ekonomi, Politika & Finans Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1-22; Katy Brown, "When Eurosceptics Become Europhiles: Far-Right Opposition to Turkish Involvement in the European Union," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 27, no. 6 (2020): 633-654; Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Özgehan Şenyuva, "Turkey: A Vicious Cycle of Euroscepticism?" in *Euroscepticism and the Future of Europe: Views from the Capitals*, ed. Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak and Paul Schmidt (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 159-162.

[10] Ebru Ş. Canan-Sokullu, "Turcoscepticism and Threat Perception: European Public and Elite Opinion on Turkey's Protracted EU Membership," in *Turkey and the EU: Accession and Reform*, ed. Gamze Avci and Ali Çarkoğlu (Routledge, 2020), 275-289.

[11] See, for example, Kürşad Ertuğrul and Öznur Akcalı Yılmaz, "The Otherness of Turkey in European Integration," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 48-71; Ayhan Kaya, "Right-Wing Populism and Islamophobism in Europe and Their Impact on Turkey–EU Relations," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1-28; Asif Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia and the Discursive Reconstitution of Religious Imagination in Europe," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2019): 135-156; Menderes Çınar, "Turkey's 'Western' or 'Muslim' Identity and the AKP's Civilizational Discourse," in *Islamism, Populism, and Turkish Foreign Policy*, ed. Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Bill Park (Routledge, 2020), 8-29; Brown, "When Eurosceptics Become Europhiles," 633-654; Mustafa Onur Tetik, "Discursive Reconstruction of Civilisational-Self: Turkish National Identity and the European Union (2002–2017)," *European Politics and Society* 22, no. 3 (2021): 374-393; Aylin Güney, "Turkey's Relations with the EU from a Critical Perspective: From Europhilism to Anti-Europeanism (2002–2021)," in *Critical Readings of Turkey's Foreign Policy*, ed. Birsen Erdoğan and Fulya Hisarlıoğlu (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 211-232.

official EU reports. It examines how cultural and religious narratives were shaped in the context of the rejection of Turkiye's EU membership. This article begins with a discussion of theoretical dimensions on how the notion of civilizational Europe influences the perception of Islam and Turkiye as "the Other," followed by an overview of Turkiye's EU accession process, and a discursive analysis of its stalled accession.

On Theoretical Dimensions

The Notion of Difference and Civilizational Europe

The failure of Turkiye's EU accession process can be better understood through the lens of "incompatibility." To explain incompatibility, the concept of "difference" plays a central role, particularly related to religious and cultural identities. Difference can be understood in essentialist terms (in the sense of innate, fixed, and unbridgeable) or in constructivist terms (in a way as a product of discourse, political, and social constructs). Here, civilizational difference represents a deeply embedded form of identity distinction from both perspectives; being essentially different due to inborn traits, and being constructively different in terms of historical and political contingencies. Such differences can be further examined either from the viewpoint of conflict or cooperation.

From a conflict perspective, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis warrants attention for two reasons. First, albeit somewhat simplistically, the thesis attempts to scrutinize the notion of difference from the domain of "civilizational" (according to the author). Second, it remains widely influential in popular discourse, particularly in the West, and therefore must be taken into account when discussing the dynamic relations between the West and "the rest."[12] Huntington posits that the world of the post-Cold War period will no longer be divided by either political, ideological, or economic differences, but by "deep-rooted cultural fault lines." According to him, after the Cold War ended, "People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, *civilizations* [emphasis added]."[13] Nation-states, as the main political actors, will persist. However, conflicts will not occur between states per se, but between what he denotes as "civilizations," namely, the broadest cultural entity, or between states from different civilizations. For Huntington, Islam (along with "Sinic") will become a major civilization that challenges the hegemony of the West. The West, according to him, is the center of the world and universal culture, which "the rest" should emulate to become modern, progressive, and civilized. The centrality of the West lies in its core values such as rationality, secularity, the rule of law, and individualism, which are rooted in the Greco-Roman and Catholic-Protestant traditions, among others.[14] In this sense, Islam has been argued as incompatible with, and poses a threat to, the modern Western universalism. Despite being widely criticized for its flaws,[15] Huntington's thesis remains resonant, especially in the age of identity politics, populism, and Islamophobia, where American and European far-right parties are gaining places in the political arena, and anti-immigrant sentiment is spreading across the West.

To understand how Huntington's thesis persists in the Western context, it is essential to examine how Europe, often referred to as "the mother" of the West, has been constructed as a civilizational entity. Europe should be understood as more than just a geographical space. Although Europe has been viewed

[12] In explaining why the clash of civilizations thesis continues to appeal to the Western community, including among Europeans, Fazal Rizvi argues that the concept of "social imaginary" may offer the answer. Social imaginary is the shared perception of what is considered normal, acceptable, and "part of our group." Here, the clash of civilizations thesis is legitimized by a particular social imaginary, in the sense that the latter provides the foundational ground to build perceptions of "self" (in-group) and "others" (out-group). This kind of imaginary, as argued by Rizvi, works in tandem with the constructed political myth to justify the rationale of excluding others. For a further discussion, please refer to Fazal Rizvi, "Beyond the Social Imaginary of 'Clash of Civilizations'?," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 3 (2011): 225-235.

[13] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 21.

[14] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 68-72.

[15] Huntington's thesis has been widely criticized due to several flaws, such as civilizational essentialism and determinism (perceiving that civilization as an eternal, predestined, and self-contained entity), a binary perspective (the narrative of "us versus them"), generalization towards plurality within societies (cultural homogeneity), and being Western-centric. Edward Said, Talal Asad, and Osman Bakar, among others, have criticized the thesis for being overly shallow in its understanding of intercultural and interstate relations. Said challenges Huntington's argument that reduces complex realities in societies to inherently conflictual entities, namely "civilizations." See Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, updated on October 4, 2001, accessed on July 17, 2025, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/. Asad implicitly questions the assumption that Western secularism and modernity are universally ideal. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-17. Bakar explicitly disputes the claim that Western civilization is the only universal one. See Osman Bakar, *Islam & Civilizational Dialogue: The Quest for a Truly Universal Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Cendekia and Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, Universiti Malaya, 2025), 10-11.

as ethnically and culturally diverse,[16] it possesses a distinct civilizational identification. It is historically grounded in the *sui generis* Greco-Roman philosophical and Judeo-Christian religious traditions on one hand, and Enlightenment rationality and secular modernity on the other.[17] These legacies define what constitutes Europe. This self-image, in which Europe perceives itself, aligns with Huntington's assertion concerning "the centrality of the West." In other words, both philosophical-religious traditions and rational-modernity form the basis of "a superiority over the others," whether they are the imagined "East," "Islam," or simply "the rest." Hence, Europe should be treated as a civilizational rather than a geopolitical entity, where "Europeanness" is defined primarily in a cultural sense.

As Hamid Dabashi denotes Europe as "a metaphor" (in the sense that it is an ideologically constructed concept),[18] it has no definitive borders. As Europe heavily defines its self-image through historical, cultural, and religious traditions, it therefore "draws" its borders according to a civilizational sense. In other words, Europe has two borders: geographical and civilizational. Originating from its traditions, the imaginary civilizational borders define what Europe is, delineating not only who belongs within it but also who does not. Civilizational borders are often represented in political debates concerning immigrants, cultural integration, and the enlargement of the EU's membership. The case of Turkiye vividly illustrates how civilizational borders are applied. Turkiye, a predominantly Muslim-majority country with Islamic and Ottoman heritage, is often perceived as an "outsider from these borders," not simply geographically (as only a small part of its land today is situated within the European continent in a geographical sense), but "civilizationally different." The "non-Europeanness" of Turkiye made it "alien" to European identity.

Civilizational Islamophobia and the Discourse of "Otherness"

The notion of difference in Europe, which is closely entwined with the idea of civilizationalism, suggests that the concept of "the Other" should be examined through the lens of religious stereotyping. As Turkiye is a Muslim-majority country, stereotypes toward Islam have to be considered when discussing the notion of difference and how Turkiye and its people are viewed as "the Other" from a religious point of view. In this context, Islamophobia, particularly in a civilizational form, merits further analysis in order to delve into the discourse of "Otherness" in Europe.

Even though being a contested concept, Islamophobia has been accepted by a consensus as a phenomenon that refers to the stereotype, fear, and prejudice towards Islam (as a religion) and Muslims (its adherents). In conceptualizing Islamophobia, the definition proposed by the Runnymede Trust deserves particular attention due to its profound impact on shaping debates concerning Islamophobia afterward. According to the Runnymede Trust, Islamophobia is "fear or hatred of Islam," "to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims," "unfounded hostility towards Islam," and "unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs."[19] Even though the usage of the word "Islamophobia" has been argued by some scholars as semantically inappropriate to represent the real phenomenon,[20] it is a self-contained concept that encompasses multiple manifestations concerning the stereotyping and discrimination of Islam and Muslims as a whole. As a form of prejudice, fear, and hatred, Islamophobia is far more complex than mere individual bias. Rather, it is embedded in broader state policies and institutional discourses. Islamophobia is a political and social construct via political rhetoric, legal frameworks, national security, and media framing, among others. The construction of Islam and Muslims as a threat led the

[16] Christian Grililo La Torre and Katerine Francesca Montalto, "Transmigration, Multiculturalism and Its Relationship to Cultural Diversity in Europe," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun: The Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2016): 39-52.

[17] For further reading on the idea and identity of Europe, please refer to Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (Macmillan Press, 1995).

[18] For further reading on Dabashi's provocative work on Europe from a postcolonial sense, see Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality After Empire* (Pluto Press, 2019).

[19] The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia A Challenge For Us All* (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997), 1 & 4

[20] For example, Halliday argues that the concept of "anti-Muslimism" is more suitable to be used in denoting the phenomenon, as discriminations are mainly directed at Muslims. See Fred Halliday, "'Islamophobia' Reconsidered," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 5 (1999), 892-902. On the contrary, several other scholars view that the phenomenon should be seen as discrimination towards Islam, not towards Muslims per se, as Muslims are not becoming who they are without submitting to Islam. Hence, the concepts like "anti-Islam" and "Islamoprejudice" are more preferred. See, for example, Jolanda van der Noll and Vassilis Saroglou, "Anti-Islam or Anti-Religion? Understanding Objection Against Islamic Education," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 219-238; Roland Imhoff and Julia Recker, "Differentiating Islamophobia: Introducing a New Scale to Measure Islamoprejudice and Secular Islam Critique," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2012): 811-824. While others argue that the phenomenon is a form of racism, and denoting it as "anti-Muslim racism" and the like. For instance, see Robin Richardson, "Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism–Concepts and Terms, and Implications for Education," *Race Equality Teaching* 27, no. 1 (2009): 11-16; Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, "The Racialisation of Muslims," in *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, ed. S. Sayyid and AbdoolKarim Vakil (Hurst & Company, 2010), 69-83.

agenda of targeting Islam and Muslims not only for the course of security, but became a way for the West, either the United States or European countries, to define their politics, social, and culture, particularly following the end of the Cold War.[21]

Islamophobia in Europe is politically and socially constructed, rendering it a civilizational phenomenon. When Islamophobia is treated as civilizational, it should go beyond mere fear or hatred of individual Muslims per se but involve a deeper prejudice and anxiety about Islam and its adherents as the perceived "threat" by the "cultural Others." This perception echoes what a prominent Orientalist, Bernard Lewis argues, that Islam is the only rival to Christianity (i.e., the religious identity of Europe and the West) in terms of universal aspiration,[22] as well as what Huntington asserts, that Islam is the eternal enemy of the West.[23] In this sense, Islamophobia reflects a long history of the relationship between Islam and Christianity. More precisely, the kind of "proto-Islamophobia" dates back to the Crusades period, where the imaginary Islam, in a negative way, dominated among Christians in Europe without direct contact with Muslims.[24] Gradually, this negative view constructed Islam as Europe's civilizational "Other" that persists to the present time.

Civilizational Islamophobia, which is inherited from the long-standing cold relations between Islam and the West, stands on the notion of European self-conception. In this case, Islam is seen as "the Other" and outside of Europe's "civilizational borders." The conception of "Europeanness" shapes the perceptions of what belongs within the European civilizational realm. "Europeanness" is understood as deeply rooted in a particular historical narrative that revolves around the legacy of Greco-Roman, the religious tradition of Judeo-Christianity, Enlightenment rationalism, and secular modernity. Within this framework, the Islamic "Other" is viewed as a "civilizational outsider" and does not belong to the long tradition of Europe. In a civilizational sense, perceiving others as "outsiders" carries implications, where Europe has historically positioned itself as the "center of the world," relegating "the rest" to the "periphery."[25]

The perception of Europe's centrality does not emerge in a vacuum but is rooted in how "the rest" is perceived by the European community. Through his monumental work *Orientalism*, Edward Said exposes that for a long time, Europe, particularly, and the West as a whole, has produced knowledge about "the East," or what he denotes as "the Orient," in a way that the latter is perceived as static, irrational, exotic, and inferior to the former.[26] The Orient is not simply the East in a geographical sense, but "the constructed Others" in order for the West to assert its centrality and superiority. Being part of the Orient, Islam and Muslims were considered not progressive, different from the more civilized West, and incompatible with modernity. Orientalism should not be treated as a mere literary critique of how the West portrays the Orient. It has shaped the realms of securitization, international politics, and cultural relations, as well as how Western and European people see "the Other."[27] In Said's sense, Orientalism can manifest in three forms: first, as an academic discipline that is concerned with the writings and research on the Orient; second, as a style of thought which is deeply grounded in ontological and epistemological distinctions between the Orient and the Occident; and third, as the "corporate institution," namely a systemic structure through which the West deals with the Orient in order to dominate and exert authority over it.[28] It is the second form that is more relatable to the context of European exclusion upon Turkiye, as it stems from the way of thinking that positions the "superior European" against the "inferior Others."

The idea of civilizational Islamophobia is deeply entwined with Said's historical *longue durée* conception of Orientalism, which shapes the style of thought and perceptions of the "European self" with its perceived unique and superior legacies, and the inferior "non-European Others." Being rooted in the knowledge production of Eurocentrism, Islamophobia contributes to racism towards Muslims.

[21] Hatem Bazian, "Islamophobia, "Clash of Civilizations", and Forging a Post-Cold War Order!," *Religions* 9 (2018): 282.
[22] Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic* 266, no. 3 (1990): 48.
[23] Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations, 32-33.
[24] Bazian, "Islamophobia, "Clash of Civilizations", and Forging a Post-Cold War Order!," 282.
[25] Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows*, 20-21.
[26] For further understanding of what Said critiques regarding the Western conceptions of the Orient, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 4th ed. (Penguin Books, 2003).
[27] Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin and Nadhirah Zainal Rashid, "Orientalism and the Globalised Muslim World: Decolonising "Exotic" Narratives of Eurocentrism in the Era of Post-Colonial Studies," *Intellectual Discourse* 30, no. 2 (2022): 421-423.
[28] Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3.

Even though treating Islamophobia as a kind of racism is contested by some scholars,[29] it remains significant, especially when addressing Islamophobia as a civilizational phenomenon. According to Chris Allen, Islamophobia is a kind of "new racism" that views differences not because of one's skin color, but due to their religious and cultural affiliations.[30] In examining this new kind of racism, Enes Bayraklı, Farid Hafez, and Leonard Faytre denote Islamophobia as a form of "epistemic racism," since Islam is excluded and perceived as antithetical to what has been perceived as "the modern and universal West."[31] Islamophobia's epistemic construction of racism mainly stems from Orientalism, namely the discourse of treating "Others" as "uncivilized" for being "non-Western" (in the context of Europe, being "non-European"). Epistemic racism then becomes an impulse for policies that marginalize other races that are identified as "outsiders," particularly through anti-immigration legislation and disproportionate surveillance and profiling of Muslim subjects.[32] In the context of Turkiye, civilizational Islamophobia and the discourse of "Otherness" serve as useful frameworks for examining the extent to which Turkiye is excluded from joining the EU due to its identity that is perceived as "different" from Europe.

Turkiye's EU Accession Process: From Enthusiasm to Shifting Direction

Examining the failure of Turkiye's EU accession process is incomplete without discussing the country's efforts to join the Union. Both the historical background of the accession bid and the initiatives pursued by the current ruling government warrant closer scrutiny.

Background of Turkiye's EU Accession Bid

In its early stages, Turkiye's EU accession process was marked by long-standing efforts interspersed with significant political and regional challenges. Turkiye initially engaged with what was then the EEC through the Ankara Agreement in 1963, which sought to foster closer economic relations and gradually prepare Turkiye for full membership. Nevertheless, political instability in Turkiye, most notably the 1980 military coup, undermined these prospects and led to a cooling of relations with Europe.

Turkiye formally applied for full membership in 1987, yet shifting geopolitical priorities after the Cold War and the EU's focus on Central and Eastern European countries delayed progress in its accession path.[33] In the 1990s, Turkiye achieved notable milestones, most prominently the establishment of a Customs Union agreement with the EU in 1995, which signaled stronger economic integration but still fell short of granting candidate status for full membership.

It was not until the Helsinki European Council summit in December 1999 that Turkiye was officially recognized as a candidate country for EU accession. This recognition was crucial, yet it came with the acknowledgment that Turkiye continued to face significant political and human rights challenges that needed to be addressed before accession negotiations could advance. The unresolved Cyprus conflict remained a major impediment during this period, complicating Turkiye's relations with the EU and its member states.[34]

The broader EU enlargement process in the late 1990s and early 2000s focused heavily on the accession of Central and Eastern European countries, with ten new members joining in 2004. While negotiations for those countries concluded successfully, Turkiye's accession talks were postponed, pending further political reforms and resolution of outstanding issues, particularly the Cyprus dispute. At the Copenhagen European Council summit in December 2002, the decision to begin accession negotiations with Turkiye was deferred until 2004, reflecting a mix of cautious optimism and persistent skepticism.

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[29] For example, S. Sayyid argues that proponents of Islamophobia as a racism issue usually hold racism positivistically, in the sense that it shifts from a biological term to a cultural one. This understanding, for Sayyid, will lead to impoverishing the concept of Islamophobia due to inconsistency regarding the notion of racism itself. See S. Sayyid, "A Measure of Islamophobia," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014): 13.

[30] Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Ashgate, 2010), 10.

[31] Enes Bayraklı, Farid Hafez, and Leonard Faytre, "Making Sense of Islamophobia in Muslim Societies," in *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies*, ed. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (Routledge, 2019), 6.

[32] Burak Erdenir, "The Future of Europe: Islamophobia?," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (2005): 1-10; Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia and the Discursive Reconstitution," 136-137.

[33] Aaron Denison, "Turkey-EU: Waiting for Godot," *Asia Europe Institute-AEI*, June 29, 2018, https://aei.um.edu.my/turkey-eu-waiting-for-godot.

[34] "Turkey's Pre-Accession Strategy," *European Union*, June 1, 2005, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/turkey-s-pre-accession-strategy.html.

This period became one of waiting and preparation, setting the stage for the formal opening negotiations in 2005 after the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AK Parti) took power in November 2002 and sought to revitalize Turkiye's EU full membership ambitions.[35]

During the AK Parti Era (Since 2002)

In the aftermath of the 2002 General Election, the AK Parti leveraged the EU accession agenda as a means of gaining legitimacy and securing long-term public support. The democratization process in Turkiye under its rule was executed in two distinct phases: first, a phase of "Europeanization-democratization" that took place between 2002 and 2007, and second, a shift toward "Islamization-democratization" from 2007 onwards.[36]

Europeanization has been a prerequisite for Turkiye's bid to join the EU, requiring compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria that emphasize the expansion of individual freedoms and civil liberties, while protecting beliefs and cultural identity from undue state intervention. The Copenhagen Criteria basically outline three main requirements for candidates, namely: i) political stability, where the states' institutions upheld the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities; ii) a functioning market economy, in the sense that it is capable of withstanding competitive pressures within the Union; and iii) the capacity to adopt the responsibilities of membership, including acceptance of the *acquis communautaire* as embodied in EU treaties, legislation, and regulation.

Throughout its early terms, the AK Parti prioritized the recovery of Turkiye's political and economic conditions by introducing the Harmonization Package in line with the Copenhagen Criteria. Under the banner of democratization, the EU served as an indirect ally to the Turkish government in weakening the military's influence over state institutions. Reforms included strict oversight of military financial expenditure and restrictions on the military's privileges within government. A series of amendments to the Turkiye Constitution and related laws were introduced under the Harmonization Package to rebalance civil-military relations in accordance with EU democratic standards. Alongside political reforms, Turkiye also pursued the creation of a functioning market economy that is capable of coping with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU. These measures contributed to steady economic growth, with one notable achievement being the significant reduction of interest rates in 2007, which marked a milestone in Turkiye's economic development.

Despite its commitment to democratization and economic reform, accession criteria also carried an implicit requirement, namely, "Europeanness," whereby a candidate country must be culturally and civilizationally recognized as part of the European family. In this regard, Turkiye's perceived "non-Europeanness" emerged as a central reason behind the stalled accession process. Even with notable progress in political and economic reforms, the EU membership process remained difficult to attain for Turkiye. Several member countries, particularly France, Germany, and Austria, have expressed their opposition to Turkiye's accession, both among their political elites and within their publics. In response, the AK Parti began to shift its focus towards domestic issues, including those related to cultural matters. This marked the party's transition towards an "Islamization-democratization," particularly following the increasing support that it received in a series of elections. During this phase, the AK Parti emphasized the protection of human rights as a means of safeguarding religious freedom. From the very beginning, the party already proposed a new interpretation of secularism by arguing that democracy, which entails the protection of religious rights, should not be seen as incompatible with secularism.[37] This interpretation, that recognized religion in public space, diverged from the Kemalists' conception of secularism, which confined religion to the private domain. Based on this new understanding of secularism, greater space was opened for Turkish society to practice religion in the name of religious freedom.[38]

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[35] "European Union Enlargement: A Status Report on Turkey's Accession Negotiations," *Congressional Research Service Reports*, November 26, 2013, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RS22517.html.

[36] For a further discussion on AK Parti's different phases of democratization, please refer to Nurhidayu Rosli and Kamaruzaman Yusoff, *Pendemokrasian AK Parti di Turki* (Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2024).

[37] This new interpretation of secularism has been asserted by the AK Parti's main leader (currently the President of Turkiye), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, through his speech in the early years of the party's inception. According to him, "secularism needs to be crowned with democracy in order for fundamental rights and freedoms to be accorded constitutional guarantees." For the full text of the speech, see Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Conservative Democracy and the Globalisation of Freedom," in *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz (The University of Utah Press, 2006), 336.

[38] For a further reading on the AK Parti's policies that opened up more religious practice in Turkiye, see Muhammad Khalis Ibrahim and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, *Perkembangan Islam di Turkiye: Dari Era Khilafah hingga AKP* (Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2024).

The AK Parti's perceived turn toward Islamization, however, triggered resistance from the secularist segment of the Turkish public. As the party consistently secured electoral victories, it slowly developed a majoritarian outlook, framing its policies as reflecting the "will of the people."[39] This perspective convinced the AK Parti to pursue pro-Islamic policies despite opposition from secularists (even though the population of the latter was getting smaller, considering the increasing support towards the AK Parti). The peak of the protest against the government culminated in May 2013 with the demonstration at the Gezi Park, which then spread to several other areas across the country. The government's harsh response, particularly the excessive use of force by security forces, drew widespread domestic and international criticism, including from the EU. The harsh acts toward the protestors have been widely regarded as a turning point that marked the beginning of a decline in democratic reforms initiated by the AK Parti in its early years in power.[40]

In addition to the Gezi Park protests, the rivalry between the AK Parti and the Gülenists also signaled a further decline of democracy in Turkiye. The Gülenists, followers of Fethullah Gülen and his Hizmet social network, initially maintained a symbiotic relationship with the AK Parti (while the party ensured the network's freedom to operate, the Gülenists mobilized public support that helped the party to remain in power). However, tensions emerged between them over disagreements regarding the handling of the Kurdish militant group, which then escalated into open confrontations, including mutual accusations, corruption charges brought against AK Parti ministers by Gülenist-linked prosecutors, and the government's closure of Hizmet-affiliated schools.[41] The tension reached its peak with the failed military coup on July 15, 2016, which was said to have been masterminded by Gülenists among high-ranking officers. In the aftermath, the government declared a state of emergency and launched mass arrests of individuals who were associated with Gülen and the Hizmet network. These actions drew widespread criticism for suppressing dissent under the pretext of "national security." The coup attempt also paved the way for the constitutional amendment the following year, which transformed Turkiye's political system into a presidential one as a means of "maintaining stability."[42] These episodes marked the end of the AK Parti's democratic reform agenda, which reinforced perceptions of Turkiye's democratic backsliding.

The Exclusion of Turkiye as "the Other" and the Stalled EU Accession Process

In pursuing EU membership, Turkiye, under the more Islamic AK Parti, has not sought to sacrifice its identity in order to become fully European and Western. This differs from the Kemalists' vision, which aimed for a fully Westernized Turkiye as a means to civilize the country in line with its European neighbors. Under the AK Parti, Turkiye has become a more pragmatic and dynamic country in balancing its national interests on one hand, and its identity on the other. In examining Turkiye's pragmatism and dynamism under the AK Parti's rule, the party's discourse requires further elaboration, as it is closely related to its commitment to the EU. Since its inception, the AK Parti has been portrayed by its founders as a party with a new discourse and identity, namely conservative democracy (*muhafazakar demokrasi*). By embracing this new discourse, the AK Parti has dissociated itself from its Islamist predecessor. Erdoğan clarified conservative democracy as: "…rests upon *the social and cultural traditions* of our people. Our aim is to reproduce our system of *local and deep-rooted values* in harmony with the universal standards of political conservatism [emphasis added]."[43]

Asserting the significance of "the social and cultural traditions" as well as "local and deep-rooted values" indicates that the AK Parti does not compromise matters concerning Turkiye's identity in the sake of complying with the EU's accession conditions. Compared to the previous Islamists, who were

[39] Ergun Özbudun, "AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift," *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 157-158.
[40] Nevertheless, according to Sözen and Yavuz, international media took opportunities to sensationalize the events for their political and commercial interests. By not covering the actual scenario, some of them exaggerated the events by reporting the events as "a mass protest against the government" and the "Turkish version of the Arab Spring." See Edibe Sözen and M. Hakan Yavuz, "The Gezi Protests: An Outburst at Turkey's Shatter Zone," *Insight Turkey* 16, no. 1 (2014): 149-150.
[41] For a brief history of alliance and rivalry between the AK Parti and the Gülenists, please refer to Hakkı Taş, "A History of Turkey's AKP-Gülen Conflict," *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 3 (2018): 395-402.
[42] In its campaign, the AK Parti argued that transforming Turkiye's political system from an executive to a presidential one would secure political stability. According to the party, political stability was essential for building strong institutions and enhancing administrative effectiveness. See the party's pamphlet in AK Parti, *Our Decision: Yes: Presidential Government System* (Department of Publicity and Media, 2017), 3-9.
[43] Quoted from Erdoğan's speech at the American Enterprise Institute on January 29, 2004. See Erdoğan, "Conservative Democracy and the Globalisation of Freedom," 335-336.

more ideologically driven, the AK Parti is less ideological, in the sense that the party stresses political practicality over ideological means. However, this doesn't mean that the discursive aspect is absent in the party's consideration. By adopting a conservative democratic discourse, the AK Parti emphasizes the civilizational, historical, and cultural dimensions of the Turkish nation. Being an entity that departed from the realm of its Islamist predecessor, the AK Parti carries a discourse of identity politics through civilizational means. Reflecting the AK Parti's civilizational discourse, Burhanettin Duran examines the party's quest for a new political language and narrative through a national history grounded in Turkiye's cultural and traditional legacies. The party is argued as "pro-Western" regarding its interests with the EU, and "pro-*ummah*" in the sense of becoming more Islamic.[44] In a more recent development, Erdoğan stresses that Turkishness and Islam cannot be set apart,[45] which indicates the AK Parti's reassertion of Turkiye's Islamic identity. In short, under the AK Parti's rule, Turkiye's "Islamic self" has been reasserted, which then affects how Europeans perceive the country.

Many observers of Turkish politics contend that the "more Islamic Turkiye," particularly under the AK Parti's rule, is the main reason the accession process stalled. The debate became more intense following the party's shift in its political trajectory from being democracy-enthusiastic to becoming less democratic. By arguing that the party is becoming "more authoritarian," rejecting Turkiye's EU membership has been perceived as far from baseless. However, criticism and rejection of Turkiye's accession to the EU began at the very beginning of the accession process, long before the country's commitment to democracy waned. For example, during a December 2004 European Parliament session convened to assess Turkiye's compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria ahead of accession negotiations, some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) debated on the country's unfitness to join the EU due to being "from another civilization." Mogens Camre, an MEP from Denmark, asserted that:

> ...the profound differences between Turkey and the EU. It is not merely a question of having to make a few economic adjustments, but of *Turkey and the EU being two widely different civilisations* whose values are incompatible…*Turkey is not Europe*, however…There is a reason for Turkey's countless problems, and that reason is a civilisation that has damaging effects upon the development of society…Turkey should give up its Muslim culture [emphasis added].[46]

Jan Masiel, another MEP from Poland, emphasized the same tone by stressing Turkiye's Muslimness, which was viewed as incompatible with Europe's "Christian identity":

> It is not a matter of whether Turkey does or does not already meet the EU's requirements. It is a matter of whether we want a Muslim Turkey in a *Europe that was built on Christian values*…I have been observing Muslims in Brussels for 20 years, and I would not want such a large country to have any influence on the fate of my country, Poland, within the framework of the European Union [emphasis added].[47]

Jim Allister, an MEP from the United Kingdom, also contended his rejection of Turkiye's EU membership by arguing on the historical and cultural differences:

> Turkey is not part of Europe, it is part of Asia: only a finger of land flanking Istanbul lies in Europe. That does not make it a European nation…*Turkey itself has a shameful history of expansionism*…its intolerant suppression of religious freedom, in particular with regard to Christians. No – Turkey is one country and culture that we can well do without [emphasis added].[48]

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[44] For further reading on the AK Parti's civilizational discourse, see Burhanettin Duran, "Understanding the AKP's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and Its Limitations," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 1 (2013): 91-109.

[45] "'Hostility against Sharia is Hostility against Islam,' Says Turkey's Erdoğan," *Duvar English*, updated on February 2, 2024, accessed on August 7, 2025, https://www.duvarenglish.com/hostility-against-sharia-is-hostility-against-islam-says-turkeys-erdogan-news-63759.

[46] "Verbatim report of proceedings, Monday, December 13, 2004 - Strasbourg," *European Parliament*, accessed on August 1, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-6-2004-12-13_EN.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com#creitem10.

[47] "Verbatim report of proceedings, Monday, December 13, 2004 - Strasbourg," *European Parliament*.

[48] "Verbatim report of proceedings, Monday, December 13, 2004 - Strasbourg," *European Parliament*. However, not all MEPs opposed Turkiye's potential to join the EU. Some of them were more optimistic (at the time) on Turkiye's capability to fully adapt to the EU's values and standards, and saw that, by letting a predominantly Muslim country like Turkiye in, the EU as a whole can deny perceptions that it has become a Christian Club.

France, one of the core EU members, has consistently opposed Turkiye's EU membership. Its former Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, questioned Turkiye's commitment to European values and asked provocatively whether Europeans were ready for "Islam to enter the riverbed of secularism."[49] A similar expression has been made by the former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, where Turkiye "has no place in the EU" and "does not belong to Europe" for being a predominantly Muslim country.[50] Although the tone of Germany (i.e., another core EU member) is softer, elements of rejecting Turkiye due to identity factors are evident. Whilst Angela Merkel, the former Chancellor of Germany, did not explicitly emphasize Turkiye's religious differences, she too was no exception in portraying the country as "culturally distinct."[51] Such identity-based arguments were expressed as early as the mid-2000s, particularly when Turkiye was enthusiastically pursuing political reforms and democratization. This suggests that the stances of some European political elites regarding Turkiye's accession to the EU were rooted in cultural exclusion narratives prior to its democratic backsliding. These exclusionary perceptions persisted thereafter and were further reinforced as Turkiye's democracy declined, albeit couched in the argument that a less democratic Turkiye is unfit for EU full membership and should instead remain merely a "privileged partner."[52]

The perception of Turkiye's incompatibility with the EU was not only adhered to among political elites but was widely shared across other segments of European society. From the outset, the former Vatican's Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger opposed Turkiye's EU membership, arguing that the Union's identity was rooted in a Christian tradition that was permanently in contrast with the "Islamic Turkiye." According to him, Turkiye should seek cooperation with its Arab neighbors rather than with Europe.[53] A study on the opinions of European churches regarding Turkiye's EU membership reveals that Catholic leaders were relatively inclined to oppose Turkiye's accession to the EU compared to Protestant leaders, who were more open to its membership, provided it upholds human rights and universal values.[54] Here, the stances of religious leaders are significant in examining the exclusion of Turkiye as "the Other" in two ways. First, they imply that Turkiye's exclusion is not merely a political matter but draws on religious leverage. Second, the stances indicate that the "Othering" of Turkiye cannot be separated from a religious-historical dimension, as the Cardinal himself referenced the warring history between the Islamic Ottoman and European powers to justify his view.[55]

The perception of Turkiye as "the Other" also extends to the general public in EU member states. By analyzing surveys made by Eurobarometer, a study indicates that most citizens of EU member states reject the idea of Turkiye joining the Union. While their rejections consist of several reasons, cultural differences emerge as the most prominent one. Besides being "non-European," Turkiye was largely rejected by the European public on religious grounds. Both those who associate themselves with and without a particular religion oppose Turkish membership in the EU (while the former out of concern for their Christian faith and heritage, the latter feel that Turkish-Islamic religiosity threatens the secular nature of modern Europe).[56] Eurobarometer data for the following years indicate that skepticism among citizens of EU member states toward Turkiye's accession to the EU not only persists but also increased. Again, the citizens of core EU member states, such as France and Germany, along with several others, like Austria, Finland, and Denmark, remained staunchly opposed to Turkiye's accession. Concerns that

[49] "Turkey's Place in EU Questioned," *Al Jazeera*, updated on September 23, 2004, accessed on August 7, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/9/23/turkeys-place-in-eu-questioned.
[50] "New France, Old Ideas?," *Deutsche Welle*, updated on May 25, 2007, accessed on August 7, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/sarkozy-tackles-turkey-question-during-diplomatic-tour/a-2557936?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "France Says Blunt 'Non' to Turkey," *France 24*, updated on February 25, 2011, accessed on August 7, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/20110225-france-sarkozy-gul-turkey-eu-hopes.
[51] "German and French Leaders' Views on Turkey's EU Membership," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, updated on June 27, 2005, accessed August 7, 2025, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/german-and-french-leaders-views-turkeys-eu-membership.
[52] See, for example, "Macron Suggests 'Partnership' with EU for Turkey, Not Membership," *France 24*, updated on January 5, 2018, accessed on August 8, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/20180105-french-president-macron-suggests-partnership-deal-turkey-eu-not-membership-erdogan; Pierre Mirel, "European Union-Turkey: From an Illusory Membership to a "Privileged Partnership"," *Fondation Robert Schuman*, updated on June 12, 2017, accessed on August 8, 2025, https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0437-european-union-turkey-from-an-illusory-membership-to-a-privileged-partnership; "Merkel Says Still Against Turkey Joining the EU," *Reuters*, updated on October 8, 2015, accessed on August 8, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/merkel-says-still-against-turkey-joining-the-eu-idUSKCN0S12RC/.
[53] "Cardinal: No Place for Turkey in EU," *Al Jazeera*, updated on August 11, 2025, accessed on August 8, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/8/11/cardinal-no-place-for-turkey-in-eu.
[54] Michael Minkenberg, "Christian Identity? European Churches and the Issue of Turkey's EU Membership," *Comparative European Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 149-179.
[55] "Cardinal: No Place for Turkey in EU," *Al Jazeera*.
[56] Jürgen Gerhards and Silke Hans, "Why not Turkey? Attitudes towards Turkish Membership in the EU among Citizens in 27 European Countries," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no. 4 (2011): 753 & 760.

drive their opposition largely lie in factors that are related to economic, human rights, and security, as well as cultural differences.[57] In a broader sense, this deep-seated social resistance, that is rooted in identity and culture, has created a political environment in Europe where perceiving Turkiye as "an outsider" is considered "politically acceptable," particularly in the age of populism.[58]

However, attributing the failure of Turkiye's EU membership bid solely to this pattern of European rejection does not adequately reflect the full scenario. In this regard, Turkiye's own democratic backsliding should also be acknowledged as a critical impediment to the accession process. The latest EU Commission report explicitly states that further negotiations have stalled due to the deterioration of democratic practices, a weakened rule of law, a lack of effective checks and balances mechanisms, and other institutional shortcomings.[59] While identity-related considerations remain to underpin this rejection, Turkiye's democratic backsliding has provided the European community with a "legitimate rationale" for hardening resistance to its accession bid.

Taken together, evidence from political elites, religious authorities, and the general public suggests that the relationship between cultural rejection and institutional shortcomings should be understood as a cause-and-effect loop. Early objections to Turkiye's accession on civilizational grounds signaled to both Turkish political elites and the public that full membership was unwelcome within the European community, irrespective of the reform processes undertaken. This persistent cultural exclusion fueled the rise of Euroscepticism in Turkiye, eroding motivation for domestic democratic reforms. As public support for EU membership declined, political elites faced diminished pressure to sustain the momentum for accession, which in turn accelerated democratic backsliding. Thus, cultural rejection and institutional shortcomings should not be seen in parallel. Rather, they are interdependent processes; civilizational exclusion by Europe undermined Turkiye's reform incentives, spurring Euroscepticism among the Turkish community and contributing to democratic backsliding.

Conclusion

This article offers a discussion on the failure of Turkiye's EU accession process from a civilizational perspective. In sum, a logic of civilizational exclusion and Islamophobia is deeply embedded within European and EU discourse. These logics are entangled with the notion of difference that is rooted in Orientalism, which is reflected in the conceptions of "civilizational clash" and "civilizational Europe." The perception of difference in Europe informs a self-conception that legitimizes the exclusion of those deemed outside the European civilizational identity. Such a civilizational, exclusionary perception is not merely upheld among European political elites but is also being shared by other segments of European society. Unfortunately, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, albeit problematic, indicates that the real scenario partially aligns with what he anticipated, particularly in the context of Turkiye's accession to the EU.

However, the failure of Turkiye's accession process should not be viewed solely through the lens of Europeans' perception of "Turkish Other," but also as a result of the country's inability to fully comply with the EU's accession criteria. On the one hand, the EU has been consistently reluctant to accept Turkiye's membership. On the other hand, Turkiye's institutional shortcomings have likewise hindered the progress of the accession process. As far as Turkiye's latest development for the EU's membership is concerned, the EU's MEPs have decided to freeze its accession process in response to the country's democratic backsliding in several areas.[60] In this context, Turkiye's current position, caught between a democratic deficit and being culturally "Other," is likely to further complicate its accession prospects. Europeans always had cultural reservations, but recently, they have had a legitimate reason to say "no"

[57] For a full analysis on the EU's public opinion on Turkiye's EU membership, see Jakob Lingaard, "EU Public Opinion on Turkish EU Membership: Trends and Drivers," *FEUTURE Online Paper No. 25*, October 2018.

[58] To some extent, some radical right parties instrumentalize Christianity not merely as a faith but also as a cornerstone of national and European identity. See Damjan Mandelc, "Religion, Migration, and the Far-Right: How European Populism Frames Religious Pluralism," *Religions* 16, no. 9 (2025): 1192. To understand the recent scenario on the rise of far-right populism in Europe, see, among others, Murat Aktas, "The Rise of Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe," *International Sociology* 39, no. 6 (2024): 591-605; Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon, "Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian's Coverage of Populism as a Case Study," *Politics* 41, no. 3 (2021): 279-295; Gülşah Özdemir, "Anti-Immigration, Populism and Security Discourses: The Rising Far-Right in Europe," in *International Immigration and Security Policies*, ed. Gülşah Özdemir (Özgür Press, 2025), 63-81.

[59] European Commission, *Türkiye 2025 Report: 2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussles, 4 November 2025), 2-6.

[60] "Türkiye's EU Accession Process Must Remain Frozen," *European Parliament*, updated on July 5, 2025, accessed on August 10, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250502IPR28215/turkiye-s-eu-accession-process-must-remain-frozen.

to Turkiye's EU membership on the basis of democratic concerns. Therefore, in order for Turkiye to loosen the tight accession process, it must strengthen its democratic credentials as a source of leverage, while maintaining its identity as a Muslim-majority nation.

Overall, these dynamics suggest that Turkiye's failure to progress in its EU accession process is due to the intersection of civilizational exclusion and institutional shortcomings. Hence, this article suggests several aspects for future research. First, future examinations should assess whether the European community will, over time, move toward redefining its identity in a more inclusive and pluralistic manner or retain an exclusivist civilizational self-conception. Such research could explore whether evolving social and political dynamics within the EU might foster a reimagining of "Europeanness," or whether exclusionary narratives persist (or even intensify), particularly in light of the rise of right-wing populism, identity politics, and securitization discourses. Second, future studies should critically evaluate the strategic relevance of EU membership for Turkiye. While some argue that accession is no longer aligned with Turkiye's national interests, others contend that civilizational and political barriers will consistently prevent the country's full EU membership. Yet Turkiye has not entirely abandoned its EU aspirations, making the question of relevance significant for further investigation. Third, given the salience of civilizational factors in the case of Turkiye, comparative studies should examine the accession process of several Balkan countries. Being religiously and culturally rooted in Orthodox traditions (which differ from the Catholic-Protestant legacies of the EU), such studies could test the validity of civilizational differences as a determining factor for accession.

In sum, the case of Turkiye demonstrates that EU accession is not merely a matter of institutional compliance with technical criteria but of contested civilizational boundaries. Whether these boundaries remain fixed or otherwise will determine not only Turkiye's future relations with the EU but also the very meaning of Europe itself.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgment is extended to the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), for funding this publication through the Small Research Grant (GKP) under the research code SK-2023-022.

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