

Turkey's Other Multicultural Debate: Lessons for the EU

Abstract

This paper looks at the dynamics of multiculturalism in Turkey. However, rather than looking at the traditional multicultural debate in Turkey – the one associated with the Kurdish and Alevi problem as well as Turkey's non-Muslim minorities –, the focus is shifted to the "other" source of multiculturalism in Turkey: immigration and the large number of foreigners who came to Turkey in the last three decades. This paper argues that Turkey's overall attitude towards this migration multiculturalism is unique and therefore could be insightful to European countries facing similar challenges.

The paper starts by situating the argument within the broader discussion on how Turkey can also contribute to the EU project and by presenting succinctly the migration flows that have induced this new multiculturalism. Then, the analysis turns to the dynamics of this migration multiculturalism and especially the way Turkey's state and society have reacted to this multiculturalism. More specifically, four levels of analysis are covered: public policies towards migration and multiculturalism, public discourses over these issues, societal discourses and finally societal behaviors. All of the evidence presented highlights the complexity, pluralism and ambivalence intrinsic to these issues. Not surprisingly, the overall picture presents both positive elements as well as worrisome features. But these characteristics differ substantially from the evidence of European countries and therefore raise the questions addressed in the final section. What does this all mean to the EU? How can we make sense of the Turkish experience and what does it mean for the EU's own experience with migration and multiculturalism?

The overall argument demonstrates that Turkey is applying a very interesting policy (albeit not totally consciously): rather than tackling the issue of multiculturalism by talking about multiculturalism, Turkey deals with multiculturalism by ensuring free cross border movements of migrants. More specifically, by combining three elements – the perceived temporariness of migration, the informality and flexibility of Turkish society and market, and a liberal visa policy – Turkey is addressing the issue of multiculturalism in its own way and not without some successes.