

Turks in Germany: the issue of the third generation identity

Törökök Németországban: a harmadik nemzedék identitás kérdése

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Introduction

There are more than 3 million inhabitants with Turkish origin living in Germany comprising three generations. All of them cope with ever growing problems of integration, and issues of individual and collective identity.

This brief paper will reflect on the problem of Turk immigrants living as “aliens” in a foreign society, Germany. First, there will be an overview of the historical background of the problem. The core question asks why there are so many Turks in Germany, and why they have a problem with education, immigration and other social issues. Subsequently, the issue of identity and social integration including language, education and employment which quite a sizable group of the third generation of Turks face will be elaborated on. Finally, when compared to Polish and Italian immigrants, Turks face far more deep rooted and collective problems of social integration than the other two large cultural minority groups.

Historical background

The settlement of Turkish people in Germany started in 1961. With initiation from the Turkish state administration, the German and the Turkish governments made an agreement for Turks to come to Germany as “guest workers”. Both wanted to increase their economies. Only unmarried persons from the European part of Turkey were allowed to go to Germany. Most of the individuals were unskilled male workers from the countryside. The initial stipulation allowed them to stay in Germany for two years. Consequently, many of them did not have any reason to learn the German language.

Family reunification was made impossible until 1973-1974. With loosening of the immigration code, many families from Turkey came to Germany to live with their sons, brothers or their future husbands. Although some of the families returned back to Turkey after a few years, still many stayed.

Situation in Germany

More than three million Turks (26%) live in Germany today, including those who have German citizenship making them the largest group of all foreigners living in the country. Many of them face problems with both education and employment. Nearly 30% of them did not complete elementary school and

25.5% are unemployed. Compared to the rest of German society, the Turkish people have higher unemployment rates and have much lower education rates. Recently the migration trends have changed as more people with Turkish origin are migrating back to Turkey than ever before, and the trend of immigration to Germany seems to be decreasing.

Identity issue

According to the findings of a qualitative case study with 100 interviewed native Turkish people living in Germany, most of them claimed to be “Turkish”. Forty five percent of the interviewees said that they are “Turks” even if they have the German citizenship. One respondent stated:

“It doesn’t matter if you have the German citizenship or not. Turk stays Turk, German stays German. If you have dark hair and dark eyes, you’ll be always picked as Turk, it doesn’t matter, for how long you have the German citizenship.” [“Es ist egal, ob man einen deutschen Pass hat oder nicht. Türke bleibt Türke, deutsch bleibt deutsch. Auch wenn man dunkle Haare und dunkle Augen hat, wird man immer als Türke manchmal raus gestempelt, egal wie lange man deutsch ist.”]

Close to one third of respondents (30%) claimed that they feel “German-Turkish”, forming a new national identity for themselves. This double identity was found mainly in the group of the second generation of Turkish immigrants. They were born in Germany, but their affiliation to Turkish roots strongly influenced by their parents. Only two people answered, that they see themselves as German. In a number of cases, interviewees simply refused to answer the question pertaining to what nationality they feel they belong to. Some of them would refer to their religion, while many others were not able to define their nationality, thus unable to claim personal affiliation to any kind of national identity.

Turks in Germany represent a very heterogeneous group concerning self-determination or identity. This heteronomy certainly results both from interaction (influence) and confrontation (conflict) of two diverse cultures, including stereotypes. On one hand, the German society has a rather firm, long-standing stereotype of a Turkish migrant, while on the other; the Turkish society in Germany has its own stereotypes about German society as a whole. The reality of self-identity and interethnic relationships lies somewhere in between these two cultures.

One reason it is so difficult for Turks in Germany to grasp and define their own identity lies in the fact that Turkey has changed dramatically in the past few decades as well. People who go back to Turkey often feel like foreigners. Even with the same ethnicity, they feel as if they are in a completely different society, because they were socialized in Germany. Their social references are from Germany. While the young Turks experience this, the elderly do at an even greater level. Those who lived in Germany for more than forty years and return

to Turkey do not find it as it used to be in the 1960's. The following quotation from a qualitative study illustrates this type of disillusionment:

"It's not clear, as if we're Germans or Turks. We are here for 30 years, what means that we spent the best years in our life in Germany. Whether we're German or Turks, we don't know."["Ob wir Deutsche oder Türken sind, ist nicht klar. Wir sind seit 30 Jahren hier, d. h., die schönsten Jahre im Leben haben wir hier verbracht. Ob wir Deutsche sind oder ob wir Türken sind, wissen wir selbst nicht."]

The identity issue of the third generation

Many German people have strong prejudices towards the Turkish people in Germany, especially of the younger generation, who were born in Germany and are naturalized German citizens. The third generation of Turkish immigrants are often accused of not wanting to integrate themselves into the German society. It is true that young Turkish immigrants are not as educated as their German peers, are more often unemployed, and more often caught in conflict with law than immigrants of other nationalities. It remains to be seen why young Turkish people have problems with cultural integration into the mainstream society.

One cause is the poor education. As already mentioned the first generation of Turkish immigrants were unskilled workers from the rural areas of Turkey. They did not plan to stay in Germany for more than two years, so their willingness to learn the German language must have been very low. Many left Germany and went back to Turkey, while others stayed. However, for those who stayed, they still faced the language problem. This included many families who lived in Germany for more than forty years.

The social and inter-ethnic attitudes within the German (host) society have changed dramatically since the early 1960's, including an increase in prejudices and xenophobia. Many Turks were originally only supposed to be in Germany for two years. School teachers did not have many expectations, show support or provide attention for Turkish children, despite the fact that school education is the key to social integration. In short, rather poor school education for Turkish youngsters has become a first step in long unemployment. This was the first "vicious circle" that many Turkish families were caught into.

Another issue is the conditions of the neighbourhoods. Most Turkish people live in districts inhabited predominantly by other Turks, causing them to be separated from the mainstream society. A step towards integration would be to get more direct contact between the Turks and Germans. One of the consequences of such a cultural isolation is a rather low rate of mixed marriages, as low as 5% in Turkish minority population. There is also a religion problem. The vast majority of Turkish people are Muslims. This creates an enormous gap between them and the Christian German society. Turkish girls with headscarves are often heavily discriminated both in schools and in public places.

All these mutually interwoven problems make the identity issue of the third generation of Turks in Germany complex. They are excluded from mainstream society in many ways. In Germany they stay “the Turks”. They do not belong to the Turkish society and culture either since their social development occurred in Germany. Those returning to Turkey cannot identify themselves with the Turkish way of living, and are not accepted by that society either, since they are regarded as “the Germans”. The result of this social exclusion process from both nations can be detrimental for building any kind of national identity.

Comparison

The Polish and Italian immigrants seem to cope better with integration into the German mainstream society. One reason for this could be that both countries are historically Christian, posing no problem with religious integration in German society. On the contrary, the Islamic religion of the Turkish people is alien to the vast majority of Germans. In addition to that, the terrorist attacks in 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York deeply touched the German people as well. Since then, the public fear of the “Islam” created another obstacle for young Turks attempting to integrate themselves into the German society.

The lifestyles and mentality of both the Polish and Italian immigrants are far more similar to the German, Westernized way of living in comparison to the Turkish way of living. In the statistics of the country’s Federal Office for Migration and Asylum, there is evidence that Polish and Italian people prefer to live in neighbourhoods and districts inhabited predominantly by native Germans. On average of both the Polish and Italian immigrants are better educated and have significantly lower rates of unemployment compared to the Turkish population.

Conclusion

Integration and identity of the third generation of Turkish immigrants are complex problems. These two issues are highly interwoven causing problems. If the young Turkish generation is not able to build their own identity, they will not be able to integrate themselves either in the mainstream society.

The Turkish president Abdullah Gül asked the Turks in Germany to learn and speak the German language fluently. In his opinion, the language is the key factor of integration. He suggested enrolling Turkish children in language courses as early as kindergarten simply because it will be easier beginning in elementary school.

However, a direct integration of Turks in Germany might be not enough; even impossible at the time because of the existing prejudices and xenophobia from the Germans. Germans should also learn how to live in a multi-cultural society.

Many populist politicians tend to reinforce xenophobia however, with statements such as the one quoted below:

"I don't have to acknowledge anyone who lives by the state, who refuses this state, who doesn't provide and support the education of their children, and continuously produces new small headscarf girls." ["Ich muss niemanden anerkennen, der vom Staat lebt, diesen Staat ablehnt, für die Ausbildung seiner Kinder nicht vernünftig sorgt und ständig neue kleine Kopftuchmädchen produziert."]

This statement was made by Thilo Sarrazin, a politician of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), former chairman of the National Bank of Germany, who was removed from this position because of this particular statement made about the Turks in Germany.

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