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## WHIRLING HISTORIES

### THE STRUGGLE THAT WILL SHAPE TURKEY'S FUTURE

“The Ottomans were loved and respected by the nations they ruled. The *millet* system was a righteous system in which every religious minority could preserve and practice their religion freely as long as they paid their taxes,” we Turks were taught at school.

Furnished with this information it comes as a shock to find out that the children of those nations might feel differently. For us, for example, the *devshirme* system let the children of impoverished non-Muslim families climb the social ladder all the way up to becoming a Grand Vizier. For the nations ruled by the Ottomans, *devshirme* system took away their beloved offspring and assimilated and converted them to Islam.

Notwithstanding differences in the interpretation of the past, it is even a bigger shock to realize how vivid those memories remain, passed on from one generation to the next in former Ottoman lands, be it the Middle East, the Balkans or among the Armenian *diaspora*. “Countries under the Ottoman occupation often had to live under severe conditions. This fact is not completely forgotten even though it happened in the 16th and 17th centuries,” the Brussels-based Russian Orthodox Church proclaimed on its website. “The sensitivity of South-Eastern Europe to its history needs to be taken into consideration... The culture, traditions and way of life that characterise Turkey are far distant from the one, which has roots in the other countries of South-Eastern Europe.”

Under these circumstances, one of the biggest challenges that Turkey faces in its negotiations to join the EU, launched earlier this week, will be the struggle between memory and amnesia. This is a new state, a new generation and a new country, Turkey reminds again those who only see her through the spectacles of her past.

If Turkey as a whole leans more toward rupture and amnesia, the Austrians this past week have proved to be inclined to the other end—toward historical continuity and rigid memory that sees today’s Turks as directly descended from the men who besieged Vienna more than 300 years ago. The insinuation is clear: Turkey is the same old Turkey and hence unfit for membership in Europe’s elite club. In Austria, a recent poll found 82% of the population opposed Turkish accession to the EU. Kurt Krenn, the Bishop of Sankt Pölten, have warned against an “Islamization” of Europe, at a time when the Muslim population in Austria stands at around 300,000.

The past haunts Turkey as well. Yet it too often goes unrecognized that Turkish civil society is profoundly heterogenous, replete with differing voices that co-exist and come into conflict with each other. The recent Armenian Conference here, which was held last week, shows that Turkey’s civil society and its media are a diverse and dynamic lot. We, a group of intellectuals, had gathered to discuss the 1915 massacres and deportation of Armenians. We are pressing the government to recognize the atrocities inflicted by the Turkish authorities upon the Armenian minority. The justice minister prevented us from meeting last spring, and a local court tried, but failed, to do so again. During the meeting, we were vilified and applauded by numerous voices

on the political left and right. While ultranationalism runs deep in Turkey, it is equally true that Turkish society is changing quickly and fundamentally, embracing multiculturalism and diversity. European politicians should pay more attention to the shades of gray in between. It is here where the potential for further social transformation lies.

There is not clash of civilizations between Turkey and EU, as there isn't between East and West. There is a clash of opinions within each and every country. On the one hand are the ones who believe that they are in no need of, if not better than, others. They want to live with and within people who are just like them—people of the same religion, the same genealogy, and the same prospects. They have little faith in “foreigners”. On the other hand are those who believe that we're all dependent on one another—financially, culturally and socially. That there exists no room in this world for uncompromising nationalism but only for constant give and take between nations and peoples. Among the former, in the countries located in the West, are the religious conservatives and nationalists. Among the latter are the cosmopolitans and libertarians. The clash is not between nations but within nations.

A similar clash is going on in Turkey—albeit with a difference. Here, the clash is between those who are oriented toward the state and those oriented toward civil society. Dedication to the state machinery is strong. It can form crooked and unusual alliances between army officials, conservative bureaucrats, fiery diplomats, ultranationalist “Gray Wolves,” ultraleftists, Kemalists, and some Islamists. In modern Turkish history, the three military coup d'états as well as various illegal acts of the nationalist paramilitias have all been legitimized in the name of “protecting the state interests.”

Those who favor the rise of a civil society want to diminish the role of the army, the state machinery and strengthen the cosmopolitan, multicultural, multiethnic strains from Turkey's past to build its future. This pressure will bring great changes to the country, and the EU can help or hinder it.

As part of this process, Turkey must come to terms with 1915. But it won't help for the EU or the European Parliament to impose the recognition of genocide as a precondition for membership. It will only serve to increase hatred against those of us who are critical of the state ideology. The distinction between change coming from the “outside” and “inside” is one that should be taken into account when it comes to understanding the “ordinary” people in Turkey. Any decision perceived as “imposed” from above or outside is bound to spark a nationalist, defensive reaction in which open-minded intellectuals become targets. It is the old “anti-imperialist backlash” that we have seen all around the world. Already we have been receiving e-mails and letters, asking us “are you guys happy now, is this what you wanted all along by organizing the Armenian Conference, you intellectuals are in collaboration with anti-Turkish EU politicians....”

So, with respect to facing the past, and perhaps rewriting our common history, the change we all sorely need has to come from within Turkey, not from beyond its shores, and definitely not put in front of Turkey as a “condition” for anything. By trying to isolate or block Turkey, Austria and other EU skeptics are undermining the forces of change in my country. If the isolationists win, we will all lose—Austrians, “Europeans” and Turks.

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