

TURKISH IDENTITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF EUROPE*

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Abstract

The paper concerns the perception of Europe as a determinant of Turkish identity. It attempts to pursue the trajectory of the perception of Europe by referring to the understanding of the concept among the intelligentsia and the political elite starting with the 19th century. Turks were mostly seen as the other of Europe at least until 1856 when the Ottoman Empire was included into the Concert of Europe. Even before that date, relations with Europe had a determining effect on the Turks' perception of themselves and their vocation in the world. Since the beginning of Ottoman decline vis-à-vis Europe, Turkish identity in relation to Europe included two opposing elements: a yearning for Europe coupled with a sense of mistrust. The development of those two types of attitude can be traced back to the Empire, to the 17th century when the Empire began to decline vis-à-vis European powers. The governing elite intended to reverse the decline by emulating European countries in science, military craft, education etc. The decline of the Empire vis-a-vis the West, the demise of the Empire, the War of Independence and the formation of the Republic had important effects on the shaping of Turkish identity. The paper attempts to pursue the trajectory of the perception of 'Europe' by referring mainly to perceptions of the Turkish political elite and intelligentsia starting with the 19th century up to the present day. It thus tries to analyze the significance of the concept of 'Europe' in determining Turkish socio-cultural identity.

Decline of the Empire

Relations between the Ottoman Empire and Europe go back to earlier periods of the Empire when it was still in the process of expansion. However, in those days the relative superiority of the Ottomans over Western Europe

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did not necessitate the adoption of any aspects of the Western system. The Empire began to retreat against European countries from the 17th century onwards. This took the form of military defeats and increasing unrest within the Empire especially in the Balkans due to the spread of nationalist movements. The 1699 Treaty of Carlowitz deprived the Empire of Transylvania, most of Hungary, Podolia, and Dalmatia. In 1683 the siege of Vienna failed and in 1686 Budapest was lost. The military decline of the Empire vis-à-vis the well-regulated European armies led to reflection on the causes of the decline and a comparison with the advances in military technology in the West. It was mostly thought that the development of the West in the military and industrial fields and the Ottomans' failure to keep up with those developments were the key reasons behind the decline¹. At the beginning of the 18th century the importation of the military institutions of the West and its military might and technology emerged as an important question. The need to catch up with the West led to a growing interest in the West. The reform movement was initiated in several fields: military, engineering, education, administration, judiciary. Modernization of the Ottoman Empire meant import of Western institutions and ideas. With the proclamation of the Tanzimat Charter, reform process spread to other fields of governance, and involved the adaptation of Western social and political institutions². The Tanzimat Charter included individual rights incorporated in the principles of the protection of life, property and honour.

The move to adopt the West although usually superficially was coupled with disappointment concerning the foreign policy moves of the Great Powers to exploit and dismantle the Empire. The Empire was left in a situation whereby it was completely overtaken by the economic and trade privileges given to Western powers and was turned into more or less a puppet in their imperial games. The initiatives for reform ran into the opposition of conservative elements within the state and the public mostly on the grounds of protecting Ottoman values and culture against Western values. A tension developed between those intellectuals imitating the Western lifestyle, and those that criticized such imitation and emphasized traditional culture.

Graduates of the new schools modelled along the Western system (military school, school of administration and military medicine) were convinced that the roots of Western development lay in positive sciences and admired the West's power. Even after the disappointment of the Balkan war,

a leading Turkish intellectual said that "There is no other civilization. Civilization is the European civilization". Not only technical issues but also issues related to arts, literature, philosophy and lifestyle came to the attention of the Ottoman intelligensia. While previously European influence was felt mostly in the fields of military technology, medicine and engineering, increasing contacts with Europe, and learning of European languages caused the development of an interest in European culture and society as a whole ³. The elite began to adopt the European lifestyle which proceeded concomitantly with the despise of the traditional ways. While sipping coffee in a French style café a character in an Ahmet Mithat story expresses his admiration for the niceties which surround him: "This is the real life", he utters ⁴. The new generation of intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century knew Arabic and Persian but rarely used them. They were interested in learning French and in this way came to know French literature and philosophy. A leading intellectual of the period Hüseyin Cahit described the importance of French in his life⁵: "What were the forces that saved my head from the marshes of skolasticism, opened up new horizons in front of my eyes and freed my spirit? Now I gather that the force that above all had an effect on my awakening was French language and culture".

Such intellectuals of the period adopted European philosophers, writers and poets as their own. We observe an idealization of the West that made Europe synonymous with such revered values as personal honour, freedom, mind, honesty, comfort, beauty and the arts ⁶. On the other hand traditional culture represented everything that was rotten, degraded and foul for them. That idealization depended on only a superficial analysis of Western civilization not knowing sufficiently the fundamental dynamics of Western culture and civilization. The crude westernization philosophy can be discerned in Hüseyin Cahit's words⁷:

"Whether we like it or not, we are bound to Europeanize. In the same way as the trousers we are wearing, our literature will also come from Europe".

Another current of thought developed was to preserve traditional values while adopting the technical skills of the West. The westernized attire and lifestyle of some of the elite constituted a subject of ridicule by others. It constituted a popular theme of the first Turkish novels as symbolized by Behruz Bey, in a novel by Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, who made a fool of

himself by using French without really knowing it, and by his complete rupture from the masses ⁸.

The adherents of this school of thought who could be found among Islamists, Ottomanists or the new Turkish nationalists did not reject the West as a whole but were particularly concerned about the possible effects of European culture on local culture. For them the West consisted of good and bad parts. It was possible to adapt the former and reject the latter. The good parts were technology and industrialization, while the bad parts concerned mostly societal values and culture that were foreign to the country. An important ideologue of Turkish nationalism, Ziya Gökalp drew a differentiation between culture and civilization. According to him it was possible to become a part of European civilization while preserving our culture. In his opinion Turks became part of three civilizations during their history: the Far Eastern civilization when they were living in the form of tribes in Central Asia, Eastern civilization in the time of the Sultanate Empires, and lastly the Western civilization now that they have formed a nation-state. He rejected attempts at forging a balance between Western and Eastern civilization as futile ⁹. He summarized the new principle of the Turkish society as follows: "I belong to the Turkish nation, believers of Islam, and Western civilization. ¹⁰ "

War of Independence and Founding of the Republic

The situation in the initial stages of the Republic was far from ideal. The consecutive wars the Empire had fought, the Balkan Wars, the First World War and lastly the War of Independence resulted in large losses of territory and population and confined the new state to Anatolia. The new state had very few resources and inherited a mostly devastated piece of territory. The wars since the end of the 19th century caused people from various ethnic groups who used to reside in the Balkans, the Caucasus and other regions to settle in Anatolia. People were forced to leave their homes and belongings behind and to seek an uncertain future in a previously neglected land. The architects of the new state, under the leadership of Atatürk were intent on creating an independent, modern, secular, Europe-oriented, and Turkish nation-state. The new national identity was basically irreligious, leaving religion in the private realm and preventing its public and political manifestations as much as possible. Although Turkish identity was supposed to be based on civic attachment ("Happy is the one who calls himself a

Turk"), it was based on subsuming the identities of other ethnic groups living in the country under a general Turkish identity. A series of reforms were carried out in the initial stages of the Republic ¹¹: abolition of the Caliphate and Sultanate; secularism, abolition of religious courts, and dervish orders; adoption of Western attire; reform of the calendar; adoption of the Swiss civil code; adoption of the Latin alphabet; secularization of education. The reform process changed the main tenets of the State and cultural life. The reform of the alphabet and education system represented a clear break with the past and provided for the education of Republican and nationalist elites. A new generation was educated along western lines reading Western classics and coming into increasing contacts with the West. The changes laid down the foundation for Turkey's eventual integration into Europe ¹².

The reform movement initiated with the onset of the Republic can in many ways be seen as a continuation of the reform movement that started in the 19th century. However, the outlook of the Republic was in a fundamental way different: The new Republic was no longer the 'sick man of Europe'. It was a newly founded nation-state that claimed equality with all other European nations ¹³. Turkish nationalism did not have a strong anti-Western component. Now that the enemy was forced out the new state could participate in Europe on an equal footing with other European states. As exemplified by a part of the lyrics of the National Anthem: "...The monster/beast with one tooth left called civilization...". This signifies the indignation felt by intellectuals in Turkey for attempts of European countries to dismantle the Empire. However, in spite of this animosity the Republic was based on the European model. Keyder explains that phenomenon in this way: The state elite since the 19th century was already Westernized in lifestyle. Thus, elite culture was already distant to folk culture and closer to European elites than to layman. The elite aimed at assimilating the masses into the western culture ¹⁴.

The reform process was mostly synonymous with westernization. However, there were some discussions about the extent of westernization. Some, one of which was Atatürk, were of the opinion that the Western civilization had to be taken as a whole, together with its technology, culture and social and political institutions ¹⁵. Modernity that was seen as the domination of science was concomitant with Western world view. Thus in the formation of the Republic Atatürk and his colleagues took a comprehensive approach to the issue of modernization taking on the European system that

won a victory over the Ottomans as a whole. Thus an acceptance of defeat and voluntarily assuming the culture and civilization of the victor could be discerned.

Turkey's relations with the world in the initial years of the Republic were mostly isolationist. Due to the experiences of the past an underlying suspicion of the intentions of other states determined the foreign policy of the new Turkish State that can be illustrated by the maxim "there is no other friend to the Turk than the Turk himself". Since most of the ethnic and national groups that gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire constituted the neighbouring countries of the new Turkish Republic, the fact that relations with them were uneasy can be understood easily. The effects of this outlook are felt even at the present day.

Post-WWII Era

Turkey, although not taking an active part in WWII, was included in the reconstruction of Europe under the aegis of the Western bloc. It became a member of the OECD in 1948, the Council of Europe in 1949, and NATO in 1952. General public opinion was in favor of Turkey's international standing. An examination of newspaper columns of the period shows that Turkey's inclusion into West European organizations such as NATO was presented as a verification of Turkey's moves at Westernization and as the most important development since 1856¹⁶. Both government and opposition advocated the aim of NATO membership. Eventually, the realization of membership was perceived and presented as a great victory, a question going beyond ideological differences¹⁷.

Although not taking part in the preparatory phase, Turkey showed an interest in the European Communities as well, applying for an association, which was mostly perceived positively as a contributory step to Turkey's development and modernization efforts. The signing of the Agreement in 1963 was received with jubilation. It was seen as a major step in the direction of greater integration with the West¹⁸. The signing of the Association Agreement confirmed that Turkey was perceived as a European country. Turkey's inclusion into the Western camp due to strategic and security considerations relegated the issue of culture and values to a secondary position. The Turkish prime minister, İnönü, in the signing ceremony of the Agreement said: "With this Agreement we are convinced

that we have transcended a serious stage in Turkey's route to Westernization, which is a behavior that had been made into a national policy by beloved Atatürk".

In those days any such moves in the direction of closer relations with Europe was seen as a national cause ¹⁹. The Republican People's Party, the one party that ruled the country until 1950, expressed that it was an inevitable decision for Turkey, a country which is "situated on two continents but in mentality and civilization is included in the Western world" ²⁰. A Moderate Right Party evaluated the Agreement as a precondition for the development and continuation of cultural ties with Western Europe. The only party that rejected the Agreement was the Turkish Workers Party since it viewed it as a new form of imperialism by financial monopolies and cartels. ²¹

In the period following the Association Agreement various political opinions, ideologies, and socio economic interests could express their views more liberally within the framework of the 1960 constitution which provided extensively for rights and freedoms. In this environment opinions against Westernization and greater integration with Europe began to be voiced, although not powerful enough to break the general elite consensus ²².

With the 1970s problems began to emerge in the world economic and political system. Such problems began to be experienced in Turkey as well leading to political instability, economic problems, civil unrest, radicalization of politics and anarchy. Turkey's priority was mainly socio-economic development and industrialization by way of import substitution. Industrialists were mostly against a rapid integration with the EC due to possible effects of trade liberalization on the industrialization process in Turkey. This reasoning also constituted a point of controversy within the bureaucracy and intelligensia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an institution devoted to Republican ideals, defended increased relations with the EC while other state institutions and agencies such as the State Planning Agency adhered to the developmentalist perspective arguing that liberalization of trade against the EC should proceed gradually to avoid harmful effects on industrialization ²³.

Populist politicians that took power after the transition to democracy aimed at enhancing a modernist and yet anti-western ideology within the limited framework of the Cold War discipline which could not be realized since Turkey was a part of the Western alliance. Modernization took on an

economic facet with the increase in American influence, the development of consumerism, markets, telecommunications, energy and other infrastructure allowing for the development of Turkey as a market economy in the Western bloc. The new state elite was not as strict as the Republican elite on the issue of westernization. Increased political participation of the masses allowed for a softening of the western oriented and secular ideology.

The Westernization project was attacked both from the Right and the Left. Islamist and ultra nationalist parties saw it as a threat to traditional and religious values. An ideologue of the newly emerging Islamic world view approached the issue in the following way: "Considering the fact that the ultimate aim of the Common Market is to construct a Union of European States, should we let Turkey become a province in this union?...: Since it will be a Union of Christian states, the inclusion of an Islamic-Turkish State can never be accepted" ²⁴. Another leading Turkish intellectual who stood as unique among others drew attention to the fundamental impossibility of Turkey's being accepted into Europe: "Even if we burn all the Korans, run down all mosques, we are Ottomans in the eye of the European; Ottoman meaning Islam. A dark, dangerous, hostile crowd" ²⁵.

On the Left, those advocating modernization without westernization, and rejection of the western economic model determined the discourse ²⁶. Most Marxist writers were skeptical of Turkey's integration into the EC. They mostly saw it as an endeavour that is doomed to fail due to among others the differences in development paths, and the lack of a bourgeoisie in Turkey. Arguing that the concept of Europe is not adequately grasped in Turkey, Ali Gevgili, argues: In Turkey it is the case that the outer appearance of Mr. European, is usually taken into consideration, and the whole chain of social, economic, and historical determinants... lying beneath the appearance are forgotten" ²⁷. Another Marxist economist argues that "the communitarian worldview of Islam and the statist principles of the Ottoman Empire do not constitute the necessary historical and cultural sources for the Turkish society to become a Western country. Turkey's attempts at changing civilizations may prepare the end of Ottoman-Turkish civilization, but cannot transform the Turkish society into a Western society" ²⁸.

Unresolved problems and parliamentary deadlock led to the military coup in 1980. Relations with the EC were suspended. Starting with the 24 January 1980 economic programme Turkey took on the course of economic

liberalization. With the transition to competitive politics, new political parties emerged on the political scene. The period witnessed the increasing importance of religion in politics and the waning power of Leftist movements. Anti-Europe movements that began to emerge in the 70s became increasingly vocal after 1980. The controversies over the Republican ideal of Europe as the altar of contemporary civilization continued with a further dissolution of the consensus on the modernization project and integration with the West.

Having in mind the experience of the military intervention, relations with Europe began to be seen as a guarantee of democracy and human rights and later on as a safety valve against the growing importance of the religious movement by the Left. On the right, the right-wing parties formed had a dubious attitude towards the West. The rise of a new group of capital based in provinces in Anatolia that were used to traditional networks, and adopted the Islamic discourse worked to soften the official hardline policy of secularism and westernism. They and the parties that represented them reflected a growing disillusionment with westernization and the main tenets of the Republic. However, these new right-wing politicians could not develop a viable anti-western project either. The argument was usually to stay traditional while adapting and using the technical power of the West ²⁹.

Those elements of Turkish identity that contrasted most with Europe, namely, religion and traditional culture became more pronounced. Together with the integration of the periphery to mainstream politics, a schism developed between defenders of the official doctrine and those vying for traditional and religious values. Reaction to Europeanization in private and public life became more visible leading to a questioning of official views. A process of reconciliation of traditional culture with europeanization also started that would make it possible to integrate with Europe while maintaining cultural particularities ³⁰.

After 1980 politics and questions of democracy and human rights increasingly began to dominate the relations between Turkey and the EC. While in the Cold War era Turkey's Europeanness was based on strategic and security considerations, in the post-Cold War world, politics and culture became the determinants of Europeanness. The end of communism and the ideological divide in Europe made the creation of a European space based on common values possible. Those proponents of the Republican posture

supported application to the EC since it would contribute to further westernization. Eventual integration was going to be the final destiny of the project of modernization and westernization. However, in this phase Turkey was under increasing criticisms from the West while such comments began to lead to reactions in Turkey, considered by most as intrusions in internal affairs³¹. Still steps in the direction of greater integration could be turned into political successes by political parties in Turkey as seen in the process starting with the application for membership in 1987. The issue of EC membership became a controversy among government and opposition all claiming that this could be achieved only in their period of government. Although it has lost its glamour, Europe still meant quite a few things to many people in Turkey. Ultra rightist parties criticized governmental policies on this issue laying emphasis on the loss of sovereignty it would entail³².

Following the application for membership and the negative opinion of the EC Commission, different opinions were expressed: There were those who advocated the continuation of the quest for membership. Some analyzed the economic benefits and costs of integration. On the other hand, there were those who contended that Turkey could never be accepted as a member no matter how hard it tried. Two general themes in this context were Turkey's inadequate standards in every field and the general feeling of mistrust towards the West³³.

Recent Developments

After the 1990's Turkey's perception of itself and the world underwent a transformation concomitantly with the changes in world politics. Islamist elites increasingly challenged the modernist project that depended on a secular and positivist state in Turkey. They ruled out the Republican alternative of westernization, and turned to Islam and relations with the Islamic world as references to guide their social values, lifestyles, and political worldview. While rising to power, the growing force of Islam was contained by the State Security Council under the leadership of the military. Although questionable in terms of democratic credentials, this move had an important effect on the outlook of the Islamists concerning Europe. They also began to see Europe as a guarantee of their democratic rights. Thus it is true that Europe became a reference point for most segments of society in Turkey. Not only Republican elites, but also the new generation of counter-elites acquired a sense of belonging to the Community of Europe³⁴.

The criticisms to the westernization project, although causing some alterations, could not change the essential preference of Turkish society³⁵. In the period following the Helsinki Decisions of the European Council, the main schism among intellectuals and political elite concerns the following point: While some attach primary importance to the unity of the state and see the Copenhagen criteria as creating problems in the particular state-society relations in Turkey, others give priority to democracy and human rights and see the EU as a guarantor of these values. Thus further integration with Europe is conditional upon change and reform. This situation creates a point of contention between those who want change and those who advocate preservation of the status-quo. Whether Turkey will be able to overcome those conservative forces and take up the challenge of full membership to the EU remains to be seen.

The sense of belonging or not belonging to Europe is likely to determine Turkish identity in the near future. EU membership may help resolve the major paradox of Turkish identity stemming from geographic and historical factors. Inclusion into the most important European organization would mean the conclusion of Turkey's quest for westernization. The perception of psychological isolation stemming from being situated on the periphery of two continents would be eliminated, burying with it the maxim "There is no other friend to the Turk than the Turk himself". On the other hand, membership may not serve to put the final note to Turkey's pursuit of self-improvement. Taking as a starting point the contention by Ole Waever that Europe has no borders but a new center and periphery that is defined with reference to lesser Europe's³⁶, it would not be wrong to suggest that the question of Europe will go on shaping the fundamentals of Turkish identity. The resolution of this ongoing questioning depends on a sense of self-approval and being at ease with cultural particularities. Even as a member of the EU, Turkey's reference point will continue to be other European countries that may be seen as 'more European'. Thus it may be likely that the paradox of Turkish identity in relation to the perception of Europe –both a sense of admiration and a sense of mistrust- will persist in the near future in the form of a sense of urgency to change and become more like the 'more European's and a sense of anxiety about the need to change and weariness of criticism due to not being able to fulfil the necessary standards.

Endnotes

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- 5 Cited in Berkes, N., *Türkiye'de Çağdaşlaşma*, p.371.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.372.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.377-8.
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