



EU'S REJECTION OF TURKEY: THE REAL UNDERLYING REASON

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ABSTRACT There are many negative elements in EU-Turkey relations. Some consider the difference in religion as the primary factor. The issue is deeper than that. It is cultural contradiction. When Europe says cultural diversity is richness, it tends to mean cultural integration.

*"Religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion."
Paul Tillich*

Many arguments have been advanced against Turkish membership in the European Union. Some have said that Turkey and its capital, geographically speaking, are not in Europe. Some have said Turkey is too big. These are not tenable arguments; they are flimsy in the face of "pacta sunt servanda" (agreements must be kept). Turkey's geography has not changed since the 1963 Treaty binding the then Common Market with Turkey. Turkey is and was big then.

What is not openly said as the main obstacle to Turkish membership is perhaps, according to many, religion. Many Turks believe that EU will keep Turkey outside because of Islam. However, this seems to be

too simple. Certainly, there is an element of truth, but it is deeper than that.

According to French sociologist and historian Amaury de Riencourt "culture and civilization are two expressions that have been used more or less indiscriminately and interchangeably in the past. The distinction between them is of organic succession. They do not coincide in time but follow each other during the life span of a particular society: each Culture engenders its own Civilization..."

Many writers and academicians have stressed the role of religion in a given society in the shaping of culture. Islam, in general, has not gone through a process of Reformation as was the case in Christianity. What is said in the Quran is often irrelevant and even misinterpreted among many



practitioners. In other words, the letter and spirit of the Quran have been ignored many times by its practitioners in certain Islamic societies. This is evident in the treatment of women and fine arts in Islamic societies; even in Turkey, while many steps had been taken to redress women's situation under Kemal Atatürk, the situation seems to have reversed yet again.

The EU report on gender issues in Turkey states:

"The gender gap in primary education continued to narrow and has virtually closed at national level. This needs to be sustained by continued encouragement of girls' enrollment and prevention of school drop-outs, particularly in rural areas". However, gender equality and combating violence against women remain major challenges in Turkey.

Women's representation in politics, senior positions in public administration and trade unions are very low.

With regards to women's lowered participation in the labor market, the absence of sufficient child-care facilities, difficulties in access to secondary and further education and the existence of gender stereotypes are all contributing factors. Unpaid work in subsistence agriculture and employment in the informal sector continue to be challenges. There are no social inclusion mechanisms for women to

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counter-balance the impact of poverty, migration and other socio-economic problems. The situation of children, especially of girls, at primary boarding schools needs attention in order to avoid drop-outs and increase the quality of education. The safety of minors in these institutions, in particular girls, is a cause for concern and was debated in the press. There is a need for a transparent and objective review of the system. The gender gap in secondary and other levels of education persists. School textbooks still contain stereotypes about women's role and status.

There is evidence of increase in honour killings. The number of shelters for women and other preventive and protective services remain limited in scope. There is no effective government oversight of

shelters and of the work of municipalities. Inter-institutional cooperation needs to step up. Training of law enforcement bodies and public institutions, particularly in the field of violence against women,

needs to be sustained. With regards towards domestic violence, execution of the ECHR judgment in the Opuz v. Turkey case is still pending. Family courts have been applying severe sanctions in cases of domestic violence and honour killings. However, this practice needs to be applied consistently. In one honour killing case, the Court



of Cassation reduced the penalty due to 'unjust provocation'.

Early and forced marriages remain a cause for concern. Such marriages could also lead to reproductive health risks and domestic abuse. There are no reliable figures on the incidence of such marriages. Women organisations report deterioration in their dialogue and their cooperation with relevant public institutions, at both central and local levels. Implementation of the national action plan on gender equality and violence against women lacks sufficient human and financial resources. The action plan does not contain firm and measurable targets.

Turkey's problem, despite its legal guarantees, is insufficient implementation in all areas, in particular on gender issues. Turkey continues to be a man's society. Even among politicians, the general consensus is that women are simply required to bear children and do house work. The gap of mentality between urban and rural areas is huge. Even in big cities the practice between the center and periphery of the city changes immensely. In the peripheries many women go to work to gain money needed not because women are considered equal. And the money gained is handed over to the husband, the real head of the family. Therefore, the very fact that

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many banks and companies have women as executives should not give an image of equality of women in the society. Honour killings are considered routine especially in the South East. Many girls' suicides are either related to forced marriages or to honour killing

threats. Daily newspaper Milliyet continues a campaign for girls: "Father send me to school." The very fact that such a campaign is required only demonstrates how dire the situation is.

Note that the campaign is "father...." and not "mother send me to school" which clearly shows the patriarchal nature of the family. In many rural areas, the practice of having a second unofficial wife, kuma, remains widespread. The practice has even been globalised since some women are being brought over from the Maghreb countries. On UNDP's gender inequality index, Turkey ranks 77th. The importance given to women in Turkey is reflected in the Gender Empowerment Measure, released as a part of UNDP's Global Human Development Report in October. According to these results, Turkey ranks 101 out of 109 countries, behind Pakistan and Azerbaijan, effectively as the 8th country from last.

Headscarves remain another issue of controversy. Some in Turkey regard the wearing of headscarves as personal choice or freedom. Some see it as a



modernization of women; a way for women to reject the mainstream. Yet, many consider it as mainly a man's problem; namely a man's order (husband or father) to wear the headscarf. In other words, it is an expression of men's hegemony over women. This trend in Turkey has coincided with the growing ban on display of religious signs in Europe. Many high-level bureaucrats in Turkey complain that they cannot advance in their career unless their wives wear headscarves.

The society's approach, particularly in rural areas, and in some cases—the Government's approach, to fine arts also needs to be noted. A case in point is the dispute over a statue “Ode to Humanity” erected in Kars (bordering Armenia) by a famous Turkish sculptor ordered by the Municipality. The Prime Minister called it monstrous and demanded its removal. The problem over statues is not new in Islamic countries. Most recently, the Minister of Culture has ordered that many busts of well-known people be taken from the basement of the Ministry and dusts be taken off. These busts have been distributed to some municipalities for display as if to show that there is no prejudice towards this type of art. The fact that they have remained in the basement for some time is noteworthy. Practitioners of Islam have remained cool to many

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“western” forms of fine arts. The television series called “The Glorious Century” depicting Suleiman the Magnificent's rule has also been a matter of controversy over the sexual habits of the ruler. Many TV viewers believe that the Ruler (Suleiman) has been slighted but do not realize that this is not a documentary but a TV series. Many people point out that the core people of the present government cannot even watch a ballet performance. There are claims that some ruling party members refuse to shake ladies' hands. These may be considered as isolated cases; but many consider that they also reflect a certain mentality. These developments do not go unnoticed in the European media. Le Monde,

for example, gave the news of Prime Minister Erdoğan's remarks on the above-mentioned statue as “Erdoğan's latest victim.”

The latest row is over the new regulation on alcoholic beverages where its use in some areas have been restricted. The government claims that the regulation is compatible with EU norms whereas some fear that it would be the first step in banning alcohol. Furthermore, boy-girl relations in schools have come into news; in some conservative regions, sensitivity over sex have led many to fear that encroachment in lifestyles is growing.

In Turkey many radical elements exist in the society. Despite the



Quran's otherwise dictum some can even claim that repentance does not exist in Islam. The fabric of the society has changed in recent years. It has become much more conservative and religious.

Sharing of universal values brings with it the question of what universal values are. In the world universal values is a term on which there is no general agreement. The saying that "cultural diversity is richness" remains somewhat hollow. When EU speaks of cultural diversity, it mainly speaks of European culture. Many in the EU make a distinction between cultural diversity and lifestyles. There is widespread belief in Europe that the EU is an institution where shared lifestyles exist. More than cultural diversity, there is in Europe a tendency towards cultural integration. The presence of Turkish workers in Europe, particularly in Germany, has been a negative factor for these workers have been largely unable to integrate into the societies they inhabit. They have been seen as a microcosm of Turkish society. EU tend to regard them as a foreign element injected into the body.

Pacta sunt servanda is an important element of international relations. When a former German President was reminded of this important element in the case of Turkey-EU relations, the former President responded by saying "Are you as secular as you were in 1963!" This is a vital factor in Turkey's relations with the European Union. It is generally agreed that without

secularism democracy cannot exist.

Turkey's geographic location, its borders with the Middle Eastern countries, its large population can be considered negative elements for Turkish membership, however they are merely secondary factors. The overriding factor seems to be cultural difference for an EU of "citizens". If this assumption is right, we may see Bosnia joining the Union before Turkey. Some will say that Bosnia can be easily absorbed because of its size and population. I submit that "Bosnia's Islam" is considered part of "European culture" and will be considered a significant factor.

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