

**TURKEY AND EUROPE:
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
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An ongoing process of interaction with the West and the East has moulded Turkish history. As a country and people, we are at the crossroads of civilisations, religions and trade. Therefore, the external environment and its dynamics, and interaction with Europe – sometimes confrontational, sometimes harmonious – are among the decisive factors in our historical development. Thus, the Ottoman Turkish presence in Europe during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought forward new ideals and new patterns of social relationships, introducing human values and a highly egalitarian, efficient and sophisticated organisation in an era when feudalism, a lack of tolerance and exploitation of the people prevailed.

Ottoman-Turkish civilisation and its moral values contributed to the evolution of the Middle Ages into modern times. It turned Turkey into a safe-haven for persecuted ethnic and religious groups from the sixteenth century onwards – a role that Turkey had to assume during World War Two.

As modern times approached, interaction with the West contributed the external dynamics (which were mainly positive) for institutional reformation in Turkey during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Turkey's specific historical development – its cosmopolitan characteristics, its civilisation melding Western and Eastern values, a multitude of beliefs and ethnicities – bestowed on Turkey a unique identity. We consider ourselves both European (which we have been for seven centuries) and Asian and view this plurality as an asset. Our history was moulded as much in Istanbul, Edirne, Tetova, Kosovo and Sarajevo as it was in Bursa, Kayseri, Diyarbakır and Damascus.

I want to elaborate on a few elements of 'European Culture' that we share, for sometimes there is a need to contribute to better mutual understanding.

On some issues, Turkish and West European perceptions differ, generally because of the different natures of their respective historical developments. In analysing and understanding the social fabric of Turkey, criteria based on race as a distinctive and major tool leads to the wrong conclusions. We do not conceive our citizens' ethnic origins to be a relevant factor in Turkey. No one really cares about the race of anyone else. The concept of race as a distinctive factor and as the main attribute of 'minorities' does not fit our realities and perceptions.

In Turkey, the Ottoman interpretation and implementation of Islam is one of the main components of cultural identity. For centuries, the state, not just because of its ethic beliefs, but also for its own survival, had to keep a multitude of ethnicities and cultures united. In line with these ideals and constraints, race did not exist as a social and political category. The main distinctive factor was religion and this distinction was implemented with great tolerance. Social and political differentiation was always conceived in religious terms, i.e., 'Muslim' and

'non-Muslim'. Muslim Ottoman subjects, whether in Sarajevo, Kosovo, Istanbul, Kayseri, Cairo, Aleppo or elsewhere, and of whatever ethnic origin, were equal in status. Contemporary Turkey based itself on this heritage of non-discrimination and further developed it through its modernisation process.

This is the background of our perceptions. Our understanding of "ethnic minorities" has some connotations with that of France and Greece: concepts of freedom based on individual citizens, and the conceptual exclusion of collective definitions and "ethnic rights" in France; religious categorising of minorities in Greece.

When some West European scholars apply to Turkey their version of social analysis based on their particular socio-cultural experience, they are misled. They overemphasise race as a social factor and generally draw the wrong conclusions. This is why Muslim Turks, whether of Balkan, Kurdish, Caucasian or whatever origin, are somewhat irritated when they are considered 'minorities' in West European discourse.

This, of course, does not mean that I am not – in fact, that we are not – in favour of freedom of cultural and democratic expression for all citizens who desire it. I have always said as a writer, as a politician, and as a minister, that there are some delays in certain points of our democratic development. This is the current situation, in spite of the fact that Turkey is among the European front-runners in some fields of democracy, such as gender equality, women's votes, secularism, upward mobility, etc. In some of the criticisms formulated, the points of departure might generally be justified. However, the overall, exaggerated conclusions are generally unjustified.

It is not an excuse or a pretext, but it is obvious that these difficulties were mainly due to the horrible terrorist-secessionist campaign that we faced. During the last 15 years, terrorists have killed thousands of civilians. There were cases such as the 128 primary schoolteachers who were executed in groups.

As the Prime Minister, Mr Bülent Ecevit, has explained, the more we free ourselves from the constraints of terrorism, the greater will be the momentum of democratic reforms. Actually, we are in the process of overcoming terrorism. It is interesting to note that, during the last ten months, Parliament, through a record-breaking performance, has enacted major constitutional changes and several laws, including legislative reforms. I do not think that these would have been possible if terrorism had not subsided. These conceptual and legislative changes represent a continuing trend; a trend initiated by Turkey's internal dynamics.

Concerning Turkey's European Union candidacy and membership, I always ask myself what Turkey will contribute to the EU; what its real input will be; what enhancement Turkey will bring to the EU. And, what advantages will Turkey gain by being part of the EU?

As for the advantages, I believe that being part of the EU will provide Turkey with a challenge and with a greater opportunity to attain a higher level of rationality in all aspects of its organisational, political, social, democratic and economic life. The historical, cultural and geographical settings of Turkey, which provide for ample interaction with our international environment, enhance the contribution of external dynamics.

I can refer to the positive aspects of our existing partnership in the Customs Union. It was a huge challenge and is only four years old, but this union has further motivated Turkey to

reach an economic competitiveness, industrial infrastructure and skill level comparable with that of the EU. We have achieved this end without considerable economic assistance from the EU. I am not overlooking the limitations and burdens that this partnership has caused and is causing. However, we are already integrated in the economic dimension of EU.

I believe that initiating the process of joining the EU's political dimension will bring parallel results in reaching higher levels of a new rationale. Furthermore, we are now in a better position to take advantage of this process because we benefit from a strong government with a sound parliamentary majority – a privilege we have not had in Turkey for the last five years.

What Turkey can contribute to the EU is a historical experience of a different kind; a dimension only a country that for centuries was the representative of a huge territory and a unique civilisation can provide. Turkey also represents the assertiveness of its republican and democratic evolution, and its unique role as a 'model'. As the only country with a predominantly Muslim population and that has the ideals and practices of a pluralist democracy, secularism, the rule of law, human rights and gender equality, Turkey enjoys the privilege of being a paradigm of modernisation.

Furthermore, the post-Cold War political framework witnessed the appearance or the confirmation of several independent states. Of the multitude of those new states, Turkey shares a common history or a common language and cultural affinity with almost all in the Balkan's, Caucasus and Central Asia. This provides Turkey with a new international environment of historical, political and economic dimensions. Turkey thus becomes a centre for the emerging Eurasian reality and constitutes Western Europe's major historical, cultural and economic opening to Eastern horizons.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the EU has yet to firmly decide on its policies vis-à-vis the challenges of the emerging territories; whether it is interested in the vast opportunities of encompassing new economic, historical and cultural dimensions; whether it can contribute more to the harmonisation of civilisations in a world endangered by the much discussed clash of civilisations; whether it will assume a larger responsibility to create a better world for all.

Turkey contributes to all these causes positively, to some, perhaps, decisively.

To further develop our relations with the EU, both sides should put aside the confrontational approach that has sometimes been displayed. Generally, problems are solved more efficiently if the other party's sensitivities, concerns and constraints are taken into consideration. Western Europe, for a long period in history, has considered Turkey 'The Other', to put it in Edward Said's terms. Turkey was the 'anti-thesis', the 'Outsider'. Now there is growing evidence that this unfortunate categorisation is withering away. It is our mutual responsibility to ensure that this positive trend develops.

A clear decision was reached in Helsinki where Turkey was declared an official candidate for EU accession. This is a historical point in our relationship. With this the EU has demonstrated that it is indeed refuting the 'clash of civilisations' theory as well as 'The Other' mentality. We can only welcome this development that must be nurtured and strengthened.

Human values are universal. The Copenhagen criteria are values that are not particular to the EU; they are values millions share, both inside and outside Europe. They are values we share and that we have developed and will continue to develop. Turkey is aware of her

responsibilities and will adhere to them. The period ahead is still fragile. The history of Turkish-EU relations should make us tread carefully. The Accession Partnership, the National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, the screening process and financial co-operation are equally important components of Turkey's accession process. We expect the EU to fulfil its commitments and set the path for Turkey to join the 'family'.

I believe in a brighter future for Europe. I believe in Turkey's contribution to this future.