

“Euro-Turks”. A Commentary

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The term Euro-Turks has been coined to refer to the Turkish immigrants in Europe, mainly in Germany but not only, and their offspring. The term has been coined to distinguish Turks who live in continental Europe from those who live in Turkey and it may be seen as a fundamental contradiction with the political discourses that consider Turkey as part of Europe and hence as a future member of the European Union. Indeed why should Turks living in Germany or France be called Euro-Turks? Does this imply that Turks who live in Turkey are not European? Is there a contradiction in terms between Europe/European and Turkish? Or is this term precisely noting that Turks are European by definition and actually emphasizing this by turning the qualification European Turks into a single noun, notably Euro-Turks. This brief note comments on the relevance of the term Euro-Turks today.

Is Turkey part of Europe?

It would be worth providing here a brief history of the term Europe to actually demonstrate that at least Mediterranean Turkey should be seen as part and parcel of it. The name Europe is a transliteration of the Greek word *Ευρώπη*. The name finds its origins in Greek mythology: *Ευρώπη* is the name of a young woman, daughter of the Phoenician king Agenor (king of the city of Tyre on the coast of Sidon, in present day Lebanon) that was abducted by Zeus, the supreme ruler of Mount Olympus and of the pantheon of gods who resided there. Zeus, known in Greek mythology for his weakness for beautiful young women, disguised as a white bull, seduced and abducted Europe. He brought Europe to Crete to bear their offspring. There she later married the king of Crete. The place where she arrived (notably Crete) was to take her name, Europe, and their offspring would be called Europeans (*Ευρωπαίοι*), or so the story goes.

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Europe was referred to by Homer as the daughter of Phoenix in line with the narrative above, while in ancient Greek mythology in general, she was frequently mentioned as the sister of Asia and Libya (Africa). The three sisters symbolized the three land masses. It was Herodotus who stated that he could not understand why three names, and women’s names at that, should have been given to a tract of land that is in reality one. His argument is occasionally taken up today by scholars who note that Asia and Europe are in reality one land mass and that it is only our Euro-centric view of the world that makes us define contemporary Europe as a continent, separate from Asia and Africa.¹

Regardless of which version of the myth is valid, it is clear from the writings of Greek historians like Herodotus or first century cartographer Strabo that Europe was geographically located in the southeastern part of the Mediterranean basin, quite far from where the geographical and political centre of Europe lies today. Europe was also about water, about the Aegean sea and about the Mediterranean, not about land, nor was it in any case a continent of any sort. It was rather the shores surrounding the well-known and well-travelled southeastern part of the Mediterranean. In this perspective, the Turkish coastline and Minor Asia can be considered an integral part of the history and mythology of Europe. And Turks are more ‘European’ than Germans or Poles or indeed the French who are considered to be ‘in the heart’ of Europe today.

Naturally there have been more than 2,000 years in between these two periods, which have slowly marked Europe’s move westward, initially through the Roman Empire and later through the scission of the Catholic and Orthodox Church, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance which witnessed the centering of the cultural and geographical notion of Europe onto what is today continental Europe. Interestingly though, what makes

1 Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Idea of Europe. From Antiquity to the European Union*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

the connection to antiquity of contemporary relevance is precisely the political and cultural value that was assigned to it from the Renaissance onwards, when the Mediterranean sea and the Greek world were heralded as the cradle of European civilisation.

Two points are worth considering here. First, that Europe had its origins outside the borders of contemporary Europe and even outside the borders of ancient Greece – indeed the mythical origins of Europe and its cultural and political distinctiveness had more to do with Asia Minor, which is part of Turkey today, than with Europe itself. Second, that Europe was born out of its opposition to Asia, just as Hellas contrasted itself to Phoenicia and Persia. Europe was based on the notion of Hellenism that implied an opposition and a dualism between civilizations combined with a strong ethno-centrism. Thus despite its geographical Europeanness, the opposition or the tension between Turkey and Europe find its roots in these proto-conceptions of Europe.

Euro-Turks: What's in a name?

What is it that makes the Euro-Turks a contested group and a contested identity. The answer is less geographical or historical, as can be concluded from the above, and more political and indeed geopolitical.

The term Euro-Turks was coined to refer to those Turks that live in a European country other than Turkey and who are socially and economically integrated into that country, even though politically they may retain their Turkish citizenship. The relevant populations however do not use this term to refer to themselves, nor has the term any legal or political value for designating a certain status or set of rights. Part of the reason why the term Euro-Turks has not gained high currency in either political or academic debates is precisely its ambivalent connotation, that can be seen as positive, signaling belonging, but also negative, as signaling separation both from “other Europeans” and from “other Turks”.

It is also worth noting that generally the term has been used to refer to migrant populations and their descendants, in western and northern Europe, and not to native European Turkish populations, like those of Greece and Bulgaria. This is of particular interest as it signals that the very notion of Euro-Turks neglects the very populations that it could designate, notably those people of Turkish ethnicity that are native of the European continent.

The emphasis on the Euro-Turks in the last 20 years has mainly derived from concerns over their (more or less) successful socio-economic integration into their destination countries, particularly France and Germany. It is only in the last ten years that a consideration of their role as diaspora populations that mediate the process of Turkey's European integration has acquired salience.² However some 10 years after the EU granted Turkey the status of candidate country, in the process of acceding to the EU, the Euro-Turks appear more European than ever, while Turkey is drifting away from Europe.



Indeed we witness the debate on Europe's Turks coming to full circle today. While Europe is busy with its own economic (Eurozone crisis and global financial crisis) and political (worsening social conditions in the crisis-ridden countries, rise of the far right and xenophobia) concerns, Turkey is turning eastwards as a regional hegemon that can play a mediator's role in the crisis of Syria and in the overall international negotiation over what comes after the Arab spring in North Africa and the Middle East. Becoming a Member State of the troubled EU is becoming less and less appealing for Turkey as the EU is finding out the hard way that its economic unity as well as social solidarity among member states were pretty fragile. At the same time, the spread of the “Arab spring” in the Middle East and notably to Syria has opened up a new set of dangers of high instability in the region for Turkey but also a new opportunity to play the role of the quiet force that can act as a stabilizer. Turkey seems to be re-acquiring some of the strategic importance that it used to have during the Cold War. In other words, what frightens the EU, notably the rising Islamic political currents and Turkey's proximity to a number of not so stable countries, is Turkey's winning card as a regional power.

The importance of Islam and of the social and cultural integration of Turkish immigrants and their native descendants in different European destination countries is thus acquiring salience again today, while their role as diasporas mediating the interests of the home country as a prospective member state is receding.

Today, we are witnessing encouraging signs of not only socio-economic but also political integration of the Turkish origin populations of France, Belgium and Germany. This last, formerly a stronghold of ethnic nationalism, is experiencing today a pluralization of its public sphere, as two important German political figures are of Turkish origin. The co-chair person of the Green Party, Cem Özdemir, long known to be the only successful politician of Turkish origin, is now joined by a brand new State Secretary for migration, refugees and integration, Aydan Özoğuz, a Social Democrat in the new grand coalition government of Angela Merkel. Even if the political participation of Germans of Turkish origin remains under their actual potential (11 members in the Bundestag today compared to 5 in the previous Parliament, but still less than half of what they should be), the term Euro-Turks may be losing its currency further as we speak of Germans of Turkish origin or of Germans tout court.

² Ayhan Kaya and Ferhat Kentel, “Euro-Turks: A Bridge or a Breach between Turkey and the European Union? A Comparative Study of German-Turks and French-Turks”, in *EU-Turkey Working Papers*, No. 14 (January 2005), <http://www.ceps.be/node/1035>.