



Zeynep Devrim Gürsel
Biting my tongue

With the Turkish accession process underway, the task of patriotic Turks is to ingratiate their nation to Europe. This means playing down cultural differences when presenting Turkey to the outside, and stifling controversy at home for fear it may be off-putting. Here, one Turkish ex-patriot describes her difficulty in answering "the Turkish Question".

The new shoes that looked good in the shop window are blistering your feet, and the tag of your shirt is chafing your skin. But you've been told by your parents or some other figure of authority to be a "good guest". You're visiting people they respect; they want to make a good impression and have warned you to be on your best behaviour. But your only thought is to go home, to change, and not to have to sit so primly. A common childhood memory, surely.

But imagine you had been a guest perpetually? How long could you have remained on your best behaviour?

This is the question facing Turkey in its bid for EU membership. With French president Jacques Chirac stating that Turkey needs to undergo a "major cultural revolution" if it is to join the EU, the message is clear: only once Turkey has become more like Europe will Europe consider allowing a country that is culturally different from it to join. What is mandated is not simply adherence to certain parameters of democracy or human rights, but a *cultural* revolution. Of course Europe welcomes cultural diversity, but preferably diversity in its own image. Not only is best behaviour called for; the guests will only be invited to stay if they convince the hosts that they are not so different after all. The guests continually try to avoid saying anything that could cause controversy or displeasure.

Just one day after Chirac's demand for cultural revolution, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso proclaimed that "Turkey must win the hearts and minds of European citizens", since ultimately they are the ones who will decide the fate of the country's membership. Barroso's words highlight what Turks have known for years — every encounter between a Turk and a European is an opportunity to shape Europe's impression of Turkey. It's become very difficult to imagine meaningful intercultural dialogue between Turks and European citizens, since only one side is judged to have the right to vote. It's not only a matter of one country's head of state mandating cultural revolution in another democracy. Barroso's words indicate that this is not just a round of high-level political talks, but a call for Turks to charm each and every European tirelessly for as long as the accession process may take. Suddenly, being a patriotic Turk is about getting European citizens to like you.

But one cannot be on one's best behaviour forever. For fifteen years, I've been a Turk abroad, living mostly in North America and Europe. After spending a year in Paris in 2004, I was relieved to move to Berkeley, California, thinking I might escape the daily interrogations about Islam, terrorism, and "what Turks are really like". As an anthropologist, I value intercultural conversations. But when such conversations occur in the framework of EU admission, I can never speak merely as myself, but must always be a spokesperson for other Turks, all Turks. Immediately, I feel I need to peddle Turkey, touting its European-ness.

On 4 October 2005, when the EU officially opened membership talks with Turkey in Luxembourg, an Italian neighbour slipped a note under my door: "Welcome! Now, see U in the EU. (Just try not to take Vienna again, ok?)"

One young man, who had been kind enough to lend us his electric drill, commented, upon hearing I was Turkish, "Great. We must sit down for a long drink, because I have a million questions for you since all we talk about in Italy is whether or not the Turks should be allowed to join." And while I don't doubt the sincerity of these friendly gestures, my heart sank at the realization that though I had escaped to California partly to avoid having my daily interactions dominated by "the Turkish Question", I was immediately being required to be a good Turk, to vie for the hearts and minds of European citizens.

Two days later, I happened to be on a flight from New York to Amsterdam, when the all too familiar questioning returned. "Great!" beamed the German doctor sitting next to me, "So you can tell me what it is like to live in Turkey *as a woman*. Isn't it true that the majority of people are Islamic extremists?" I wanted to ask if she had any idea just how offensive her question was. Instead, I donned my patient, well-worn explanatory tone.

"70 million people aren't all the same", I replied.

"Oh, of course not. I mean I know there are some very family-oriented, hard-working Turks as well. After all, if you need a plumber at 11:30 on a Friday night, you don't even bother calling the German plumber, because he won't answer the phone till Monday. Call the Turkish plumber and he'll be over right away."

I bit my tongue and hid in a book for the next six hours.

You might think I'm cowardly or intolerant of ignorance, but I'm merely sceptical of conversations between people from two groups, one of whom has been warned of its need to win over the hearts, minds, and potential votes, of the other. I felt I was being offered two roles to choose from: the Islamic extremist or the obliging *Gastarbeiter*. These can't be an equal exchange between two adults, since by their very structure they become the performance of slogans. Implicit in her enthusiasm about my being a Turkish woman was the message, "It's not you, or Turks like you, that I worry about. You look like me, you talk like me, and you don't veil. It's the others I'm asking about — the ones who are, you know, different."

After the first few years abroad I stopped engaging in such conversations because I caught myself trying to play down the existence of those "other Turks", to deny their number and their beliefs. I heard myself talk about fellow countrymen as inconveniently non-European, and became deeply ashamed of how well I could play the game of "reshaping the appearance of my country to

suit your wishes". Now I avoid these conversations because I find them degrading.

But if I were a "good" Turkish citizen, Barroso's words would incite me to seek out every opportunity to ingratiate myself, and therefore Turkey, with Europeans. This feels a lot like proselytizing. When Tayyip Erdogan explained his globe-trotting political marketing efforts at the World Affairs Council in San Francisco in July 2005, he invoked the image of peddlers from his youth, who used to ride on ferries hawking their goods. Surely part of this is politics as usual. However, Turkey can't afford to spend the next decade focused primarily on a popularity campaign targeted at European citizens. As a guest, there are many things that one learns not to talk about; controversies are politely elided, open debates deferred. It is precisely these conventions that need to be encouraged today.

A new political energy is emerging within Turkey. Issues that have been suppressed for too long are beginning to surface. This is a time of excitement, change, and optimism for democracy in Turkey. But these debates are accompanied by discomfort and confrontation. It would be doing a disservice to democracy and to a thriving new generation of Turks to clamp down on these debates just because they bring up issues that don't fit with the glossy image being sold to the Europeans. Best behaviour is not conducive to profound social change, something that is messy by nature.

The onus is on Turks not to focus all their efforts on pleasing the Europeans. One country cannot mandate cultural revolution in another. Cultural revolutions are already taking place in Turkey that have to do with various elements within the population finding ways not only to coexist, but engage with one another, albeit with regular misunderstandings. But this exciting process, which has certainly been accelerated by the prospect of EU membership, is what stands to suffer, or even be stalled, if instead the country focuses solely on trying to be a Turkey Europeans feel comfortable with. Ultimately, the bid for EU membership stands to harm democracy in Turkey if it continues to be an incentive for Western-educated, upper class, secular Turks to talk over other Turks and to gloss over complex, yet vital, debate about inequalities, historical injustice, and thorny social issues. It is for European citizens to decide whether they want to buy into a publicity stunt that promotes unthreatening-looking Turks clad in Western brands who, just like European consumer-citizens, participate in a free-market economy; or whether they want to encourage free speech in a real-world democracy, in which difference is not just advertised, but meaningfully integrated into political structures. Is Europe ready for that kind of cultural revolution?

Perhaps then I'll stop biting my tongue.

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