



Eurozine News Item

Faces of Istanbul

"Istanbul has always been a master of transformation, but never has it changed its face so rapidly as in the last fifteen years", writes Jacqueline Schärli in her editorial of the latest issue of Swiss magazine *du*. "While fashionable young people sip overpriced drinks in clubs, and let their gaze wander across the Bosphorous to Asia, outside on the street old women with headscarves sell paper tissues to car drivers." Now, to coincide with the 18th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in Istanbul, *Eurozine* presents four articles from the issue, each revealing a different facet of the city that is the standard-bearer of Turkey's modernization process.

Elif Safak [describes](#) how a "pink halo" hovers over the traditional district of Üsküdar. "The whole district resembles a long-forgotten historical document that has been signed by countless women", writes Safak. "Many of the monuments, mosques and fountains, religious buildings and dervish houses were built by or for women." One such building is the Kiz Kulesi ("virgin's tower"), where, as legend has it, a princess was imprisoned. Today, the tower houses one of Istanbul's more exclusive restaurants.

In the countless cafes in Üsküdar, one can see young women from conservative families sitting holding hands with their friends. Kemalists and people from the West often think of "oppression" when they see a woman with a headscarf. But everyday life in Üsküdar offers many examples which throw into question the all-too-crude generalizations about Islam and religious belief. There are various types of headscarf, just as there are many different reasons for wearing it. But there is only one word for it. The word 'headscarf' misses all too often the complexity and the fluent character of Üsküdar. Sacred and worldly, political and individual, tradition and modernity are closely intertwined here.

"Whoever has a house survives": that's the truth about life in the hilly eastern suburbs of Istanbul, [writes](#) Hanna Rutishauser. In the 1940s and 1950s, migrants from Turkey's diminishing agricultural regions flocked to Istanbul seeking work in the new industries. In order to accommodate the new workforce, the authorities allowed the immigrants to build makeshift dwellings — or *Gecekondu*, literally "a house that is built overnight" — on public land. In the 1980s, the *Gecekondu* turned into *Apartkondu*, semi-legal blocks whose residents pay rent to a "property mafia" profiting from the legal loophole. Today, the *Gecekondu* districts of the past have acquired the trappings of the modern city, while new settlements keep appearing: the government wants to allow construction on 4700 square kilometres of forest outside the city.

The Greek minority in Turkey are now the government's small change in the battle for EU membership, [says](#) Georg Brunold. His account of the modern history of the Turkish Greeks begins with the defeat of the Greek by the Kemalist forces in 1920, when around 1.8 million Greeks were repatriated, leaving behind 120 000. Since that time, Istanbul's Greeks have borne the brunt of Turkish resentment: most notoriously in 1955, when a mob destroyed Greek businesses in the Beyoglu district, after an agent provocateur firebombed Atatürk's birthplace in Thrace. For the two thousand or so Greeks in Istanbul today, Europe represents their greatest hope for better prospects.

As Klaus Kreiser [writes](#), Istanbul has long been a European metropole. Be it the introduction of an entry charge to the Hagia Sophia in 1934 or the first McDonald's in 1986, the city's Islamic Ottoman heritage has been fighting a losing battle against modernization since the 1920s. "In Turkey today", writes Kreiser, "practically no one longs for the Sultans and the Caliphate. [...] The modern Turkish concept of *nostalji* evokes instead Ottoman haute cuisine, *kütahya* floorboards in a modern bathroom, and a glass cabinet in the corner of the living room containing a handwritten Koran belonging to one's great grandfather. [...] The idealization of the past cannot cure the ills of modern megalopolis. For most residents of the city, there is no alternative to a Western way of life. A visible secular middle class has become the vanguard and the messengers of a European way of life, taking over every function previously fulfilled by the non-Muslim minorities. Whoever still doubts that Istanbul has become a European metropolis could learn better by comparing it to the cities of the Arabic East, to Tehran or Karachi."

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