

Roma and Nationalism in Turkey

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Roma¹ in Turkey face high levels of discrimination, despite their professed loyalty to the notion of “Turkishness” and support for Turkish nationalism. The fact that, unlike many Romani communities throughout Central and South-Eastern Europe, the prevailing part of Roma in Turkey are not confined to segregated settlements does not readily mean that they enjoy the benefits of equal citizens of the Turkish state. Negative stereotypes stigmatising Roma as “fickle” and “superficial” at best, or “criminals” and “vicious” people, are continually reproduced through the media, as well as being muttered as social idioms ad infinitum. On the whole, the general perception of Roma in Turkish society places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Beyond the stereotypical images, little, if anything, is known about Roma in Turkey by the larger society. Ethnic data is not officially gathered and the official state policy does not recognise minorities, except for the so-called “Lausanne Minorities”.² Traditionally tense relations between ethnic and religious groups, which would not or could not assimilate into the “Turkish identity”, and the state have forced most of these groups to hide or even totally reject their original cultural roots. Moreover, almost none of the ethnic groups in Turkey consider themselves as ‘minorities’. Among Kurds, Turkey’s most populous minority, for example, there are strong proponents of the idea that Kurds should be recognised as another majority parallel to the Turkish community rather than be accorded the “diminutive” status of a minority. Needless

¹ The authors of this article use the term “Roma” as a collective reference to a variety of communities (Roma, Dom, Lom) in Turkey usually identified as “Gypsies”, taking into account the fact that the term “Gypsy” in its Turkish version “Çingene” is associated with negative stereotypical images.

² The Republic of Turkey’s official description is that there are no minorities in Turkey, with the exception of those who were mentioned in the post-World War One Lausanne Treaty dated 1923; meaning Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Jews. In fact, in the text of the Lausanne Treaty there is no specific mention of any ethno-national origin. The only reference is to non-Muslims. Despite this, according to the state rhetoric, other non-Muslim groups in Turkey, such as the Orthodox Syrians, Catholic Chaldeans, Baha’is and Yezidis are not accepted as minorities. For the text of the Lausanne Treaty, see: http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne.

to say, as the concept of “minorityhood” is perceived as demeaning by the state and minorities themselves, little progress is made in terms of the recognition of universal standards of minority rights. Even the so-called “ground-breaking” legal reforms, triggered mostly as a consequence of the European Union accession process, produced modest advancements in both legislation and practice. Against this background, it is not surprising that Roma in Turkey perceive themselves as Turks with a Sunni Muslim affiliation, and tend to avoid public expressions of minority identity. The aspiration of marginalised minorities to “blend in” with the majority is a very understandable and historically familiar phenomenon.

Despite all the aforementioned obstacles, in recent years, a “surfacing” of ethnic identities can be observed. EU funding and political supports have been key aspects in nurturing Turkey’s civil society in the 2000s, assisting it to grow into a dynamic and resourceful factor in public life. Ethno-religious diversity -- a key aspect of Turkish social texture -- has not been dealt with much except for advocacy for the rights of the much repressed Kurdish minority, so it was a novelty that among other ethnic identity questions, the “Roma issue”, too, came to the forefront. Recent studies and civic activity focusing on Romani communities gave impetus to data gathering and furthered activists’ as well as academic and intellectual interest in the plight of Roma in Turkey.

It is also a unique development that Roma themselves are organising fast to promote their rights, and profile their communities through data gathering and research. The emergence of the Roma rights movement and the Romani studies field in Turkey in the mid-2000s is bound to generate public awareness and alternatives to the stereotypical images of Roma. It is especially important that such a grassroots movement earns respect and becomes resourceful enough to have a social impact, because currently there are almost no ‘successful’ Roma figures with the exception of a number of musicians in Turkey. This is not because Roma are unable to become outstanding in their professions but because prosperous Roma feel the need to hide their ethnic background due to fear of ostracisation.

Turkish nationalism and the concept of race

Nationalism has always been in the forefront of Turkey’s political and social agenda throughout the Republican history. In fact, nationalism could be referred to as the cornerstone of the Kemalist ideology that the Republic was founded upon. The key aim of the Republic was to craft a nation-state that would “reach to the contemporary level of civilization” and eventually surpass it.³ That target of the Republic was overtly nationalistic in the sense that it wanted to augment national pride through elevating the Turks to the high level of civilization, which they deserved to be a part of.

³ “Contemporary level of civilization” is a term coined by the founding father of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to refer to the desirable level of modernisation that the new state of Turkey should strive to reach. The West was seen as the source of this kind of enviable modernisation.

As a consequence of the secession of nationalities from the Ottoman Empire, fighting for their independence starting with Greece in the 1820s, the successive wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the population exchanges of the 1920s, first the Ottoman Empire and then the Republic of Turkey turned more and more into a monochrome society with ever lesser numbers of ethnicities and religions. Aside from the historical turns of the tide, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious imperial heritage of the Ottoman Empire was consciously suppressed in the Republican nation-state of Turkey. Once the initial turmoil of creating a new state was overcome in the late 1920s, the Kemalist ideology developed intensely, displaying more authoritarian, racially segregating and nationalist tendencies.⁴ The concept of the *Türk Tarih Tezi* (National History Thesis) in 1931 is an outstanding example of the racially-motivated aspects of the Kemalist ideology. The thesis ruled that “despite the fact that the Turks mixed with other races”, the Turkish language enabled them to preserve their culture and “their most sacred heritage, the Turkish intelligence”, alongside its other “pure-bred” qualities.⁵

The founding father of the Republic Atatürk and his step daughter Afet İnan, a historian, foresaw the foundations of Turkishness as oneness in politics, language, homeland, race and origin, historical and moral kinship. Although the allusion to race was not the first condition among the main cornerstones of Turkishness, it was a crucial factor for obtaining the ticket of admittance to the new Republican society. Eligibility for state foundations like the Military Lyceum and War Academy and the Mining and Exploration Foundation was premised upon being of the Turkish race.⁶

It is still a matter of academic debate to what extent the Republican elite were swimming on the shores of racism. Regardless of the various personal intentions of the Republican founding fathers, it can be said that they were most probably also embarking on segregationist ideas because they were allured to the fascist winds blowing in Europe, as well as the “milder” social Darwinist and imperialist supremacy idea(l)s.⁷

On the one hand, Turkish nationalism set Westernisation as one of its key goals, but on the other, the yearning for authenticity and qualm regarding the West were perceptible. The emphasis on racial supremacy of the Turks was a way of emulating the Western popular notions concerning the race and mirroring them back, digested as a part of the national ideology for the sake of proving Turkey’s pre-eminence among the nations.

⁴ Gökürk, Eren Deniz (Tol). 2002. “1919-1923 Dönemi Türk Milliyetçilikleri.” In Tanıl Bora (ed.). *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*. İstanbul: İletişim.

⁵ Ersanlı, Büşra. 1992. *İktidar ve Tarih Türkiye’de “Resmi Tarih” Tezinin Oluşumu (1929-1937)*. İstanbul: Afa Yayınları.

⁶ Ünder, Hasan. 2002. “Türkiye’de Sosyal Darwinizm Düşüncesi.” In Tanıl Bora (ed.). *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*. İstanbul: İletişim.

⁷ Ibid.

Racist ideologies and Roma

Turkish society has always taken pride in being highly tolerant in welcoming diversity, extending a helping hand to the underprivileged and steering clear of racism. However, the reality happened to be far away from that. There have been frequent instances of ethnic and religious tensions, the underprivileged suffered from discrimination and there were racist demagogues. In the early years of the Republic, Kurdish unrest had been a cause of major distress. In a similar vein, Armenians and Greeks were regarded as potential traitors. The ethno-religious pressures they faced caused many Armenian and Greek citizens to leave the country. Meanwhile, the Kurds were coerced to assimilate. The national education system and the mandatory military service were the cornerstones of education. Nonetheless, the financial deprivation of the regions mostly inhabited by Kurds undermined the effectiveness of the educational system. The traditional practice to keep girls home, uneducated, further contributed to the preservation of the Kurdish language as a mother tongue, despite state pressure to impose Turkish as the primary language. Kurdish nationalism has been a strong movement since the late 19th century. Furthermore, the Kurds possessed political power in Ottoman times. For Roma, who were more urbanised and did not retain a specified national identity, mother tongue and cultural practices were major sources of distinction in the early Republican times. Roma had little resistance power against the strong assimilationist pressures building up in the late 1920s, as compared to other ethnic groups since they did not possess a political movement or solid communal ties.

In general, Roma were not considered as a specific problem by the state elite as they did not oppose nationalist demands. But in the 1920s and 1930s, there were thinkers who believed that Roma should be expelled from the country or assimilated. One of them, Nihal Atsız, wrote that “the Gypsies should be sent back to India” or if that was not possible, they should be relocated in the easternmost town of Hakkari and “molded into real men” there.⁸ Atsız spoke of the “Gypsy problem” as “an internal wound that should be touched upon”.⁹ According to him, “Turkifying the Gypsies and integrating them among us [the Turks] and destroying the purity of the Turkish blood would be murder.”¹⁰ Atsız believed that ethnic cleansing alone could purify the Turkish homeland, Anatolia, from inferior races. Another extreme nationalist ideologue, Reha Oğuz Türkkan, preached that children under three who are of mixed blood line should be executed.¹¹

⁸ Atsız, Nihal. 1992. Makaleler 3 (Articles 3). İstanbul: Baysan Basım ve Yayın.

⁹ Atsız, Nihal. 1997. Makaleler I-IV (Articles I-IV). İstanbul: İrfan Yayınevi

¹⁰ Arslan, Emre. 2002. “Türkiye’de Irkçılık.” In Tanıl Bora (ed.). *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*. İstanbul: İletişim. See also Bakırezer, Güven. 2002. “Nihal Atsız.” In Tanıl Bora (ed.). *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*. İstanbul: İletişim.

¹¹ Ertekin, Orhangazi. 2002. “Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türkçülüğün Çatallanan Yolları.” In Tanıl Bora (ed.). *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*. İstanbul: İletişim.

The primary idea of the Turkish ultranationalists in the founding years of the Republic was to establish Turkish national unity and boost national pride through affirmation of racial superiority. Atatürk never officially supported these views, but did flirt with the idea of Turkish racial pre-eminence in his own way. This is why the 1930s was the prime time for extreme Turkish nationalism and racist rhetoric.

The escalating ideological zeal of the extreme right provoked the reaction of the state and in 1944, some of the most active individuals among the Turkish nationalists, including Atsız, were detained and faced trial in the Martial Courts. They were kept in prison for a year and were released in 1945. Towards the 1950s, Turkey established itself as a foreign ally of the US against the USSR. The severe opposition to communism on the part of the Turkish extreme nationalists at that time made them a useful instrument of the state for decades to come. By the end of the Cold War, they had become an integral part of Turkish political life and established a visible profile with a solid base of supporters in the Turkish society. Nonetheless, the prime time for Turkish extreme nationalism was to come with Turkey's embarking on the rocky road to European Union membership in the 2000s.

Contemporary Turkish nationalism and Roma

Turkey's civil society received an important boost by the EU accession process in financial and political terms. Nonetheless, the liberal atmosphere breathed in by this process was suffocated in the mid-2000s by a nationalist "counter-attack". The EU candidacy was a grand design shaking the very foundations of the Republic, but few could truly assess how fundamental a change was required to accomplish the EU ideals. It should also be mentioned that some EU Member States' reluctance to signal a green light to Turkey's membership, despite already agreed terms, did not help at all clear the tough road ahead for Ankara. In a matter of years, a complex of external and internal factors has blown away optimism which saw Turkey ripe for change and counted the days to EU membership, to give way to thundering nationalist overtures.

As of 2008, it is much more a challenge to discuss minority rights in Turkey than it was in the beginning of the millennium. Lynching attempts on civil society members propagating human rights; murder of the prominent journalist and human rights activist Hrant Dink; assassinations of Christian priests and missionaries; the harsh mood of debates between Kurdish political circles and the "Turks"; the highly nationalist expressions of a sizeable group of people in public events such as the 'Republican Rallies' in 2007; and the overwhelmingly jingoist tone of the media poisoned the formerly liberal atmosphere.

It is an interesting "paradox" that the Roma rights movement in Turkey found a niche for itself to flourish after 2005, despite the fact that nationalist winds blew hard. This paradoxical occurrence, in fact, should be cause of "hope". If the much marginalised Roma of Turkey found the zest to form dozens of civil society organisations, received considerable media attention when

many of the other minorities were attacked by journalists for expressing “different” opinions, and became vocal enough to travel to the Grand National Assembly to criticise the government at times when nationalist expressions peaked, then there should be room for optimism. But it should be noted that Roma in Turkey do not relate their activism to neither minority rights nor any other identity based struggle. Their key objective seems to be “equal citizenship”, i.e. equality of access to rights, especially social and economic rights. Therefore, the mobilisation process among Roma in Turkey by no means defies the nationalist winds. Nonetheless, it is still impressive that Roma are trying to mobilise for civil actions.

A recent case brought before the courts in İzmir in 2007 was indicative of the aforementioned dual nature of the EU process in Turkey. This case, known as the “Budun case”¹², encapsulates the ongoing nationalism versus liberalism debates in Turkey perfectly: On the one hand, there is an ultra-nationalist group that disseminates racist propaganda, and on the other, there are human rights activists who litigate and campaign against racism. However, the proliferation of ultra-nationalist propaganda through numerous media channels, like internet sites, marginal as well as mainstream newspapers, radio and TV stations, is overwhelming. This is complemented by a variety of anti-Semitic, racist and nationalist fiction and non-fiction works. It is even possible to come across appraisals of Hitler in morning hour TV programmes about family life, cooking, etc. The best-sellers of 2005-2007 period are by and large highly nationalistic narratives, rich in hate-speech against various minorities (mostly Armenians and Kurds), in addition to anti-Semitic and/or anti-Western tones. A casual search over the internet shows that racist expressions in various internet sites, blogs and chat forums are abundant.

Roma are not among the prime targets of ultra-nationalist and racist groups in Turkey. This is because the Kurdish Question looms large and tangibly affects everyday realities in the country. There has been an ongoing violent clash between nationalist Kurds and state forces for almost 30 years now, claiming more than 30,000 lives. While Kurds are the prime magnet for racist propaganda, Roma are sometimes apparently associated with the Kurds as the “vile races”. For instance, several internet sites call for attacks on both Kurds and Roma and stamp the latter as an ‘equally lesser group’.

In today’s Turkey, nationalism is a rising trend and all major political parties utilise nationalist rhetoric. A survey conducted by A&G Research shows that 50.1% of the public believes that nationalism is on the rise.¹³ Probably even more important than public perception of Turkish nationalism is the nationalist reactions of people. For example, 81.6% of the respondents indicated that they believed that it was wrong to use the slogan “We are all Armenians” as a reaction to the assassination of journalist and human rights activist Hrant Dink, a member of Turkey’s Armenian community. Meanwhile, 37% of those interviewed stated that their

¹² Details regarding this case can be found in the field research chapter, 107. page of this book.

¹³ Milliyet Daily, 12 March 2007. A&G Araştırma (A&G Research), “Milliyetçilik Yükseliyor” (Nationalism on the Rise).

“nationalist reflexes strengthened” as a result of contemporary events, such as the difficulties that Turkey faces on the way to EU membership, and the nationalist murders of 2007. Another survey indicated that 52.2% of the public was distressed by foreigners buying of land in Turkey. Likewise, 52% believed that the EU is set out to “dismember Turkey”.

Such examples designate that nationalism has the power to determine public attitudes towards socio-political developments in Turkey. It is especially worrisome that human rights activists and foreign donors who support the human rights movement in Turkey are condemned as plotting against the unity of Turkey. So far, this trend does not seem to have effected the Roma rights movement in Turkey. But it can be said that human rights advocacy in general suffers from nationalist pressures. The verbal and written threats and physical assaults curb the dynamism of the local human rights movement, and legal and authoritarian pressures, such as the court cases filed against human rights activists, lead to a huge consumption of time, if anything else. On the whole, human rights activists of Turkey have difficult times keeping their enthusiasm and belief in the human rights struggle alive. It should be underlined that personal conviction in the importance of human rights struggle is still the main driving force behind civic activism as institutionalisation and professionalisation of the NGO sector is still in the process of consolidation.

Conclusion

Currently, the Roma rights movement in Turkey is developing as a struggle for equal citizenship and not for minority rights. Many Romani activists involved in rights litigation or campaigning feel the need to stress that “they are not against the state, but merely looking for justice”. The concept of human rights is still alien to the majority of Turkey’s Roma and they feel uncomfortable when using the term, because they perceive it as contrary to the interests of the state. It is an unfortunate development that at this very early stage of Roma rights activism nationalist propaganda “the EU and ‘other foreign agents’ are aiming to destabilise Turkey by utilising human rights” render it exigent and intimidating for all activists. While the nationalist surge in Turkey might not be strong enough to drown the contemporary development of the Roma rights struggle, it is bound to stall and complicate the already rough road ahead, as well as delay initiation of the crucial discussion of minority rights.

