

IS TURKEY REALLY EUROPEAN?*

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The reaction of the Turkish government following the signing of an agreement between the Republic of Cyprus and Israel on January 13 in relation to the delineation of the sea economic zone between the two countries did not surprise Cypriots but provoked the reaction of Israeli officials as it was seen as far fetched and out of proportion. We should be reminded that Turkish officials stated that they consider this agreement null and void because the Cyprus problem remains unresolved. Turkey in essence stressed that it does not recognize any international agreements signed by the "Greek Cypriot administration" as it describes the Republic of Cyprus.

By the same token Chancellor Merkel was strongly criticized and indeed attacked by Prime Minister Erdogan and by the Turkish press for her statements during her visit to Cyprus on January 11 in relation to the responsibilities of Turkey for the *status quo* in the island. Moreover, Erdogan was compelled to use strong nationalistic rhetoric stating that Turkey will not back down in Cyprus and will not give an inch back.

There is no doubt that Turkey does not yet function according to the European political culture and value system. Indeed, the Armenian President Sargsyan made a very wise statement during his visit to Cyprus on January 17: "Turkey must reconcile itself with its own past before accession to the EU." Nevertheless, there is no indication of such a change in attitudes in Ankara. It is unfortunate that Turkish officials react in denial often adopting a victim syndrome when countries and institutions refer to the Armenian genocide. And in relation to Cyprus Ankara considers the occupation of the northern part of the island as a normal state of affairs. Moreover, any politician who brings up the issue is attacked and is asked to re-read his/her history. The real issue is that Turkey does not recognize the right of the Republic of Cyprus to exist. This is the most important factor which has not yet allowed the resolution of the Cyprus question. Likewise this attitude entails real threats to peace, security and cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

Only a few weeks ago the Turkish authorities in Karpasia in the occupied northern part of Cyprus interrupted the Christmas church service on the grounds that no permission had been requested in advance. If we take this as a litmus test of Turkish attitudes toward people of other ethnic groups and religious affiliations, certainly the signs are not encouraging. Taking also into consideration other incidents in Turkey toward minorities inevitably one reaches the conclusion that there is a long way to go for Turkey to acquire European attitudes.

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In this regard it may be useful to compare how post World War II Germany dealt with issues and how Turkey still behaves while protesting "that Europeans discriminate against it." The reality though is that on several occasions Turkey exhibited complete disregard for European values and decisions. And in several cases European leaders opted to downplay Turkish actions and reactions hoping that in the long run Ankara would move along a Europeanization process in carrying out its obligations. For example, when it was agreed that Turkey could start accession negotiations Ankara was also asked to implement the Ankara Protocol with the new 10 members of the EU. Ankara stressed that it does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, that it will not withdraw its troops from the occupied northern part of the island and that it will not extend the implementation of the Ankara Protocol to Cyprus. To the present day it has not done so.

It is essential to note that the economic crisis in the occupied northern part of Cyprus led to massive demonstrations on January 28 demanding Turkey to let go of the stranglehold on the Turkish Cypriot community. Indeed, an integrated economy and society and a unifying federal constitutional structure can lead Cyprus to a new era. But this cannot happen unless Turkey respects the territorial integrity and independence of the Republic of Cyprus.

The Turkish issue inevitably preoccupies and indeed divides public opinion and decision making centres in Europe. For various reasons several countries chose to support the Turkish accession process irrespective of Ankara's record.

It is also instructive to indicate that the Turkish establishment pushes internally the consolidation of one identity and pursues an assimilationist approach – an approach which makes several ethnic and religious minorities feel suffocated. Yet Ankara tends to encourage Turkish speaking people residing outside Turkey to maintain their Turkishness even at the expense of not integrating in the society of the country in which they live. This has been causing serious problems across several societies. It is not only in Cyprus where the Turkish demands - if implemented - would lead to a deeply segregated society. This attitude and practice has prompted, for example, Chancellor Merkel to state that the integrationalist multicultural model has not worked in Germany.