

TURKEY AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: A HISTORY

Throughout its history, Europe has never been simply a place but a complex set of ideas and aspirations in continual evolution—of which the European Union of 2022 is only the most recent iteration. As a result, while history cannot predict the future of Europe and its relationship to Turkey, what it can do is identify clearly recurrent patterns that are likely to continue. With this in mind, the present article provides a very long view—almost as old as history itself—of the evolution of the European idea as seen from Turkey, to provide a more rooted perspective on current debates about Turkey, Europe, and where the two are headed at a moment of dynamic change for both.

Giancarlo Casale*



TPQ

Spring 2022

* Giancarlo Casale is a Professor of Early Modern Mediterranean History at the European University Institute, Firenze, Italy.

Setting the Scene

Writing in the 5th century BC, Herodotus, the world's first historian, famously critiqued the practice of dividing the earth's territories into continents—a relatively new idea at the time. The problem, he noted, was a general one for all parts of the world but particularly acute concerning Europe. For example, while the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles clearly marked the border between Europe and Asia Minor, to the north of the Black Sea, who could say precisely where Europe began and Asia ended? Still further to the north, how could anyone determine how far Europe extended into the frozen darkness of the Arctic? And with such indeterminate borders, who knew with any certainty how many exotic peoples Europe contained, and from where they had their origins? Even the continent's name, taken from a figure in Greek mythology, was a source of considerable confusion since the original "Europa"—a princess notoriously seduced and abducted by the god Zeus—was a native of what is today Lebanon who eventually settled on the island of Crete. Regardless of whether the story of her abduction was legend or fact, Herodotus quipped, "What is clear is that Europa came from Asia, and never even traveled to the landmass the Greeks now call Europe."¹

To be sure, not all authors of the ancient world were as entirely unconvinced by the idea of Europe. Still, Herodotus had special reasons to be so: although he wrote in Greek, the great historian was born as a subject of the Persian Empire in Halicarnassus, today the Turkish town of Bodrum. Only later in life did he emigrate to continental Europe, living for a time as a resident foreigner in Athens and eventually becoming a citizen of Thurium located in what is today southern Italy. As he wrote his celebrated book on the great war between the Greeks and Persians (or, in other terms, between "Europe" and "Asia"), he therefore remained intensely aware of his status as an insider/outsider. This position left him perpetually skeptical about the boundaries between Europe and the rest of the world and open to the viewpoints of those who found themselves on the outside looking in.²

In this respect, Herodotus was the first in a very long line of observers who have interrogated the idea of Europe from the unique vantage point of Turkey. In ancient times, this was primarily an issue of geography. But in later centuries it began to take on a wider significance, as Europe itself began to be understood not just as a physical space but as a place with its own unique culture, identity, and legal traditions—and therefore a special political destiny.

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): p. 250.

² On the general problem of continents and Eurocentrism, see Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Tunisli Hajji Ahmed: The Ottoman Sultan as the Most European Sovereign

In fact, one of the first authors of any kind to discuss Europe in these more explicitly political terms was Tunisli Hajji Ahmed, a mysterious sixteenth-century author who claimed to be an Ottoman Muslim brought to Renaissance Italy as a captive but, in reality, more likely an Italian who had learned Turkish as a second language. Whatever his true identity was, in 1559, Hajji Ahmed published in Venice a treatise on world geography—one of the earliest texts ever to be printed in the Turkish language—in which he defined Europe as a combination of two factors: the imperial legacy of ancient Rome, and the expansiveness of the European states of his own day, particularly those (like Spain and Portugal) that were busily discovering and conquering new lands far beyond the physical borders of Europe itself. Fascinatingly, by these criteria, Hajji Ahmed reckoned that *the most European sovereign of all* was none other than the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent since Suleyman ruled his empire from the Roman capital of Constantinople, and from there had conquered more territories beyond the borders of Europe than any other contemporary ruler.³

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Hajji Ahmed—whoever he was—ranked as a marginal figure with idiosyncratic views, writing at a time when the subject of Europe’s political identity was still a relatively esoteric one. But by the nineteenth century, the question of how to define the collection of laws, institutions, and traditions that constituted “Europe” had become a significantly more urgent challenge for virtually every member of the Ottoman ruling class. This is because, beginning with the establishment of the post-Napoleonic “Concert of Europe”, the world was on a path to become ever more starkly divided between European states—who respected one another’s sovereignty within a mutually recognized set of rules—and a non-European world that, lacking

³ Giancarlo Casale, “Seeing the Past: Maps and Ottoman Historical Consciousness,” in Erdem Çipa and Emine Fetvacı, *Writing History at the Ottoman Court: Editing the Past, Fashioning the Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013): p. 80-99.

the structures of “civilization”, was seen as a natural target of European imperialism.⁴ Importantly, and in stark contrast to later periods of history, Czarist Russia was at first emphatically included within this European “concert”. But the Ottoman Empire’s status was decidedly more ambiguous in a way that, given the rapid pace of European imperial expansion throughout the world, posed an existential threat to the state’s survival. As a result, much of the history of Ottoman reforms in the 19th century (i.e. the “*tanzimat*”) can be understood, structurally, as a series of attempts to maintain the recognition of other European powers—and, thereby, to avoid dismemberment—by bringing the Ottoman state in line with a constantly changing set of expectations about what, exactly, constituted “European civilization”.

From Empire to Republic

To a considerable extent, this delicate dance with a constantly evolving European idea has continued to drive Ottoman (and, later, Turkish) history ever since. Even WWI, which caused the final disintegration of the remaining territorial empires within Europe (Russian and Habsburg as well as Ottoman), did not change this fundamental dynamic. Instead, as interwar Europe was radically reshaped by secular nationalism, Kemalist Turkey found itself at the forefront of this continent-wide transformation. The resulting changes within Turkey were profound, including the abolition of the Caliphate, the drafting of a European-style republican constitution, and the verbatim adoption of commercial and criminal codes from Switzerland and Italy, as well as deeply invasive social reforms such as the creation of a new “European” alphabet and an obligatory new Western national dress. Yet, however radically each of these changes were meant to break with Turkey’s Ottoman past, in many respects—as historians have argued with increasing conviction in recent years—the Kemalist project was simply a continuation of the prolonged, 19th-century Ottoman effort to preserve the state, and to stave off the imperialist designs of its Western neighbors, by adopting reforms according to an ideal model of European modernity.⁵

The one significant exception to this pattern, it might be argued, was WWII, when Turkey’s fortunes temporarily diverged from the rest of Europe as one of the only states to avoid direct involvement in the conflict, at least until the final months of hostilities. But immediately after the war’s conclusion, as Europe began another, fundamental continental-wide transformation—this time shaped by the twin forces of cold-war realignment and European integration—Turkey once more found itself at the vanguard. Unlike Spain and Portugal, the only other large European countries that had avoided the war, Turkey was a significant beneficiary of the Marshall Plan.

⁴ Glenda Sluga, *The Invention of the International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021): p.1-10, 73-86.

⁵ Erik Zürcher, *The Young Turks’ Legacy and Nation Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk’s Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

It was also an early signatory to the Council of Europe (in 1949) and NATO (in 1952). And as a part of these two initiatives, Turkey was placed firmly within a process of European “institutionalization” that continued, with various twists and turns, throughout the decades of the Cold War.⁶

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With the approach of the new millennium, in fact, this process appeared to have reached its natural culmination, as Turkey formally applied to join the European Union at more or less the same moment that the EU, with the creation of a common currency and a common visa regime (the Schengen zone), became, in practice, a fully institutionalized supra-national state. By the early 2000s, the successful completion of this process had become such an important aspirational goal for Turkey that it was virtually the only issue to unite almost the entire, divisive spectrum of Turkish politics—bringing together Kemalists and military stalwarts, leftists and Kurdish factions, Neo-liberals and Islamists alike. Crucially, even the early electoral successes of the AKP were closely tied to its ability to tap in to this widespread enthusiasm for “Turkey in Europe.”⁷

But since then, and particularly during the last decade, Turkey has unquestionably moved in an abruptly different direction; with the formal accession process stalled, relations with the Union at loggerheads over a steadily expanding range of issues, and even Turkey’s long-term commitment to NATO increasingly called into question.⁸ And yet, perhaps counterintuitively, from a slightly wider vantage point, there is a solid case to be made that this process of challenging the supposed inevitability of European integration—and actively exploring alternatives to it—has itself become a

⁶ Şaban Halis Çalış, *Turkey’s Cold War: Foreign Policy and Western Alignment in the Modern Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

⁷ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “The AKP and the Paradox of Islamic Europhilia,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3/1(Spring 2004): p. 1-6.

⁸ Alper Kaliber & Sinem Aydın-Düzgit, *Is Turkey De-Europeanizing?: Encounters with Europe in a Candidate Country* (London: Routledge, 2018).

quintessentially European undertaking and a common denominator uniting Turkish domestic politics with its (ostensibly) more thoroughly “Europeanized” neighbors.⁹ Brexit is, naturally, the most obvious example of the triumph of anti-EU politics analogous to Turkey’s in another European state. But a similar argument could be made about the broad-ranging challenge to European principles represented by the Visegrad Group, as well as the emergence of populist and openly anti-EU political movements in Italy, Germany, and France—in other words, the very heart of “old Europe” as it is understood today.

A Look to the Future

What, then, does this long historical trajectory, ending in a kind of “convergence through divergence”, portend for the proximate future of Turkey and Europe? Today, there is a widespread sense that Europe finds itself once more at a crossroads; with the twin shocks of the COVID pandemic and the Ukraine crisis having momentarily silenced the most vocal Eurosceptics, but without any general agreement about what a revamped and more cohesive Europe 2.0 should actually look like—much less what this might mean for EU-Turkish relations.¹⁰ For example, do recent calls for a common European defense force represent a new opening for Turkey, with its increasingly sophisticated domestic defense industry and the continent’s largest standing army? Or will this present an additional factor in Turkey’s marginalization, as EU defense grows increasingly independent even from NATO? Similarly, might a new openness to EU enlargement towards Ukraine and previously unconsidered candidates like Georgia and Moldova restart Turkey’s long stalled accession process? Or might such a process encourage a new identitarian rhetoric of civilizationalism, or even racism, that will push Turkey farther away? And from the other direction, what of Turkey’s upcoming elections? Might a change of government in Ankara, once again look to Europe as a guide for reforms? Or might the depth of anti-Western sentiment, as suggested by recent polls, instead present an opening for the government to retain and consolidate power based on a new “Eurasian consensus”?

Historians are not typically in the business of making predictions, and as a result, there is no way that history alone can provide a definitive answer to any of these questions. But, to paraphrase the words of the celebrated American satirist Mark Twain, even if history does not repeat itself, it often rhymes. And in this case, if there is one lesson that history can teach, it is that Turkey’s complex, intertwined, and constantly evolving relationship to Europe is much older than the most recent

⁹ Adrià Riviera Escartin, “Populist Challenges to EU Foreign Policy in the Southern Neighborhood: An informal and illiberal Europeanisation?”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 27/8 (2020): p. 1195-1214.

¹⁰ These sentiments were, for example, clearly visible in the proceedings of the recent European State of the Union conference (of which your author was a participant): “The State of the Union 2022: A Europe Fit for the Next Generation?”, Firenze, May 5th-7th. For the program, see <https://stateoftheunion.eui.eu/programme>, accessed 10 May, 2022.

election cycle, or the start of the EU accession process, or even the founding of the Turkish Republic. As a result, whatever comes next is certainly not going to be a definitive chapter of the story but rather another stanza in a poem written across the centuries, and as old as Europe itself.