

## **TURKEY'S POTENTIAL LIES IN ITS FUTURE, NOT IN ITS PAST**

*Dirk Vermeiren experiences Turkey as an energy hub in every sense of the word. But to him it seems as if it is Turkish people themselves that need to be convinced of their own potential. According to Dirk, the discourse in Turkish politics and even amongst ordinary Turks is too much colored by existing frustrations towards internal and external affairs. Dirk challenges Turkey to find a more positive approach to its problems.*

**Dirk Vermeiren \***



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Usually, a country's potential is reported in statistics dotted with abbreviations (what they stand for long forgotten by most people) and graphics that are said to indicate trends. But allow me to dwell on people instead of numbers. For any given country, it is the population which defines its potential. Twist this logic by putting numbers before people and what you end up with is dictatorship, or in an economical context, slavery.

According to the latest census, Turkey has a population of over 72 million, in my view, very warm people. Turkey definitely has a vibe, which as far as I am concerned does not come from its institutions, authorities or state rhetoric. The Turkish vibe, as I feel it, originates from its history, geography and its population. But the question is, does Turkey put the people first?

We all know the Ottoman Empire provided the Turks with a magnificent history and heritage. Everybody agrees Turkey's geography bridging East and West is unique, and is used as a metaphor for its role in the international arena. Studies show time and again Turkey's young population is an asset for its developing economy. These facts are well known, even worn out, suffering from quote fatigue.

However, this is a country of contradictions. Not a small number of Turks see the characteristics that define their home country as disadvantages, or even curses, rather than advantages. Official Turkish discourse skillfully mixes pride with prejudice, persuading the population that it is both their ultimate honor and their fate to live in the motherland, which is often depicted as the Turks' only chance for survival in a hostile world. As a foreigner, you do not have to dig deep in the Turkish mind to come across this belief. A friend of mine once introduced me to other table guests at a dinner as 'a foreign agent', a joke/ remark which I have heard a bit too often during my five years in Turkey, to consider it a coincidence. Even more striking was the number of times I was asked whether or not I was involved in missionary work. But probably the most striking evidence of this 'us against them' feeling, I experienced in the wake of the killing of Hrant Dink. The day after this tragic event, a package was sent to me through postal service. As I had to identify myself in order to receive my package, the young postal worker noticed I was a journalist. Looking at the stack of newspapers on my desk, he claimed to know that the murder was committed by foreign agents, aiming to discredit Turkey. I find this attitude quite intriguing and I do see a pattern in it: a state of mind which is inward looking. Here we have a potential becoming a deficit.

'Peace at home, peace in the world' is no doubt one of the most frequently used quotes from Atatürk. But in order to live up to these words the country needs to find peace of mind. As an author who has been living, working and traveling intensively in Turkey since 2002, I observe the country has a hard time dealing

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with its own realities; either turning away from them or facing them on a crash course. This was particularly the case for the topics I reported frequently in the past five years; such as the Kurdish issue, the different regional dynamics and the secularist versus Islamist axis. A lot of ground needs to be covered in all of these matters. It has always struck me as peculiar how easy some of my friends in the western, urbanised parts of the country stigmatise other Turks or parts of the country as ‘behind’ using the word ‘cahillik’. Fact of the matter is, they are not just referring to a lack of education or standard of living. They use the very same vocabulary to indicate ideological and cultural fault lines.

I have noticed that large segments of society do not communicate with each other at all, knowing of each others existence, but preferring to deny one another or referring to the others as if they were strangers in their own country. It seems quite logical to me that for to realize your potential, you have to know yourself first. I am skeptical as to whether this is actually the case with the Turks. This is a tragedy in its own right, and a lot of energy is wasted as a result. The rhetoric of the major players in this debate is more often one of division, instead of unity. However, I do think progress is being made. The challenge for everybody in this country is to act responsibly.

Turkey does not seem at peace with itself, suffering from ‘post-traumatic stress disorder on a huge scale’ as a friend recently termed the trauma of the end of the Ottoman Empire. Many Turks live with the conviction that the War of Liberation is still not over. The people advocating this idea do all they can, to persuade the population that Turkey’s potential lies not in its future, but in its past. They depict the huge potential history offers as a missed opportunity, lost in time

Several people claim Turkey’s unique geography is a curse, not a blessing; they are not happy by what they see on their GPS, wishing the location of their native country was elsewhere, either Westward or Eastward. The mechanics of the country are often explained with arguments of geography—from the role and status of the armed forces to the headscarf debate. Some of these arguments are obviously genuine and valid, however frequently it is reverted to as if ‘one answer fits all.’

Finally, there is the issue of population, which represents a potential untouched. The positive vibe of having a young population gets lost once you leave Turkey’s major cities, with their shopping malls, cinemas, and university campuses. One cannot walk the streets of small towns and villages in Anatolia, let alone in the East or South East of Turkey, without feeling a sense of neglect and even despair amongst the young population. I have met far too many Turkish youngsters that feel stuck, their only ambitions considering departure—either to Turkey’s major cities or abroad, resulting in the country loosing its potential.

The past couple of years, I reported a number of stories from Emirdağ (Afyon province), a village which through emigration has close connections with Belgium. I remember talking to a teacher at the local high school, expressing his frustrations to me, teaching students that explicitly confessed having migration to Belgium or the Netherlands as their one ambition in life. To me this teacher's cry for help was far more significant than waiters or shoe-shine boys' asking if I could arrange them a visa for Belgium. The same frustrations I felt among the talented young Turks, who graduate from university with high hopes, only to find that they are not prepared to enter a labor market which is not prepared for them. A country which does not succeed in keeping its youngsters motivated has a lot of work on its plate and a lot of soul searching to do as well.

A country which is proud to host a Children's Day on its calendar should invest much more in its youngest citizens. Investment in education in Turkey is far behind other developing countries and is unacceptable according to international standards. Public spending on education in Turkey is just 3,7 percent of its annual GDP, whereas in Mexico this is 6 percent.<sup>1</sup> A mere 14 percent of 7 or below aged children attend school in Turkey, far less than in other countries such as Morocco (34 percent), Bulgaria (61 percent), Germany (70 percent), Greece (73 percent), (Belgium 95 percent). According to this research, this results in Turkish children's falling behind their peers abroad, from early age on.<sup>2</sup>

Impressive efforts are indeed being made by the private sector in the field of education, focusing on those who seem to fall through the net of the school system. All of these are valuable contributions to resolve existing problems but at the same time these efforts should be considered as a call for change. Basically it is the private sector doing what the state should be doing. Having a background in children and media myself, I have been trying to find partners to publish an educational magazine for pre-schoolers in Turkey. Research has shown more needs to be done in early age education in this country. I was quite disappointed to realize I ended up talking to professionals in the charity sector only. Education is far too important to be dealt with as charity, and should not be subject to political games. Turkey does not need just more investment in education; it also needs educational reforms.

During my travels in Turkey I have had the opportunity to visit a number of schools. My conclusion was that Turkish children are very much disadvantaged compared to their European peers; a vast number of them receiving their education in difficult conditions. Over-crowded classrooms, run-down school premises, poor teaching material and poor salaries for the teachers do not create the right conditions for the children and for the teaching staff to be motivated. But

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<sup>1</sup> OECD Factbook 2006: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics, <http://stats.oecd.org/wbos/viewhtml.aspx?queryname=334&querytype=view&lang=en>

<sup>2</sup> For further reading: İstanbul Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Aylık Yayını, Çocuklar ve İletiflim, Nisan 2005 or consult the publications of AÇEV (Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı), <http://www.acev.org/arastirma/arastirmalar.asp>.

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apart from that, teacher training and methods and the curriculum need revising. It is my firm conviction the Turkish educational system is meant to form exemplary Turkish citizens foremost, more than its goal is to form global citizens with a broad world view. In the field of education, Turkey is an under-achiever and the price Turkey pays is not realizing the potential its young population offers.

The very meaning of the word ‘potential’ includes talent, goodwill, perseverance, innovation and drive. All of these are present in abundance in the people of Turkey. As in any other country, young people and artists should be the front-runners, the ones taking up the challenge. It would be marvellous to see more Turkish artists working on the international stage, improvising, elaborating, questioning on their own background, culture and identity, relating to a Turkish audience and reaching out to the rest of the world. More should be done in Turkey to create this climate, on the one condition that artistic integrity is preserved. But the very meaning of the word ‘potential’ also includes trust, confidence, recognition, believe, encouragement, freedom, trail and error. By definition, potential cannot be realized in a status quo – unless, of course, you believe the status quo is the maximum that can be realized. It is vital more people in this country can be convinced that change is not impossible and that is not by definition something to be afraid of.

In recent years, Turkey is referred to as an energy hub. This country is in fact an ‘energy hub’ in every sense of the word. It is a refinery, with pipes coming in from all directions, sizzling and steaming, substances and flavors being added, and pipes leaving again to all corners of the world. Of course its pipes, taps and depots need maintenance, updates and new procedures to prevent leaks, energy being wasted or even to prevent failure. Only by letting the bird out of the cage can Turkey show its true and wonderful colors. Only then can the world recognize Turkey’s full potential.