

Presentation of Dr. Hercules Millas - Istanbul (15/9/2003)

The (everlasting) ethnic dimension in mass media:

The case of Greece and Turkey

Introduction: Who Is The Speaker?

I will speak about my experience and my observations and with the capacity of an occasional columnist in Greek and Turkish newspapers. I will concentrate on the ethnic dimension of the news and of their interpretations, on how they are influenced directly by ethnic considerations. The case Greece and Turkey is my area of concern.

A briefing right at the start about my own ethnic identity may prove useful because: a) my presentation actually is about the ethnic dimension of the news and on the opinions on one hand, and b) on the other, my strong conviction is that the audience and the readers mostly perceive and evaluate the messages of any presentation that has an interethnic character taking into consideration 'who is speaking'. So, at this moment 'who is speaking?'

It is the ethnic identity of the speaker that actually determines the socially determined 'meaning' of any interethnic utterance and not what he *actually* says. If for example, as a Turkish journalist I say 'the policy of Turkey on the Cyprus issue is unproductive and the least cooperative', it simply means that I am critical to this policy and probably against the state policy of the last decades. If, however, the same words are heard from me but speaking as a Greek journalist - especially here in Turkey in a meeting like ours - the audience, and especially the Turkish audience, will receive a series of different messages and will reach different

conclusions. In this second case:

- a) The speaker will look the least polite since he/she is in direct opposition with the hosting part, will appear aggressive, ignoring that he is a visitor and hosted,
- b) He will be perceived as accusing only the Turkish part and not the Greek part, i.e., his own, a trend that will be interpreted as showing that he is prejudiced,
- c) He will be seen as a probable nationalist - highly probably he will be sensed as not liking the Turks, he may be even suspected of hate!
- d) He will look as if he is making national propaganda having found a platform; so he may be seen as an opportunist and even ethnically inferior personality.

Therefore since my messages are associated with my ethnic identity it is of importance to clarify from the beginning my ethnicity. Am I a Turk or a Greek? This question takes for granted few premises (which are generally true but not always):

- a) that every individual belongs to a nation,
- b) that he belongs to only one nation,
- c) that when one speaks he expresses the views of that nation,

d) that the nation has only one opinion as if it is one entity,

e) and as a corollary of these, and since we belong to different nations, what he says and what he stands for is different from what 'we' believe and consider proper

There is an additional case too - case f - which is more complex. What happens when the 'Other' says things that seem to be in harmony with 'our' beliefs and our (real or imaginary) ethnic interests? How do we evaluate the case when he speaks like one of 'us' - even though we know quite well that he is one of 'them'? The audience may think as follows:

a) He does not appear to say what he is supposed to say. Therefore we should search between the lines for his messages. At some point he is going to disclose, to unmask himself and his national side.

b) (If in the end of the day one is unable to pinpoint his views that are contrary to ours) We are face to face with a very clever 'Other'; and the more clever the 'Other' is the more dangerous he may be.

In short, all this sums up to the fact that there is a great mistrust between the Greeks and the Turks, as it is customary with many neighboring nations. This is the reason that the third party should not let it be understood that he is closer to the 'Other'. Once trust is lost no one listens to what the 'Other' and his associates say. Especially a clear declaration about the ethnic identity of persons who belong to marginal cases such as ethnic minority groups (my case) may help a lot. Such a person should pass the message that 'I am one of you', 'I am a Greek' or 'I am a Turk', each time according to the situation. This may help in being heard with less mistrust.

On the other hand, declarations of royalty may have negative results too. Since in Greece and Turkey normally one is not what one declares he is but others decide (officially or unofficially) about one's identity, if you declare royalty you may look a hypocrite: apart from

being a negative 'Other' one may be considered in addition an insincere person and/or a coward too.

Having clarified my identity as a speaker let me pass to the main topic.

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Two Distinct National Points of View

These strange situations that remind us a little of Kafka, show that we have two distinct worlds of news and opinions: the Greek one and the Turkish one. This is the main theme of my presentation. These ethnic worlds do not coincide and they are sometimes even in contradiction. Actually I describe nothing else but the nationalistic understanding that is very widespread in all countries in our era. The situation is not unique to Greece and Turkey but I will concentrate on these countries since I retrieve my experience from them.

As far as I know I am the only person who has the opportunity to write for some periods regularly in Greek and Turkish newspapers even though I had never been a professional in this trade. Each time I also had to shift and write in compliance with my readers: the Greek or the Turkish way. The differences in the two sides are found in three domains:

a) The selection of words is different. For example when one writes in Turkish he uses Istanbul, peace movement in Cyprus, Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, Ottoman rule, Patriarch of

Istanbul, etc; whereas in Greek one uses the following to refer to the same: Constantinople, military occupation in Cyprus, pseudo state of Denktaş, Tourkokratia (which means Turkish rule), Ecumenical Patriarch.

b) The agenda of the two sides are different. There are Greek topics and Turkish topics. For example the flights of planes over the Aegean occupy the Greek papers almost daily whereas the same topic rarely appears in the Turkish press. And when it appears in Turkish press it is within a Turkish-EE framework and not the Greco-Turkish one. The opposite applies for the Turkish minority of Western minority: For Greece there is not an issue of that kind. (By the way this minority is a 'Muslim minority' in Greek.)

c) The third level where differences are even more prominent is the hermeneutic one. Each side interprets the events differently. Of course the different use of words is nothing but a different interpretation. The selection of topics is also associated with an interpretation: it points to what is of importance and to what is not. [\[1\]](#)

In short, each side develops a discourse where the readers of each nation feel that their side is right and the other is wrong. The whole framework of news and interpretations (headlines, photographs, selection of adjectives etc) gives a sense of pride and satisfaction to our side or portrays 'our' justified anger and worries.

I have two friends who are correspondents to a Turkish and a Greek newspaper in Athens and in Istanbul respectively. They do their best to adjust to the ethnic sensitivities. Their texts however, are still censored. They narrated to me how the news that they send appear changed on the papers. The changes may seem insignificant and innocent but they are all pointing to the same direction and are in accordance with the principles given above: the text in the last resort is adjusted to the ethnic satisfaction of the reader. For example the correspondent in Istanbul once informed his paper in Athens that during the weight lifting competition in Istanbul the Turkish guy was first and the Greek second. The next day the Greek paper informed the readers about the good news: the Greek guy triumphed managing to come second in the world championship, omitting to mention who came first. The Athens correspondent once had an interview with a Greek Cypriot who suffered as a captive of the Turkish army. He narrated how he was arrested, beaten by the soldiers with the butt of a rifle and he had headaches for days. The Turkish readers read in the paper that the man was arrested and that he had headaches for

days.

Reading one paragraph is enough to guess if the text has a Greek or a Turkish origin. The words used, the topic itself and the content of the news/opinion show the ethnic source. One can claim that this journalism that has developed in the two neighboring countries and is connected to the 'Other' (to bilateral relations) exists in conjunction with a new language that is understood and used by each country separately for internal use. [\[2\]](#)

Each side normally has no direct access to the media of the 'Other'; and when occasionally it does the reader from each side feels there is something strange in what it has been said in the other side. It is fortunate for both sides that they are not reading the press of the other side on a regular basis; the bilateral relations could have been worse. Sometimes an opportunity is presented to a journalist to address to the 'Other' in a newspaper of the other country. When this opportunity appears, the writers do their best to appear moderate, considered and polite. The translators too, do their best to bring the text within ethnically acceptable limits. [\[3\]](#) The results are not bad, but it is clear there that these articles are not sincere and authentic; there are exceptional texts, specially prepared for the 'Other' and the 'politically correct' attitude make them look very artificial too.

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What is Nationalism?

To what extent could things have been different given the existence of two distinct nation states and the two nations? What is a nation if not a group of people with distinct perception of history, of the present and of the future and especially with respect to bilateral and international relations? Nations are identified by their distinct perceptions. People with similar views normally are expected to compose a single nation and a united state or at least a group that does not have national differences.

The existence of different worldviews in perceiving the outer world among groups of people who have distinct ethnic identities is not surprising; it would have been rather surprising if nations states and nations had identical views. A study on texts books of about forty different countries from all around the world showed that each country had a different evaluation of the French Revolution of 1789. In each case the interpretation of the Revolution was made to satisfy the national myth of each country. For Greece for example it was a positive step since France became a model state that inspired the Greek Revolution of 1821 and for Turkey a negative step because it spread nationalism around and especially in the Balkans causing the destruction of Ottoman Empire. [\[5\]](#)

As long as the nation and nationalism exist and as they are the dominant social entities and the basic reference for our communal identity, things cannot be drastically different. Contingently the tones may change: we may have rising sensitivities or moderate reactions. The real change will appear as new forms of social organization will appear and ethnic identity will not be the dominant and the only one.

There are so many recent studies on what nationalism and national identity are that I would not try here to repeat well-known views. I only want to make some distinctions. The term nationalism sometimes has different, even contradictory meanings. For some - and for me - it is the relatively recent ideology that appeared in modern times, about the eighteenth century and coexisted with national states. On the other hand sometimes the term is used (sometimes by me too) to denote some negative, aggressive, chauvinist political practices such as racism, fascism etc. [\[6\]](#) There is a need of clarification.

Based on a pilot study on Greek newspapers and their approach with respect to Turkey I reached to the conclusion that 'national' approach and 'nationalism' operate on two different levels: [\[7\]](#)

a) The members of any nation share some basic views, feelings, beliefs, aspirations etc. This is the minimum national consensus, the necessary condition, for having a nation and a nation state. Within this frame the Greeks, that is to say the persons who identify themselves with a Greek national identity, differ from the corresponding 'Turks'. This level I call 'sphere of

consensual nationalism’.

b) But these Greeks (and Turks) do not share the same political views. Contingently they develop different plans. Some may seek peace, others may prefer an expansionist policy. This I call ‘contingent nationalism’.

So we say that the Greeks and the Turks both share similar views vis a vis the Other (within the sphere of consensual nationalism) but at the same time they may differ on this domain of the Other (within the sphere of contingent nationalism). Some may be really fanatics whereas others advocates of coexistence. However, all share some unique national view since they identify themselves with ‘nationhood’ and share a common ‘consensual nationalism’.

What to do?

The different views of the two parties is a fact; and efforts to reach ‘a common point of view’ is not a realistic approach. The problem is not the differences but the way these difference are interpreted by the parties involved. Societies are accustomed to the idea that only ‘one truth’ can exist. This single truth naturally can be only ‘our’ truth.

A shift to a worldview where multiple truths can exist simultaneously is a huge step towards a new understanding in international relations. It means that parties become conscious of the situation. (This is the basic purpose of my book *Do's & Don'ts*) The understanding of ‘only one reality’ is unavoidably authoritative since parties will eventually try to impose this reality or at least interpret situations unilaterally. The understanding of a single ‘national truth’ which needs to be enforced to the other party can only increase the tension in international relations

The relativistic approach on the other hand is characterized with understanding and tolerance. The acceptance of the multiple realities brings forward a new understanding to

nationalism too. Instead of perceiving that the nations are in opposition due to the divergence from 'the reality', the differences are seen as an unavoidable part of international relations.

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Notes

- This does not mean that we do not try to find common grounds in our relations.

Also of racism, since we infer that people may be different but share what is true, meaning there is a truth, ours, which we want to impose. What differentiates is not our different views but something else: our race Hidden racism

To understand and not to impose

Empathy and respect this is lacking

As individuals we can do better. Once one is aware of the comic-tragic one sidedness of the news and of the media, one may react. There are exceptions to the rule. There are few journalists in both countries who do not fit to the main stream. Their main characteristic is their skeptical attitude when they face situations that are related with the 'Other'. They question every 'local' and 'ethnic' information; they communicate as often as possible with the 'Other'; they approach the 'Other' with empathy; they do not recognize an ethnic personality in every single person. (Not to see ethnically determined persons is the first step to surpass nationalism)

Sometimes these people are treated with suspicion by people who are more tied to nationalistic approaches. For nationalists the existing of people who do not readily follow the main stream are annoying. The cure to the problem seems to be the increase of social tolerance.

Enjoy it

What do I do

Not the differences and the extend of the differences is the problem

But had been treated with suspicion on both sides

The style should be unfortunately : look I am one of yours, I am with you etc but the content

could be better

I act as a person who identifies himself with some individuals

Whatever I say should be read by both sides

Where as the dominant is a extreme trust in our normal positive even superior attitude and evaluation

[1] In my book *Do's & Don'ts for Better Greek-Turkish Relations* I give many examples of these two distinct national/ethnic differences. Different words, expressions and toponyms are only part of the story (pp. 27-39). The body languages of the two sides as well as the use of the symbols are different (pp.73-84). Their 'standards' are different; actually I mean they use double standard in specific national manner (pp. 95-103). The two sides have two distinct national myths with which they define in a very general way their place in time and space at the same time specifying the historic role and the character of the Other (pp. 119-125).

[2] The newspapers that are circulating in Greece and Turkey in foreign languages (mostly in English) follow the same tendencies but on a milder tone. The 'neutral' English language helps in this direction too.

[3] There is a project that is underway presently in Cyprus. Articles that appear in the Greek and Turkish press are translated and published in the 'Other' language. According to first hand information the translators do a superb job in retouching these texts. How can one ever present to the Turkish side a Greek text that informs the Greeks saying 'the pseudo minister of the pseudo state of Denктаş spoke during the celebration of the Turkish invasion'?

[4] L. Doğan Tılıç in his book *I am ashamed but I am still a journalist - Journalism in Greece and Turkey* (it is in Turkish and it circulated also in Greek: *Utaniyorum ama Gazeteciyim*

, İletişim, 1998) describes the journalists of the two countries he had the opportunity to interview, as agents who tried to act as spokesmen of their countries, who had a perception of a national interest, of permanent friends and enemies of their country and that they had to be on the side of their own country (p. 290). The situation is even worse when the journalist starts to deal with issues that are considered 'national' (p. 364)

[5] I simplify the findings; actually in Turkish textbooks the French revolution is presented in an ambiguous manner: it is positive when it is presented as a European political event and negative when is presented in connection to Ottoman history. See H. Millas 'French Revolution in Turkish Textbooks' in *Images of a Revolution*, Edit. Rainer Riemenschneider, Editions L'Harmattan, Frankfurt/Main-Paris, 1994.

[6] The 'ultra nationalists' (racists, chauvinists if you like) (and I use the very wide spread terminology of the 'Western World') sometimes use the term 'nation' and 'nationalism' in an all-together different sense. They believe that nations always existed, that nationalism is a feeling of loyalty that kept the nations and especially their nations united for thousands of years. They cannot even think of a time - in the past or in the future - where nations did not exist or will not exist. I will not deal with this deeply ideological understanding.

[7] H. Millas, '1998 Yunanistan basınında Türkiye', in *Bilanço 1923-1998*, Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul, 1999.