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An Intervention in a Youth Organization Workshop

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The Greek-Turkish Relations and the Young People

In our era of nation-states the international relations are not conditioned by age groups but are influenced by the conjuncture within which the nations find themselves and the perceptions of the 'nations' in general. The differentiations, which always exist within a country, depend on many factors and the inclinations of any age group cannot be taken a priori as given.

How then can we explain the existence of many young people that I met during various programs connected to Greek-Turkish relations and who had a very constructive attitude in these bilateral issues? These young girls and boys are relaxed when they discuss the bilateral 'problems', they develop with ease intimate friendships among themselves, they seem eager to communicate with the Other, hear his/hers point of views and in general they are content in being with the Other.

People of my age did not present these traits when they were young, e.g., in the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary the youth of that period was demonstrating in the streets for various national ideals and worries. They were tense; in the sense that they were under the urge to fight for some 'rights' that they believed were seriously endangered by the Other. I do not remember

any contact that took place at that time between the young people of Greece and Turkey. Actually contacts of this kind were not popular among *any* age group at that period.

The youth of present time seems different from their parents and the explanation rather lies in the milieu they were brought up. Starting from about hundred years ago, the subsequent generations had faced political crises connected to the Other. Wars were fought between the Greeks and the Turks. One can remind the war of 1897, the annexation of Rhodes by the Greeks in 1908, the Balkan Wars in 1912, the Greek-Turkish war in Anatolia in 1919-1922, the Cyprus crisis and the related fights that lasted for decades and ended with a war in 1974. During this period the ethnic minorities in Greece and Turkey faced the rage of the local populations and the negative discrimination of their governments.

My generation was brought up listening to stories related to the above. If one excludes the Imia/Kardak crisis, which eventually ended by avoiding an armed clash, the latest generation, i.e., the young people who are today around 20-25 years of age, are more lucky. They were not brainwashed with negative narrations and stereotypes about the Other. They are different from their parents in 'lacking' some characteristics: they are less fanatical, less nationalists, less biased, less 'sensitive' – in the sense that they are not paranoiacs – and especially less worried.

Self-confidence is an asset in bilateral relations. The political situation in Europe the last fifty years and especially the long duration of peace in the area operates positively building up trust between neighboring countries. The dynamics of the European Union, i.e., on one hand the 'union' that was accomplished among countries that were once 'eternal enemies' and on the other the prospect that this model might be applicable to many other cases, created a new atmosphere in international arena.

The young people of present time carry the mark of this hope. This new generation heard some new expressions, such as peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution, empathy, the Other, prejudice against the Other, images in textbooks, i.e., concepts that are popularized rather recently and that did not exist before. They are brought up with them, whereas these concepts were unheard in the time of my father. As for me, I heard about most of them only after I finished my studies. The optimistic concept of 'win-win' and the discredited 'zero-sum' are known today to many of our young girls and boys. Therefore, it is not the 'age' of the people in the sense of 'how old they are' that makes the difference but the age in the sense of 'era'.

Naturally if not all, the great majority of the people I met in the youth organizations that were involved in Greek-Turkish relations appeared like a sign of hope for more balanced bilateral relations. There is no doubt that these young people at a certain phase of their lives have met the old-style negative propaganda against the Other. They have read the textbooks that my generation prepared, they listened to the accusations or insinuations against the Other from their parents and other relatives, they followed the mass media where exaggerations and bias still persist. But this 'education' was not accompanied by the every-day concrete happenings that reproduced and reinforced the nationalistic narration. The older generations, in their youth, could associate the nationalistic myths with the contemporary political developments.

The new generation is brought up with new values: for example 'peace' and not 'our historical military victories' or 'our power' gains credit the last decades. This is a revolutionary shift in values that are connected to the community and to the individuals. This change did not occur by chance; it is the result of the new prospects that our society renders to its citizens. People have much to lose in our days: a life where the basic needs are provided (a home, food, heating, even air-condition for many), leisure even every weekend - the word 'weekend' is a new one -, benefits that were unheard in the time of my parents such as free medical care, compensation for unemployment and eventually a pension that secures a decent life even if one can not work. In spite of all shortcomings and complaints, these innovations create a new optimistic prospect for a more relaxed life that was not even a 'dream' for older generations – which used to die ten and twenty years earlier than us anyhow.

The tremendous economic development that human societies experienced the last decades (without however overcoming the tremendous inequalities) gave the new generation the opportunity to travel, to visit the country of the Other and to obtain a personal idea about the Other. The imagined Other started to be replaced by concrete individuals and stereotypes with first-hand information and concrete knowledge. During this process even the most negative Other proved to be better than the traditional Other that the nation myths had cultivated.

The economic (relative) affluence made it possible for the two countries, as state establishments and as NGOs to finance programs that helped the communication of the Greeks and Turks. The third parties and especially some agencies of the European Union also contributed decisively in this direction. The youth profited considerably from these efforts. They were practical results as the ones I just mentioned above and 'communication' played a major role.

In short, our new girls and boys are much better than us, the older people. It seems that they will hand over a much better international environment than the one they inherited from 'us'.

They act with confidence and especially humor. Humor is the most prominent characteristic of the young people that presently deal with Greek-Turkish relations. They are completely different from the 'all-serious patriots' of my time. The new youth at some instances is laughing at issues that their parents were ready to go to war (or at least send others to fight for them). I think this is a good sign that a tragedy started to be perceived as a comedy; which is a way of insinuating a criticism to those who exaggerated the various issues.

The young people are heading towards the correct direction. As for 'us', the older generation, we should, a) preserve the atmosphere of détente for a few more decades so that the gains are stabilized and b) provide the economic support to increase the communication channels between the young people.

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