Assignment Paper Discussion 1

Towards minority policies beyond reciprocity? The EU, Greece and Turkey

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In the article “Towards minority policies beyond reciprocity? The EU, Greece and Turkey”, the author examines the minority’s legitimacy of existence in most national states and argues that social changes are more important than legal developments. The process of structural Europeanization can, at best, ‘normalize’ the existence of the two minorities, but it does little to ‘legitimize’ their existence.

To examine this question, the author takes the case of Greece and Turkey as examples. Greece and Turkey can serve as good examples because nations in Southeast Europe tend to employ radical measures to deal with the pressure of multicultural societies. In an environment of fear of state reprisal, it can be more difficult for minorities to pursue, obtain, or preserve their rights, therefore it becomes more representative of the challenges the minorities face. The situation of the two ‘reciprocal’ minorities within the framework of societal Europeanization in the two countries, can be explained through the very process of their legitimization as citizens (individuals) and as a group (minorities).

The argumentation starts with the discussion on how a minority emerge and how nations are built. Firstly, in order for a group to qualify as a minority, the group has to be outnumbered in quantity and marginalized by dominant group qualitatively. Secondly, a minority cannot exist independently without nation. One cannot speak of a nation, there were no minorities so to speak. The Ottoman Empire is not nation, so all the minority movements in the Ottoman Empire can only be perceived as rebellion against the system. The meanings of minority movements at that time are dependent on their result. Subdues agitation is a suppressed revolt, while an uprising succeeded is a war for independence. Such confrontations are served to create a liberation narrative and also a heroic myth about victories or defeats, upon which a ‘Nation’ build up. The ‘victories’ are celebrated, the ‘pains’ are magnified, they are used to glue a community together and therefore a nation. National sentiments were fed by the continued affirmation of their identities and reinforced by the exclusion of ‘others’. Otherness has a twofold effect on the nation-building process. Members of the nation suspect the differences are exaggerated when enemies are afar, while they demonize them when they are proximate. Therefore, minorities suffer a ‘double’ marginalization. They are marginalized by the majority group as ‘polluting’ newcomers and at the same time marginalized by their own brethren because of being a ‘traitor’ to their group. The minorities’ situation is therefore very complicated.

After offering a close look on above critical concepts on minorities and nations, the audience developed a deeper understanding on the dynamic between nations and minorities. The article shifts from theoretical exploration to empirical discussion, examining the changing status of minorities in Greece and Turkey within their historical context, and exploring the role of Europeanization in this process.

The bilateral relations experienced ups and downs in the 20th century. After the massive population exchanged resulting from Treaty of Lausanne in 1920s, along with the Cyprus and Aegean Sea issues in 1950s, and the four areas of deteriorate in 1980s and 1990s, their relationship finally warmed up due to both non-political and political factors in 1990s, peaking with the outpouring solidarity during the earthquakes in 1999.

Then, the article continues to examine the situation of the Turkey minority in Greece and the Greek minority in Turkey.

It is worth noting that Greek authorities employ religious rather than ethnic criteria in defining group identity. Therefore, the minority in Greece are Muslim minority instead of Turkish and they are made up of people from different ethnicities, including 65% Turks, 30% Pomaks, and 5% Roma. The Muslim minority’s human and minority rights have been severely violated by the state, including but not limited to the forbidden of the term ‘Turkish/Turk’ in the title of organizations, the deprivation of freedom of Muftis appointment, and other limitation on openly revealing ethnic identity and practicing cultural traditions.

The situation of Turks in Greece was no better than those Greek in Turkey. They constitute less than 0.01% of the total population, so it is way harder for them to preserve ethnic and cultural identity. For those Greek, the attempt to integration into Turkish nation at the beginning of the Republic was a total failure, resulting from the bifurcation in 19c, accelerated by the Balkan Wars, WWI, and Greek-Turkish War in the beginning of the 20c. The fear of a common external enemy drove Turkish authorities conducted a set of contradictory policies worsening Greek’s status, and made the Greek become the ‘enemy within’, especially in the economic frustration in 1940s.

The situation of minority is in an active fringe, and it changes with the political situation and demographic situation. The passage to multi-party politics, waves of Anatolian migrants pouring into Istanbul, emergency of Cyprus question, anti-Greek riots in 1950s all contributed to a complex and precarious environment for the minorities. Today, given that so few minorities remain, the most significant issue lies on the status of Greek institutions like the Patriarchate, the Halki Seminary, and the theological school on Halki island. The plight of non-Muslim religious foundations in Turkey mirrors the challenges faced by the election of Muslim Muftis in Greece, highlighting a common issue: that, to this day, religious affairs are still determined more by the interests of nation-states than by the well-being of minorities, and systematic human and minority rights violations continue to take place.

So, what role has ‘Europeanization’ played in the development of the minority’s situation within nation-states?

Around in the 1980s, Western social and cultural values began to infiltrate Greek and Turkish societies, partly transforming ‘multiculturality’ into ‘multiculturalism’. In the 1990s, the European Union was established, and a lot of peace diplomacy efforts took place – such as world markets, free trade, cross-border market economies, and the debate about European identity. They all contributed to the transfer of sovereignty to supranational/subnational/transnational levels, leading to a reconsideration of the concept of nation and state in Europe.

It has a dual effect on minorities: on one hand, it attracted more global attention to the protection of minorities; on the other hand, it also indirectly created resentment towards these groups. Consequently, the minorities were able to voice their opinions in certain ways, the intellectual elite began to reconsider minorities from a more multicultural perspective. However, at the same time, these advancements provoked a strong backlash from the radical resistance groups.

Europeanization also acts like a stone that stirs up a thousand waves when discussing the 4 areas of deterioration in bilateral relations during the 1980s and 1990s. The Cyprus question became more complicated due to the Europeanization following the Republic of Cyprus accession to the EU. The failure of the Annan Plan, which resulted from the Greek Cypriot veto and the absence of any consequences for the Republic of Cyprus’s membership, created a sentiment of perceived imbalanced treatment among Turks.

Despite these challenges, what we cannot deny is that since the 1990s, deliberate human rights violations in Greece towards the minority have decreased due to the Europeanization of Greek legislation. In both Greece and Turkey, legal adjustments have taken place within the framework of westernization and Europeanization.

However, as we have previously stated, the situation for minorities in both Greece and Turkey remains bleak. Systematic human and minority rights violations continue to take place. We cannot naively regard Europeanization as a panacea and attribute all advancements in minority rights solely to it. Europeanization should be understood as a surgical tool – capable of excising the root causes of issues, but not without inflicting some collateral damage in the process.