



## **Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe**

**Strategies - Competencies – Practices**

# **Conference Paper**

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### **Wither Nation? Europe, Turkey, and the Limits of Identity**

Contrary to presumptions, nation has always been a site of serious debate, and fierce contestation. This has been so not just after the beginning of Turkey's negotiation talks for EU membership but since the foundation of the Republic—even before. It would be controversial but not wrong to state that “nation” has never been a taboo—impervious and unaffected—through out the short long history of Turkey. There have always been various versions of the definition of the “nation” and the national narrative, and inevitably a governing variety but never without contesting visions. At each historical juncture, governing and competing visions have been in tandem with the world-wide trends and movements.

Turkey is located at a close proximity to Europe and the Middle East, at the near East of one and the near West of the other. Customarily taken as absolute and obvious, the distances—or the proximities—in question are tangible inasmuch as they are measured and discussed in units of civilizational types (as in East and West) or measured in tropes of culture (as in Europeanness and Turkishness). The distances are constituted both by the past—the past time of the Ottomans, Islam, and traditions, and by the present—the present tense of Turkish immigrants, Turkey's membership in the EU, and the war in the Middle East. In this theater of pasts and presents, traditions and modernities, and cultures and civilizations, distances collapse and proximities disappear. In other words, the distances and proximities are simultaneous and most often indistinguishable.

In the last decade or so, while Turkey is attempting to keep her distance with the Middle East and get her place in Europe, Europe is increasingly underscoring the distances between herself and Turkey. One could safely say that the coefficient of certainty is not high on the European front—though not the topic, the . Turkey’s membership process resembles a roller coaster ride, with surges and ebbs in public opinion, media hype, and political rhetoric. The public imagination in Europe is already saturated with a heightened debate on the Europeanness of Turks and Turkey. On the Turkish end, European involvement in “domestic” debate seems to affirm the public conviction about “European hypocrisy.” All parties involved are discontent with the progress but no one can afford ending the negotiations.

In this climate, a visitor to Turkey today will be faced with a multitude of national flags and posters of the founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk immediately after passing the passport control. In the city the picture will not be that different. It will not be exceptional to see apartment balconies and car windows draped with flags, street sellers offering varieties of flags and scarves and hats in red and white. On the days before and during national holidays streets and buildings—public and private—will be decorated with little, big, and enormous flags. When there is a football game with a foreign team the stadiums will turn into seas of red and white. The national colors are certainly in vogue. How do we understand the increasing visibility of national symbols? How do we understand the feelings expressed through red and white—feelings of a person celebrating the Republic Day, cheering for the national team, or protesting the invasion of Iraq? Do the flags in their abundance signify an isolationist, nationalist, anti-EU attitude? Is flag waving incompatible or in competition with EU? Where do we place the limits of identity, national or otherwise? These are vexing questions—and definitely not specific to Turkey—answers of which should be sought not in the past but in the present tense of Europe and the world we live in.