The Crisis of Geographical Imagination in Turkey

Luka Lucić

Ethnic, nationalistic and social tensions are at an all-time high in Turkey, exacerbated by the re-emergence of the "Kurdish problem" and the influx of Syrian refugees fleeing the war. Minorities are persecuted and academics denouncing exactions are targeted by the government. Luka Lucić compares this situation to the collapse of Yugoslavia and warns of possible dire times to come.

There was an old joke often told in Sarajevo during the early days of the siege (1992-1995). All across former Yugoslavia, in the early 1990s, we found our deteriorating political situation quite comical. Translated into English, it goes something like this:

> Two policeman are patrolling the city, getting ready to impose a strict curfew which starts at 10 p.m. sharp. As they turn a corner, they spot a man rushing down the street. They proceed to question him: what are you doing, where are you going?—standard police business. He answers that he is just passing by, on his way home. Upon examining his identification, the older policeman unbuckles his gun and kills the innocent man.

> It's only 9:45—the curfew hasn't even started yet. Shocked and confused, his younger partner asks, "Why did you kill him?"

> "He wouldn't have made it anyway," responds the older officer, "his ID says that he lives 20 minutes away."

It's a clumsy joke, especially when taken out of context and translated into English. You have to have lived the circumstances in order to laugh at it. And the reason the joke was funny at that particular historical junction is because it aptly summed up our rapidly narrowing geographical imagination (Harvey 1990). During the early 1990s, our spatialized cultural and historical understanding was becoming increasingly nationalistic and intolerant, even claustrophobic from the vantage point of a progressive civic society. Exploring the relationship of space to social relations—and, by extension, human psychology—geographer David Harvey (2006) points out that "what we do, as well as what we understand, is integrally dependent upon the spatio-temporal frame within which we situate ourselves." Told in Turkey some 25 years later, as the frame is similarly contracting, the joke again rings true.

Change the name and the story applies to you

Indeed, too many uncanny parallels can be drawn between the current political crisis in Turkey and sociopolitical conditions across Yugoslavia during the early 1990s. Consolidation of leadership behind an ethnonationalist and revivalist ideology, disempowerment of minorities, and tight army control of southeastern regions of the country are just a few familiar plot elements. Shortly after the June 2015 parliamentary elections,[1] as if following the same playbook that was used on numerous

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[1] See: http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=60370.

occasions during the Bosnian War, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan deliberately short-circuited the peace process with the Kurds in order to stir nationalist sentiments after his ruling Justice and Development Party featured poorly. The tactics of portraying the other (often minority) ethnic groups as a threat to the territorial or social integrity of the state were regularly employed by almost all ethnonationalist leaders across former Yugoslavia during the 1990s in order to affirm their political positions by galvanizing support for nationalist projects.

While undoubtedly complex and multilayered, the causes of both the Yugoslav and Turkish crises largely lie in the inability of the national political systems to constitute a geographical imagination broad enough to embrace the cultural, ethnic and ideological diversity historically engendered by these two post-Ottoman regions. The history of the empire has, in effect, left behind traces of cosmopolitanism that often present a problem to be reconciled by the various nation-states that have emerged in its former territory, from the Western Balkans to Southern Anatolia. The ramifications of this problem become visible with each iterative attempt at political organization of a country based on the idea of an ethnic nation, inherently an imagined community, spatially limited by finite, if elastic, boundaries (Anderson 1983). As the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s across former Yugoslavia and the current political struggles on Turkish soil both show, across this polyethnic, polyglot, and multireligious region, state-building projects that are based on an ethnonationalist understanding of the relationship between space and ideology are often bloody.

The dissolution of a multiethnic Yugoslav state into several smaller ethnonationalist states gave prominence to a host of scholarly inquiries into the symbolic and practical meanings of ethnic and national identity at the dawn of the 21st century. The contemporary political crisis in Turkey, however, presents us with a new set of questions that have direct relevance on our understanding of the relationship between space and ideology within a nation-state. Exactly how the narrowing geographical imagination is wreaking havoc across real and imagined spaces in Turkey becomes clearer when we consider the examples (discussed below) of the social segregation of Syrian refugees, government-imposed round-the-clock curfews in 17 Kurdish cities across southeastern Anatolia, and—as of late—explicit prosecution of ideological dissent stemming from opposition parties, independent media, and academia. It appears that when ideas of national unification based on ethnolinguistic, ideological, and religious sameness are thought to be the glue that holds together the legitimacy of a government's authority over a given territory, any real challenge to these governing ideas is interpreted as a challenge to the geographic integrity of the state itself.

Real and imagined spaces for refugees

The ways in which space becomes a central point of contestation as Turkey's current government attempts to deal with cultural, ethnic, and ideological diversity become apparent when we consider both the material and representational spaces occupied by the Syrian refugees currently residing on its territory. Over the past five years, Turkey has received unprecedented numbers of migrants. While a million refugees entered the 28 member states of the European Union (EU) in 2015, there are more than 2.7 million registered refugees from Syria living in Turkey alone.[2] However, throughout the migration crisis, the Turkish government has taken active legislative steps to geographically and socially segregate refugees residing on its territory. On top of that, the government has often made us of them symbolically to attain larger geopolitical goals such as the faster implementation of a visa-free regime for Turkish citizens visiting Europe and the acceleration of accession talks with the Continental bloc.

That finding social and physical space for refugees was going to be a challenge was obvious as early as 2011, when the Syrian crisis started. At the time, the Turkish government enacted reception policies that followed the pattern of temporary accommodation predicated on the assumption that the conflict would come to a swift conclusion and the displaced Syrians would return home. But as

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[2] See : http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224.

conditions in Syria deteriorated further, and it became clear that a more permanent solution would be necessary, the actions of the Turkish government began to follow the pattern of segregation—a practice of exclusion by societies seeking to eliminate diversity. Today, the government-run refugee camps provide shelter to about 200,000 Syrian refugees, while the rest are surviving under very challenging circumstances outside the traditional camps, in towns close to the Turkish–Syrian border.

Syrian refugees' access to the rights guaranteed by the 1951 Refugee Convention,[3] such as education, health care, gainful employment and freedom of movement, is acutely limited. While close to a million Syrian children live in Turkey, roughly 400,000 have no access to formal education. Many children are able to survive only by taking up jobs in factories or in vegetable fields.[4] Only recently, and after almost five years of hesitation,[5] the Turkish government has allowed adult refugees to apply for work permits. However, the permits are not automatically granted. The number of Syrians in a given workplace is limited to 10% of employees, and they are only able to seek work in the province in which they currently reside. Throughout recent talks with the EU over the joint action plan[6] aimed at stemming the flow of migrants into Europe, President Erdoğan explicitly used the refugees as a negotiation tool by threatening to send millions to Europe[7] if the government's demands were not met.

Petitioning for inclusion

Almost in parallel with the influx of refugees, multiple issues connected with the so-called "Kurdish problem" have resurfaced within the political arena, fueled by the success of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, or HDP) a coalition of anti-nationalist, environmentalist, and other leftist movements during the June 2015 elections. Of the various subsequent actions taken by the Turkish government to restrict the active political space of those not belonging to the dominant ideological group, the events of recent months that have involved the jailing of four academics are particularly telling. In early January 2016, President Erdoğan accused over a thousand academics of treason for signing a petition[8] titled "We will not be a party to this crime". In it, signatories directly address the actions of the Turkish military in Kurdish provinces that began shortly after the June 2015 elections.

Since August of 2015, the Turkish government has imposed 52 open-ended and round-the-clock curfews in 17 cities. These are a part of a security operation launched against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK), a group that Ankara officially considers a terrorist organization. However, as the tragicomic joke from the beginning of this article makes apparent, the lives of casual passersby are severely altered by the power dynamics of this restrictive space. Shortages of water and electricity, together with the challenges of accessing work, school, food and medical care, are having a devastating effect on the everyday lives of the approximately 1.3 million people who reside in this region. By the time the petition was signed, 157 civilians had died as a direct result of government actions. A video[9] shot in late January by a local journalist—in which a group of civilians carrying white flags are fired at—led to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to call on Turkey to investigate the shootings.

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3   See: www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html.
4   See: www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/world/europe/in-turkey-a-syrian-child-has-to-work-to-survive.html?_r=0.
5   See: http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-syria-refugees-workers-idUKKCN0QC1UH20150807.
6   See: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement.
7   See: www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/turkish-president-threatens-to-send-millions-of-syrian-refugees-to-eu.
8   See: https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/63.
9   See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5jaStEZvPM&feature=youtu.be.

Summarizing the current situation, the petition signed by the academics declares that "[t]he Turkish state has effectively condemned its citizens in Sur, Silvan, Nusaybin, Cizre, Silopi (…) to hunger through its use of curfews," and proceed to suggest steps toward a more inclusive social and geographical imaginary by calling on the government to "create a road map that would lead to a lasting peace which includes the demands of the Kurdish political movement." Hundreds of individuals who signed this petition were subject to disciplinary and criminal investigations, detention, and suspensions. Four signatories were arrested[10] for producing "terrorism propaganda" and held in jail for over a month after holding a press conference in which they affirmed that, despite government bullying, they were still committed to standing by the original petition.

Learning from tragedy to nurture hope for reform

The recent history of the ethnonationalist states that have emerged from the debris of Yugoslavia points in a troubling direction. Almost a quarter-century after the dissolution of the larger multiethnic state, mediocrity rules the region, nationalism is rampant, and minorities (ethnic, sexual, and ideological) are regularly deprived of spaces for political action. Sarajevans in particular are quick to point out that the siege of their city didn't end with the Dayton Peace Agreement. The siege is still in progress, they say, only today's Sarajevo is occupied from within by nationalist extremists wearing the masks of politicians and religious leaders. While the narrow ethnonationalist ideology and its limiting and confining geographical imagination has, over the past 25 years, proven to be a tragedy for the people of former Yugoslavia, Turkey is today at a historic and decisive juncture. It is still possible to turn the situation around, but we must support the visible, and help revive the latent, forces of civic nationalism in Turkey. The June 2015 elections and political engagement of academia show that Turkish society still embodies the tradition of rebellion against absolute rule, and the aggressive pursuit of liberal and progressive policies that can challenge the stale narrative upon which the ethnonationalist geographical imagination is constructed.

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10   See: www.nature.com/news/turkish-academics-jailed-for-making-terrorism-propaganda-1.19586.