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## TOLERANCE AS A EUROPEAN NORM OR AN OTTOMAN PRACTICE?

An Analysis of Turkish Public Debates on the (Re)  
Opening of an Armenian Church in the Context of  
Turkey's EU Candidacy and Neo-Ottoman Revival

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Bilgin Ayata

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# TOLERANCE AS A EUROPEAN NORM OR AN OTTOMAN PRACTICE?

## AN ANALYSIS OF TURKISH PUBLIC DEBATES ON THE (RE)OPENING OF AN ARMENIAN CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF TURKEY'S EU CANDIDACY AND NEO-OTTOMAN REVIVAL

**Bilgin Ayata**

### Abstract

Turkey has undergone significant legal and institutional reforms regarding minority rights and cultural rights in the past decade as part of a reform process to meet political criteria for EU membership. However, it has not been studied so far if this increasing institutional compliance has also led to transformations at a normative level in the public discourse in Turkey. To explore this question, this paper presents the results of a qualitative media analysis that I conducted on the restoration and reopening of an Armenian church in 2007 – a milestone for the Republic as churches were destroyed or doomed to vanish for nearly a century since the Armenian Genocide in 1915. The restoration of the Sourp Khatch/Akhtamar Church became a showcase for Turkey's self-promotion as a 'tolerant nation'. However, the church was notably made accessible to the public as a museum that initially lacked the cross on its dome and was conceived to only host a religious service once a year. This opening of a church-museum is a symbolic instance in Turkey's ongoing transformation process in which tolerance and plurality have become prominent keywords in politics and public debate. Yet, as the findings suggest, they do not so as a reflection of European norms, but rather stand for a rediscovery and reinterpretation of Turkey's Ottoman past practices as a multi-religious empire. I show, however, that this reinterpretation occurs on the shaky grounds of a blindfolded view of the past, in particular the denial of the Armenian Genocide, and on the denial that minorities are still endangered in present day Turkey. I conclude that, without an acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide, Turkey's nostalgic embracement of the Ottoman past and representation of norms such as tolerance as the 'true' Turkish/Islamic norms do not stand for a norm internalization or a norm adaption process, but instead, for a disconnection between norm and practice.

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## 1 Introduction: Research Question and the Case

### 1.1 *The Transformative Power of Europe in Turkey*

In the present study, I aim to investigate if and to what degree Europe's transformative power can be observed in Turkish public discourses on religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance. Turkey has undergone significant legal and institutional reforms regarding minority rights and cultural rights in the past decade as part of a reform process to meet political criteria for EU membership. This is remarkable considering the outright and official denial of the existence of its Kurdish population for many decades, Turkey's vehement denial of the Armenian Genocide, and its violent efforts to assimilate and repress cultural differences of its religious and ethnic minorities. These institutional reforms were accompanied by a vibrant public debate amongst intellectuals and opinion makers in which these reforms were often embedded in discussions on Turkey's candidacy for EU membership, either as an unfavorable aspect of EU conditionality that could not be circumvented, or as desirable, liberalizing norms that Turkey should adopt (Bayraktar 2010; Fisher/Müftüler-Bac 2010; Karaca forthcoming). While policy changes regarding minority rights complied overall with EU conditionality, it has not been studied so far if this increasing institutional compliance has also led to transformations at a normative level in the public discourse in Turkey. Furthermore, it has not been investigated in what way Europe's own difficulties with its multicultural reality are reflected in the public debates in Turkey when decisions on policies regarding religious and ethnic minorities are at stake. Political decisions such as the Swiss minaret ban, the burqa ban in France, the deportation of Roma in August 2010 in France, the controversy on Turkish language schools in Germany, as well as the rise of populist right-wing parties promoting anti-immigrant or anti-Islamic attitudes point to an increasing difficulty within Europe to deal with its own diversity (Göle 2010). Do these developments reduce the credibility of European norms? Are restrictive policies towards Muslims in Europe used as arguments to prevent an intensification of the EU reform process, or do they not matter, because European norms and practices serve only as distant and abstract references in a primarily domestic debate? To put it more generally, how close "has Europe hit home" (Börzel/Risse 2000) in Turkey?

To pursue these questions, I will conduct a media content analysis from 2005-2010 to examine how the opening of the Armenian church Sourp Khatch/Akhtamar in 2007 (Church of the Holy Cross), located in the province of Van, has been debated in public discourse. The restoration and musealization of this church under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism became a showcase for the Turkish government in promoting an image of Turkey as a tolerant nation embracing its cultural plurality. I will first examine how government officials showcased the church restoration both domestically and abroad and then, in a second step, explore how domestic opinion makers and intellectuals<sup>1</sup> in Turkey discussed this government initiative in the print media. I will also examine to what degree the EU appears as a reference point in these public debates, be it normatively or institutionally, in order to assess the transformative power of Europe in Turkey after 2005, hence after accession negotiations began. Yet, before moving to the empirical section of the paper, I will first discuss how the notion of tolerance is connected to a new confidence in Turkey and how Turkey's relationship to the EU is changing. In a second step, I will present the importance of the Armenian Church as a signifier of this new 'tolerance' discourse.

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1 For an excellent overview on the role and importance of intellectuals in public debates in Turkey see Fisher Onar/Evin 2010.

## 1.2 *The Transformations of Turkey on its Way to Europe*

With the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey radically turned its back from its Ottoman past and underwent an ambitious modernization project that foresaw its future firmly anchored in the West. In this narrative of the newly established nation-state, the Ottoman Empire was portrayed as backwards and rejected as a source of national identity of modern Turkey, while the West stood for an irrevocable, national aspiration of belonging to the community of modern civilizations. The state ideology of Kemalism,<sup>2</sup> which became an official doctrine after the death of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), epitomizes this distinction from the Ottoman Empire and its orientation towards the West, in particular to Europe. Turkey became a member of the Council of Europe in 1949, a member of NATO in 1952, and applied for associate membership at the EEC in 1959. It signed the Universal Human Rights Declaration in 1949, the European Convention on Human Rights in 1954, the Refugee Convention in 1961, and, more interestingly for the purpose of this paper, the UN Genocide Convention in 1950. Domestically, a radical, authoritarian modernization project was implemented during the one-party rule until 1946 which continued, albeit with a series of setbacks and challenges, after the transition to a multi-party system (Öktem 2011). Yet, the ultimate state power remained in the hands of the military that staged four coup d'états between 1960 and 1997. As Kemalist modernity was based on harsh ethnic nationalism and rigid secularism, unsurprisingly, the Kurds and the Islamists became the main obstacles to the Kemalist project (Taspinar 2008). In the early years of the Republic, both groups, particularly the Kurds, were suppressed through brutal state violence. However, the reemergence of the Kurdish and the Islamic movements after the military coup in 1980, along with neoliberal pressures and the global restructuring of the international order after the end of the Cold War, set off a second transformation process in Turkey. While the basis for this transformation was laid in the 1990s by the late Turkish Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal, it is just now fully evolving (Colak 2006). What exactly this transformation process is about and where Turkey is heading to have been a topic of much speculation and controversy in the past few years. Given that the entire Middle East is subject to a significant and ongoing restructuring process since 2001, the developments in Turkey cannot be viewed in isolation from this messy regional transformation. At the same time, Turkey's EU candidacy has spurred a drastic reform process since 1999. The range of interpretations of Turkey's transformation oscillates between the poles of Europeanization and Neo-Ottomanism<sup>3</sup> that signify antagonistic developments in this picture: The image of a Turkey that is reforming to reach full EU membership is at odds with the image of a Turkey that is orienting itself stronger towards the Middle East and Islam. As these seemingly contradictory processes are clearly underway at the same time, it will be useful to depart from such antagonisms and instead more insightful to examine if and how these two processes converge, facilitate, obstruct, or even operate together in the transformation project that is, in essence, a reinvention of Turkish national identity.

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2 The state ideology of Kemalism consists of six pillars: republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolutionism. These principles were adopted into the Turkish constitution in 1937.

3 Yavuz defines Neo-Ottomanism as the call for (1) the rearticulation of Turkish nationalism and increased political and cultural tolerance for diversity as in the Ottoman past; (2) the elimination of economic borders among the Balkan, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern countries; and (3) respect for the political borders of adjacent countries (Yavuz 1998: 40).

### 1.3 Reinventing Turkish National Identity: Turkey as a 'Tolerant Nation'?

#### 1.3.1 From Rapture to Continuity with the Past

The starting point of this paper is my argument that, since the early 1990s, a domestic struggle by various political actors about Turkey's national identity has taken place that inevitably forces Turkey to revisit its relationship with its past while it recasts its future. This entails a revision of the irrevocable goal of becoming part of Europe at all costs, as it has been presented in the Kemalist modernization project. The *rupture* with the Ottoman past that has been critical for the founding myth of the Turkish nation-state is being replaced by a new national narrative that openly takes Islam as the basis of Turkish identity and culture, thus establishing a *continuity* with the Ottoman Empire. I argue that this becomes most apparent in the recent promotion of Turkey as a 'tolerant nation' which, ironically, rests upon the same denial that the Kemalist Republic insisted on: the refusal to confront the Armenian Genocide of 1915, that led to the almost total erasure and annihilation of the multi-religious plurality that had previously existed in the Eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire. Since 1987, after the EU Parliament recommended Turkey to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide and suggested to make it a formal criterion for Turkey's EU candidacy, the issue of the open confrontation with the past has been lingering over Turkey's EU accession (Bayraktar 2010). Officially, it never became part of the formal accession criteria, yet the fact that several member states contain larger numbers of citizens of Armenian descent, most prominently France<sup>4</sup> and the Eastern European countries, and that eleven EU member states have passed resolutions in national parliaments acknowledging the Armenian Genocide, poses Turkey's approach towards its past as a challenge for its future accession. The issue of the Armenian Genocide also plays an important role in the EU's expectation that Turkey should improve relations with the Republic of Armenia (Philipps 2012). In the wake of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia in 1994. However, under the reform pressure that the prospect of opening accession negotiations spurred, Turkey announced several steps to improve relations with Armenia since 2002. The announcement by the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in 2005 that Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism will restore the Armenian Church Akhtamar has been presented as one of them, as I will show in more detail in section 3.

#### 1.3.2 Turkey as the Heir of the Empire of Tolerance and Bridge of Civilizations

In November 2010, the Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator Egemen Bagis received a religious freedom award by the American and European Orthodox Churches for "his contributions to initiatives in Turkey regarding religious minorities and his great efforts to build a bridge between different cultures and civilizations" (Hürriyet 2010). During the award ceremony at the European Parliament in Brussels that took place alongside a conference entitled "Religious Freedom: Turkey's Bridge to the European Union", Bagis first summarized the reforms that the Turkish government had undertaken in the past few years with regard to religious minorities in Turkey and then remarked:

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<sup>4</sup> France contains the largest number of the Armenian diaspora after the US, with an estimated 500 000 French citizens of Armenian descent.

*“for quite a long time, different religions, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, had lived in Anatolia in an atmosphere of complaisance. The other name of Ottoman Empire was ‘The Empire of Tolerance’. It is not surprising that the Ottoman Empire had provided a freer and more tolerable atmosphere than its European equivalent.”* (Hürriyet 2010, my translation)

Bagis not only presents a positive reference to the Ottoman Empire here, he even portrays it as superior to Europe with regard to tolerance. The notion of Ottoman tolerance is juxtaposed to present day Europe and its own difficulties with religious plurality. He continued his speech by pointing out that the night before, after having spent a day in Athens, he had to fly earlier than planned to Brussels as there was no mosque in Athens where he could perform his Bayram prayer. The Greek government does not permit mosques to be built – a thorny issue in the eyes of the Turkish government. The message was clear: While Turkey was being closely observed and monitored for its treatment of minorities, the practices of some EU member states are exempted from such scrutiny. Pointing out that, by 2025, about ten percent of Europe’s population will be Muslim, Bagis also voiced his concern about the steady increase of islamophobia in Europe and provided counterexamples of tolerance from Turkey such as the recent openings of a number of Armenian churches. In his speech, EU Chief negotiator of Turkey, Bagis, skillfully managed to simultaneously showcase Turkey’s progress with regard to religious minorities and to criticize Europe for its difficulties with its own Muslim minorities and the rise of islamophobia. Bagis’ speech illustrates vividly some of the current debates in Turkey and Europe that I want to explore further.

On the one hand, his speech in Brussels reflects the ‘new confidence’ of Turkey, or rather, that of the AKP government, that proudly draws on the country’s Ottoman past and rejects the view that values such as tolerance, pluralism, and multiculturalism are intrinsically European ideas and practices. In contrast to the traditional Kemalist elites in Turkey that readily accepted Europe for the past 90 years as its ultimate benchmark for civilization and modernity, the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* - Justice and Development Party) government – with its populist leader PM Erdogan, its intellectual Foreign Minister Davutoglu, the soft-spoken Head of State Gül, and the youthful Chief Negotiator Bagis – gave rise to a new era in Turkish politics that no longer accepts to sit quietly “in the waiting room of Europe” (Ahiska 2011). This new era entails a revised foreign policy strategy that, instead of simply following American and European interests as Turkey has been doing since the founding of the Republic in 1923, sets its own priorities and agenda openly seeking for regional and global leadership in a multipolar world. Some observers describe this change in foreign policy as “Neo-Ottomanism” (Taspinar 2008), others see this as a new orientation of a “Postwestern Turkey in a Postwestern Europe” (Rumford 2006). Irrespective of the label chosen for this change in foreign policy, it is clear that the EU is no longer the only option for Turkey, an argument that all four of the above mentioned politicians do not get tired to remind international observers. As a matter of fact, it is currently only the Chief Negotiator Bagis himself who actively promotes Turkey’s EU accession in Turkey and in European countries, while Erdogan and Davutoglu are too busy with global affairs, be it in Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, or most recently, Egypt and Tunisia. With the Arab uprisings and regime changes in 2011, Turkey’s potential role in the region both as a “bridge between civilizations” as well as a “successful democracy” (as set forth by international commentators) has intensified the interest in Turkey’s transformation process that accelerated both with the rise of the AKP as well as Turkey’s EU accession.



### 1.3.3 *Quo Vadis Turkey?*

With only one out of 35 chapters of the accession negotiation process successfully closed (with only thirteen opened so far) and a strand in scholarship arguing that the domestic EU reform process has been stagnating since 2005 (Saatcioglu 2010; Önis 2010), Turkey is nevertheless going through one of the most critical transformation processes of the last decades. This transformation appears not only to be breaking with the military legacy of the Republic – which earlier resulted in three bloody military coups and a protracted internal war for two decades in the Kurdish region – but also with the orthodoxy of Kemalism, the official state ideology (Ulusoy 2009). Inevitably, this is a fierce power struggle between old and new stakeholders that range from the bureaucratic state elite to the judiciary, paramilitary forces, academia, the military, the media, the government itself, as well as civil society organizations. For Ulusoy, this transformation is only the second wave of a Europeanization process that has begun with the modernizing reforms (*Tanzimat era*) in the Ottoman Empire (Ulusoy 2009). Hence, Ulusoy regards the ongoing transformation process in Turkey as another step of a larger European modernization project, even though the main actors of this process are previously excluded Islamic political actors and not the earlier Western-oriented Kemalists. In contrast to this view, Tugal's (2009) thorough analysis of the rise of the AKP in Turkey argues that the current transformation is a passive revolution in the Gramscian sense, leading to the successful absorption of Islam into capitalism. He describes this process as an alternative modernization that differs from the European trajectory. Göle (2011) goes a step further and asserts that Turkey has entered a "post-European" era, in which Europe no longer stands as the ultimate goal for Turkey's modernization, but instead is reconfiguring its identity and place in its neighborhood and the world.

With the recent elections in June 2011, the AKP has ever more consolidated its power and, certainly, various political outcomes of this transformation process are possible (Ayata 2012). A more consolidated democracy is only one of several options, as could be an end to Turkey's never-ending EU-candidacy status. Both the current developments in the Middle East as well as the next elections in France, Germany, and the UK will have a considerable impact which further direction this transformation process will take. Yet, irrespective of its outcome, the challenge that Turkey presents to the EU (and Europe to Turkey) is going to continue stirring heated debates about what Europe is and wants to be and where Turkey is positioning itself – if it does not want to be a "bridge" forever. What can be safely asserted is that even if Turkey or the EU decided to drop the quest for membership and agree on alternative configurations,<sup>5</sup> Turkey's transformation process will continue, as the Copenhagen Criteria have already been redefined into a domestic driven goal, the "Ankara Criteria" by PM Erdogan in 2005 (Hürriyet 2005c).

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5 In his book "A Turkey that can say No to Europe," one of Turkey's leading business men, Cem Kozlu, is advocating that Turkey should pursue alternative paths to full EU membership, as that prospect is economically less attractive for Turkey than it used to be a decade ago (Kozlu 2011).

## 2. The Case of the Armenian Church Sourp Khatch/Akthamar

The renovation and opening of the Sourp Khatch/Akhtamar indeed stands for a historic moment in Turkey. While there were 2,538 churches, 451 monasteries, and 2,000 Christian schools in Ottoman Turkey by 1913, there are only 59 active churches and 16 schools left today (Özinian 2010). After 1915, not only almost the entire non-Muslim community was annihilated or deported, but also their buildings destroyed or doomed to vanish (Ungör/Polatel 2011). The church Sourp Khatch is one of the oldest Armenian sacred sites which was last used as a weaponry by German troops during WWI. In 2005, the Turkish government announced its renovation. The renovated church was inaugurated on March 29, 2007, yet, with several shortcomings: It was not opened as a church but instead as a “secular museum” and it lacked a cross on the dome. The ministry did not allow for religious service and, moreover, it did not preserve the original Armenian name of the Church “Sourp Khatch” but instead turkified it by naming it Akdamar, which means white vein.<sup>6</sup> After much criticism, the government finally allowed for a mass to be held once a year, and installed a cross on the dome in 2010.

I have selected the case of Sourp Khatch because the renovation and reopening of the church not only carries a highly symbolic meaning with Turkey’s engagement with religious difference, but also because it reflects very material concerns of Turkey to redefine itself as a tolerant Muslim country that is embracing its cultural diversity. Secondly, I chose the case of Sourp Khatch as it falls within a period that is usually being described as a time of stagnation of the EU reforms (Saatcioglu 2010; Önis 2010). Given that Turkey’s reluctance to confront its violent past and to reconcile with the Armenian Community has become part of an informal EU conditionality, in which – according to Seyhan Bayraktar – Turkey’s generic „Europafähigkeit“/ Turkey’s EU-capability is mostly played out (Bayraktar 2010), the case of Akhtamar is particularly useful to explore the prevalence of EU’s normative power in this process.

For this study, I analyzed opinion pieces in four Turkish dailies for the years 2005-2010 in order to evaluate:

- if and to what degree external factors such as Turkey’s EU accession or Turkey’s foreign policy concerns figure in this domestic debate
- in what ways European norms or practices – either as a guiding norm or as a negative example such as the restriction of religious freedoms regarding Muslims in Europe – are being referred to in the discussions on the Akhtamar Church

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<sup>6</sup> I use Sourp Khatch (Church of the Holy Cross) and Akhtamar alternately in this text. The Armenian expression „Aghatamar“ refers to an old Armenian legend of the island on Lake Van where the church is located. Accordingly, an Armenian princess named Tamar was in love with a Kurdish boy across the lake. This boy would swim from the mainland each night to the island, following the light Tamar was holding up at night. One night, her father, who disapproved the boy’s visit, smashed her light while he was swimming towards her. The boy drowned, exclaiming “Agh Tamar!” in sorrow, and for centuries, the island and the church on it were referred to as Aghatamar in the region. The original name of the church was “Sourp Khatch” (Church of the Holy Cross). Since presently, there are various Armenian spellings and names in circulation, I am following, for the sake of readability, the spelling „Akhtamar“ as it is used by some Armenian writers (see Sassounian 2010 or Raffi Hermonn in Devrim 2007)

- if there is a qualitative change of the discourse over time, particularly in the context of declining public interest in Turkey's EU accession both in Turkey and Europe.

I surveyed over 400 news items, opinion articles, and columns in the Turkish dailies Zaman, Hürriyet, Hürriyet Daily News, and Radikal that contained the word Akdamar.<sup>7</sup> Of these, I only focus on opinion pieces and columns (64 in total) for an in-depth content analysis. The selection of columnist and opinion makers is useful as they are very widely read in Turkey and play a critical role in the Turkish public sphere (Fisher Onar/Müftüler Bac 2010). My choice of newspapers follows political cleavages as well as their popularity. The pro-government daily Zaman is a conservative, Islamic-oriented newspaper that has the highest circulation in Turkey at present (approximately 900,000). It is a high quality newspaper that includes a diverse array of columnists, including liberal intellectuals and minority members such as the Armenian journalist Etyen Mahcupyan or the Alevi-Kurdish writer Bejan Matur. Zaman represents the new elite in Turkey, while the daily Hürriyet is a conservative and populist paper that represents the Kemalist establishment, hence the old military and state elites. For many years, it had the highest circulation, yet currently ranks number three (approximately 400,000). It has still the country's most prominent columnists such as Ertugrul Özkök, Mehmet Ali Birand, and Cengiz Candar and is a very influential paper representing the mainstream of Turkey. In addition, I surveyed the English language edition of Hürriyet (formerly "Turkish Daily News"), which targets foreign diplomats and international business circles and is very different from the Turkish language edition of the paper, regarding quality and audience. While the circulation is very small (approximately 5,000), it is a forum where Turkey represents itself to the international community, which is why I included it in the survey. Selected articles by Turkish columnists belonging to the largest media group Dogan appear in the English edition, which provides a larger choice of opinion articles for my survey. Finally, I selected the progressive daily Radikal despite its small circulation as it is probably the most 'Europhile' newspaper and provides a vibrant forum for the liberal academic elite in Turkey. Together with its Sunday edition, it publishes the magazine Radikal 2 in which civil society representatives, intellectuals, and scholars write larger opinion pieces on critical issues. I have left out staunch opponents of the EU process such as the ultranationalist and ultrareligious newspapers as I am interested in likely cases of norm diffusion. For the data analysis I follow a qualitative content analytical approach where I will not only concentrate on text contents but also link the contents to contexts.

Previous studies that undertook media content analysis or qualitative elite surveys have found a strong prevalence of EU norms and values in Turkish domestic debates on tolerance and pluralism until the mid-2000s (Bayraktar 2010; Fisher Onar/Bac-Müftüler 2010). The findings of Bayraktar's extensive study on the discursive opening of one of the most salient taboos in Turkey— the Armenian Genocide – with an analysis of the Turkish media from 1973-2005 shows that external pressure exercised either by the Armenian Diaspora, the US, or the EU/EU member states precedes most instances of discursive openings with regard to Armenians in Turkey. This also reflects on normative reference points in debates: Especially in the run up to Turkey's EU candidacy between 1999 and 2005, EU norms and criteria served frequently as an argumentative frame when Turkish intellectuals were discussing a particular event or policy reform related to Armenians. For instance, when a group of historians and intellectuals attempted to organize an alternative conference at the Bosphorus University in 2005 dealing with the fate of Ottoman Armenians and thereby

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7 My search included all variations of the spelling of Akdamar.

diverging from the official denialist history, a massive uproar followed when the conference announcement was made public. Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek – an otherwise rather reform zealous member of the AKP government – accused the organizers for being traitors of Turkey and described the conference as a stab into Turkey’s back, as it would now be even more difficult to ward off Armenian genocide claims (Bayraktar 2010: 249).<sup>8</sup> In response, several liberal commentators noted in their columns that the ‘real’ traitors are those who endanger Turkey’s EU candidacy with such narrow-minded interventions ( Bayraktar 2010: 249).

Given that this incident took place shortly before accession negotiations were opened with Turkey, I expect for my case study of the Akhtamar Church fewer references to EU norms and criteria as a result of the strengthening of civil society, the intensification of the transformation process, further discursive opening, and the declining public support for Turkey’s EU candidacy. However, especially in opinion pieces by liberal critics who find the opening of the church as a secular museum, its missing cross and turkified name to be problematic and insufficient, I do expect EU norms still to be part of the argumentative framework, especially when there are demands for more acknowledgement of plurality and a tolerant society.

Moreover, I am interested to what degree questions of multiculturalism and minority rights in Europe and Turkey are intertwined and whether Turkey’s EU candidacy makes these debates more salient. While it has been researched how Turkey’s EU candidacy is being discussed in the European public (e.g., Wimmel 2006; Giannakopoulos/Maras 2005; Risse 2010), an analysis of the discursive interactions between Turkish and European debates has not been undertaken. This research will contribute to the literature, not only by shifting the focus away from solely Europe’s perceptions of Turkey’s candidacy, but by equally considering the Turkish debates. Highlighting discursive linkages of European and Turkish public debates, it also seeks to offer innovative ways for expanding the boundaries of a European public sphere as it is conceived today.

### **3. Empirical Findings: Government Policies and Public Debates on the Akhtamar Church**

#### *3.1 The Government Perspective on the Sourp Khatch Church in the Turkish Media (2005- 2010)*

On May 18, 2005, PM Erdogan announced in a group party meeting of the AKP that he commissioned the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to renovate the Holy Cross Church in Van. The restoration would proceed with state funds and in cooperation with the Armenian community in Turkey (Zaman 2005). Earlier in 2004, the European Parliament had issued a resolution on the EU Commission’s report on Turkey’s

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<sup>8</sup> Under the immense pressure of the media and politicians, the university cancelled the conference. Yet, a few months later, PM Erdogan pushed for the realization of the conference with the request that it should take place before the important EU Council meeting in October 2005, which was going to decide when accession negotiations would be opened with Turkey. Only three days before this EU Council meeting, the conference took place at another university in Istanbul, eventually (Bayraktar 2010: 250).

progress towards accession that included the recommendation for Turkey to register Akhtamar along with a number of other sites in the World Heritage List of the UNESCO.<sup>9</sup> Yet, what directly preceded Erdogan's speech on May 18 was the Third Summit of the Council of Europe that took place on May 16-17, 2005 in Warsaw. The Republic of Armenia, which had become a member of the Council of Europe in 2001, participated for the first time in this summit and Armenia's President Kocharyan demanded in his address to the Council that Turkey should recognize the Armenian Genocide (Philipps 2012). Upon this public shaming of Turkey by Kocharyan, PM Erdogan cancelled their planned meeting and was faced with questions about the Armenian Genocide from the international press following Kocharyan's remarks. Upon his return to Turkey, Erdogan reported to his party members about the summit; his speech was cited in the surveyed newspapers for two consecutive days. Erdogan presented the restoration of the church as part of Turkey's "retaliation against Genocide", namely against the 15 countries around the globe that have acknowledged the Armenian Genocide in parliamentary resolutions. In an attempt to counter this international pressure, Erdogan announced at this group party meeting that Turkey will begin to pass genocide resolutions with regard to those 15 countries:

*"Some of these countries have carried out genocides themselves. We will pass resolutions in our Parliament with regard to this. We will do this step. Why? Because Turkey has not abased itself into committing genocide in its history. It is impossible that we would accept this."* (Erdogan cited in Zaman 2005, my translation)

He then mentions the improvements in the relations with Armenia since the AKP came into government by bringing up that his government introduced direct flights between Yerevan and Istanbul (despite the border being closed between Turkey and Armenia) and announcing the start of the restoration of the Akhtamar church (Erdogan cited in Zaman 2005). The argumentation, that the opening of the church is a step towards the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations on the one hand, and a message to the world to counter Genocide claims on the other, composes the core of the official view until 2007. While some news items make references to the EU recommendation of 2004, they also report statements by PM Erdogan that this renovation will be the appropriate response to countries such as France and other countries which recognized the Armenian Genocide via parliamentary resolutions (Hürriyet Daily News 2005). The church restoration is presented in the official speeches *not* as an occasion for engagement with the country's past, but rather as a useful political instrument against critics of Turkey (Hürriyet 2005a). A third aspect contained in the news items from 2005-2007 regarding Akhtamar are the expected economic benefits of renovating churches and other sites of non-Muslim belief as this would increase revenues from faith tourism (Hürriyet 2005b).

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<sup>9</sup> Recommendation 12 invites Turkey to "drastically improve its perception of ethnic and religious minorities, for instance by highlighting their contributions to the cultural heritage of the country; in particular, requests the Turkish authorities to consider some of these specific contributions such as Hasankeyf, Ani, Zeugma or Aghtamar as suitable for registration in the World Heritage List of UNESCO." (EU Parliament, 2004)

### *3.1.1 Suppressing Genocide Claims through Church Renovations*

The intention to suppress Armenian genocide claims through the renovation of Akhtamar became most visible when the Minister of Culture Koc announced in 2006 that the church would be opened as a museum on April 24, 2007 (Koc cited in Hürriyet 2006). April 24 marks the Armenian Genocide Commemoration Day as on this day in 1915, over 250 Armenian intellectuals were detained and deported, signaling the start of the violence that was to follow (Dadrian 1995). Apart from the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, this attempt to reinterpret the meaning of April 24th by the Minister of Culture through the inauguration of the church was ignored by the Turkish press. Yet, after heavy criticism by Armenian organizations from outside Turkey, the date for the inauguration was changed to April 11, which – as again Hrant Dink alerted to – corresponds to April 24 in the old Armenian calendar (Radikal 2007). This rather obvious manipulative intent of the church opening through the ministry came to a halt after a shocking event in 2007. On January 19, 2007, Hrant Dink was assassinated on a busy street in Istanbul in front of his office. This murder against the most vocal and visible member of the remaining Armenian community in Turkey numbering less than 100,000 showed that it is not just churches and artefacts that need protection, but that the very Christian minority itself is still living under threat. Some banners during commemorations outside of Turkey read “1,500.000 +1”, suggesting that Hrant Dink is the latest victim of the Genocide, hence linking the past to the present. The murder of Hrant Dink was reported widely, also in the international media, putting the AKP government under pressure regarding its treatment of religious minorities.<sup>10</sup>

### *3.1.2 When the Past Comes Closer: The Aftermath of the Hrant Dink's Murder*

An unexpected uproar came by the progressive segments of Turkish civil society which underwent a deep shock about the murder of Dink who was an active member of it. His funeral, which was attended by over 100,000 people in Istanbul, became a turning point for the progressive part of Turkish civil society which was now displaying a heightened awareness for the vulnerability of religious minorities in Turkey. The murder also had an unintended effect on the Akhtamar debate: The last article by Dink that appeared on the day he was shot dead concerned the Akhtamar church, in which he described the delay of the inauguration of the church as a “comedy” and sharply criticized the halfhearted efforts of the government (Candar 2007). Dink's article was reprinted and widely read after his murder, which may be the reason why the opening date was changed again to a neutral date and the church eventually inaugurated on March 29, 2007. After Dink's murder, statements by Erdogan and other officials mention the church less in the context of fighting off genocide claims, and instead underscore the notion of Turkish tolerance when talking about Akhtamar. In fact, in the time period from 2007-2010, Akhtamar was frequently mentioned by government officials as a sign of goodwill and tolerance that Turkey shows towards Armenians (Zaman 2009).

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<sup>10</sup> As a party emerging out of the Islamic movement, the AKP had to prove at home and abroad that Western democracy and Islam are compatible and that the AKP will not undermine or challenge the secular order in Turkey and/or endanger non-Muslim or non-religious communities.

For instance, when a domestic petition campaign by some Turkish intellectuals in 2008 apologized to Armenians for the denial of the “great catastrophe” that befell Armenians in 1915, PM Erdogan furiously responded that Turkey had nothing to apologize for and mentioned in this context that the Turkish Republic opened the doors of an Armenian-Orthodox church to the entire world with the restoration of Akhtamar: “We did this without any expectation in return. This is a sign of something” (PM Erdogan cited in Hürriyet 2008). The use of the church as a sign of tolerance intensifies 2010, after the government – following domestic and international demands – allowed for a mass to be held once a year and a cross to be installed on the top of the dome. While Erdogan mainly uses the example of Akhtamar as an expression of tolerance of “the Turk” that the world should take notice of, the Minister of EU Affairs Egemen Bagis is the only government member who makes a connection to meeting EU standards when talking about Akhtamar (Zaman 2010).

### *3.1.3 Summary of Official View: Four Frames*

In sum, the official view regarding Akhtamar consists of four argumentative frames that all emphasize its strategic gain: the opening of the church as a

- (1) response towards genocide claims,
- (2) step towards improving relations with the Republic of Armenia,
- (3) step to increase revenues from faith tourism,
- (4) message to the world of how tolerant Turkey is towards its minorities.

In the next step, I will trace in an in-depth analysis how the public discussed the restoration and opening of the Holy Cross Church and assess if the public discourse follows or departs from the argumentative frames of the official discourse.

## *3.2 Content Analysis of Selected Opinion Pieces*

Shortly before and after the inauguration of the Akhtamar church, a debate emerged in the Turkish media. While the opening of the church-museum is applauded as a positive step unanimously in the surveyed newspapers, there is also a significant diversity in voices and arguments. For instance, while the conservative-nationalist journalist Taha Akyol congratulates Erdogan and his government for his “courageous initiative” and sharply criticizes a European journalist asking questions about the Armenian Genocide during a press conference (T. Akyol 2007), his son Mustafa Akyol, a Muslim-liberal journalist and currently deputy editor in chief of the Hürriyet Daily News, also welcomes the opening, but sharply criticizes the government for the turkification of the name and the prohibition of religious service two days later (M. Akyol 2007).



Cengiz Candar, a prominent progressive-liberal journalist even calls the opening of a church as a museum a “cultural genocide”:

*“You restore a historical church and find absurd reasons for not putting a cross and a bell onto it? Who will believe that you are secular, or that you ‘respect all faiths,’ or that you represent ‘the alliance of civilizations against the clash of civilizations.’ What you do is simply ‘cultural genocide.’” (Candar 2007)*

Candar’s sharp critique of the government policy stands in this scope rather alone in 2007, as he also makes a critical reference to Dink’s murder and its halfhearted investigation. Despite the broad condemnation of Dink’s murder in January across all democratic political spectra in the Turkish media, the other surveyed columns on the Akhtamar inauguration do not make a connection to Dink’s murder and merely assert pride and hope for a new beginning in Turkey, where tolerance and plurality are embraced. Once the uncomfortable fact that the lives of religious minorities are still in danger in Turkey<sup>11</sup> is ignored, it becomes rather easy to enjoy artifacts as cultural richness and connect it with national pride. For instance, a vocal critic of the AKP government, the journalist Mehmet Yilmaz from *Hürriyet*, remarks on the occasion of the Akhtamar opening that for many years, just as mosques in the Balkans and bridges from the Ottoman Empire have been destroyed and not been taken care of, Turkey too failed to preserve its churches:

*“Today, we should take pride in showing the courage to turn away from this wrong path. Each artifact on this street, no matter who built it or when it was built, is part of a cultural work that belongs to us. It is our task to preserve them and leave them intact for the next generations.” (Yilmaz 2007, my translation)*

It is rather interesting how smooth this incorporation of cultural richness as part of national identity can sometimes occur even for nationalist journalists. A remark of a sports journalist a few months after the Akhtamar opening exemplifies this rather well. After visiting a soccer camp in the city of Van, he states:

*“I am saying this from the bottom of my heart. “How happy is he who can call himself a Turk”. I was so pleased to go to Van for a day, I suggest everybody to visit Van. The beauty of the Lake Van, the amazing Akdamar Church, the pearl of the East attracts each year thousands of tourists. Why are we not going ourselves? In my view, those who have not seen this region full of historical beauty in Turkey do actually not know Turkey.” (Bayatli 2007, my translation)*

In 2008 and 2009, there is very little debate on Akhtamar, yet the critique of the missing cross appears in general pieces on Turkey’s transformation. For instance, Selcuk Gültasli, a journalist of *Zaman*, notes in his article about the “Anxious Republic” that the fear of the other is central to Turkey’s identity:

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to Dink, the catholic priest Andrea Santoro was murdered in February 2006 by ultranationalist in Trabzon. Furthermore, in April 2007, three Christian missionaries were brutally murdered in Malatya, with their throats being cut. The perpetrators of all murders are young men who are suspected to have only executed orders by a network connected to the “deep state”. In 2010, another catholic priest was murdered in Antakya, apparently without political motives by his assistant. Given the small community of Christians in Turkey, who number less than 100, 000, these murders show the vulnerability of religious minorities in Turkey.



*“If we open Heybeliada, which was built by the Ottomans, we are afraid that Istanbul is going to become the Vatican. We restore the Akdamar church but oppose to put a cross on top of it. Would we confess that those lands belonged to Armenians if we would do otherwise?” (Gültasli 2008, my translation)*

A similar line of self-critical discussion about the “Anxious Republic” of fear was led by Hürriyet’s columnist Fatih Cekirge in an article on the missing cross and religious service in Akhtamar, which he had visited together with the Minister for EU affairs Egemen Bagis. According to a popular legend in Turkey, a monster is living in Lake Van where the Akhtamar island is located. Alluding to this legend, Cekirge notes:

*“Akdamar church is not taken care off. (...) They prohibited the cross and religious service. In Europe, religious service is allowed in mosques. Why is there such a ban here? Look at this. Kurdish? What’s that...Armenian Church...close to the Armenian border...Prohibit the Kurdish language. The Greek are evil anyway...put a ban on this, don’t allow that...For years, haven’t we been living in a ‘horror’ movie? (...) In the middle of Lake Van, I have seen how a nation diminishes its own history and richness in a horrible way. And there, I have found the infamous monster of Lake Van: Yes, the monster of Lake Van is this mentality of prohibition. Actually, this ghostly monster is actually us, ourselves. Because for years, we have been eating up our freedoms, riches, beliefs, history, ourselves, in a monstrous way.” (Cekirge 2009, my translation)*

After domestic and international critique concerning the missing cross and the ban of religious service at the Akhtamar Church, Turkey’s chief EU negotiator Bagis announced in 2009 that a cross would be installed, and that the museum will be opened for religious services once a year. The long-awaited mass was held on September 19, 2010 accompanied by a major media spectacle that underlined the high symbolic meaning of the restoration of this church. A cross was brought to the church, but was not put on the dome in time for the service (supposedly for technical reasons), which led to the boycott by many groups of the Armenian Diaspora to attend the mass (Sassounian 2010). The debates in the Turkish media on the church intensified in 2010, as the protests by ultranationalist circles are getting louder as well. A month before the mass was held at Akhtamar, the government also allowed for a mass to take place at one of the oldest monasteries in the world, the Sümela Monastery in Trabzon, which was attended by orthodox Greeks from all over the world. The ultranationalist parties in Turkey, MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – Nationalist Action Party) and BBP (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* – Great Union Party), tried to mobilize their members against this “invasion” of the Armenian and Greek Diaspora in Turkey. The ultranationalist media launched a campaign against the mass, which was criticized by Muslim-liberal writers such as by Akyol:

*“When the ancient Armenian church in Akdamar, Van, was reopened last Sunday to worship after being empty for 95 years – a move which I applauded, but found only insufficient – do you know which newspaper voiced a strong protest? Not the Islamic press, not even the boldly Islamist Vakit. It was Yenicag – a ferociously nationalist paper whose motto presents a huge photo of Atatürk. Under a disgusting headline, ‘Armenian Mass on the Rape Island’, the paper alleged that Akdamar was a place where Armenian militias raped Muslim women during World War I. Of course, I am not saying that all secular-minded people in Turkey are die-hard fascists like this, or even necessarily illiberal. That would be most untrue and unfair. What is fair to say, though, is that if we are going to speak about ‘secularists versus conservatives’ in Turkey, the former group really does not represent a more liberal*

*or democratic mindset. Quite the contrary: While the conservatives have shown progress in the past decade, evidenced by their support for EU reforms, most secularists have grown growingly paranoid and xenophobic.” (M. Akyol 2010)*

This criticism of secularists by portraying conservatives as more progressive since they supported EU reforms was a rare example of the EU being mentioned as a reference point in the columns in 2010. Overall, the debate became more domestic and reflected the growing cleavage between nationalists, conservatives, and liberals that intensified with the constitutional referendum in September 2010.

In summary, three main trends can be detected from the present stage of the content analysis of the articles from 2005-2010: 1) The restoration and opening of the Akhtamar church is generally welcomed as a step into the right direction, but the government is being criticized by liberal opinion makers both for the turkification of the name as well as for not allowing a cross on the dome for three years. 2) When formulating this critique, the EU or Turkey’s accession process is absent as a reference, as the focus is either on domestic gains or on the improvement of neighborly relations with the Republic of Armenia. 3) Themes such as tolerance and pluralism in the context of religious minorities are framed as being part of Turkey’s heritage and own culture, and not as European norms. Rather than acquiring new norms, the question arises how Turkey has come to lose the appreciation of cultural richness in the light of its Ottoman past. The increase of islamophobia in the EU is observed with discomfort, yet it is evaluated as a loss for Europe and as an inner-European problem, with only few authors making a direct connection to Turkey and Turkey’s EU accession at all.

The finding of a weak reference to Europe or Turkey’s accession process is congruent with Karaca’s qualitative study on Istanbul’s Cultural Capital of Europe tenure in 2010 (Karaca, forthcoming). In this study, a similar absence of a normative reference to Europe was manifest in interviews with numerous key domestic actors in the run-up to 2010, when Istanbul was – along with Pecs, Hungary and Ruhr, Germany – one of the designated cultural capitals of Europe. If at all, references to the EU accession process were limited to exerting pressure on government agency as a strategy relating solely to domestic issues rather than in the form of engagements with reified notions of “European values.”

### *3.3. Norm Internalization or Reinterpretation of Norms?*

The weak presence of references to European norms in my study raises the question, if maybe a successful internalization of the norms have occurred, especially considering that Bayraktar’s study on the Armenian issue has showed a strong prevalence of the EU in her analysis until 2005. A closer look into a debate evolving around the nationalist response to the mass at the Akhtamar Church provides interesting clues. I will present two contrasting opinions by two columnists, both professors of Political Science and prominent intellectuals.

**Example 1: Baskin Oran, Professor of Political Science, author of the government commissioned minority report and a vocal, left-leaning-liberal public intellectual who writes regularly commentaries for the Radikal's Sunday edition.**

After participating in the mass at the Akhtamar Church in September 2010, Oran wrote five articles that touched upon all controversial issues such as the missing cross on top, the turkification of its name, the protests of the Armenian Diaspora etc. While these are more reports than opinion pieces, I will use his column from October 10, 2010, which he wrote in reaction to the political protests by the ultranationalist party MHP: In protest of the mass held at the Akdamar Church, the leadership of the MHP performed a Friday prayer on the sites of the ancient Armenian settlement Ani, on the ruins of an Armenian church. This protest action was strongly criticized by both liberal and conservative columnists as a populist, disrespectful, and reactionary move. Oran also takes up this issue in his column and deconstructs this protest as the MHP's failure to grasp the process of change and reform in Turkey, which is, accordingly, no longer an external, EU driven process, but found domestic ground. In response to the MHP party leader's speech at the Ani settlement, where he glorified the conquests of the Ottoman Empire, Oran wrote in his column:

*“When you have no future, you have to glorify the past. There is no future left for the anti-Westernism that the MHP represents because even though the inner dynamics of the EU have become reactionary (islamophobia, actions against immigrants etc), Turkey continued with the 2001-2004 EU reform package after mid 2008 with its ‘Kurdish initiative’ and has made progress. This means the following: The reform packages began with the initiative of the EU (external dynamic), but in the meantime, Turkey’s class structure has been taken up the wheel (internal dynamic). Despite the obstacles that the EU imposes, Turkey continues on its path toward a ‘contemporary civilization’. This is why it was a wrong choice for the MHP to put all its cards on the ‘Sevres Paranoia’ during the referendum. The tide is changing. The AKP is aware of this fact, the CHP is slowly waking up to it, but the MHP is still ignorant.” (Oran 2010, my translation)*

For Oran, the reform process is by now a domestically driven process where Turkey's EU candidacy triggered a dynamic that cannot be reversed anymore. He regards this mainly as a societal dynamic and a process by civil society that seems to be independently occurring from political parties, which have to catch the tide. This is a highly optimistic reading of the transformation process to be one of civil society driven that is representative for a group of left-leaning liberal intellectuals, who have supported the AKP's initiatives on the constitutional referendum and Kurdish initiative in opposition to leftist and Kemalist groups that regarded these government initiatives merely as pretext to consolidate Islamic power in civil and political life instead of a democratization process. Since Oran is a staunch supporter of Turkey's EU process, it is important to note that he seems to have given up on the idea that Turkey could become a member of the EU. Instead he reinvents the Kemalist ideal of a road towards the “contemporary civilization,” but disconnects this road from a European orientation.

A very different account is provided by Türköne, who does not look forward to a “contemporary civilization” but rediscovers tolerance as an element of Turkish identity by looking to its past.

**Example 2: Mümtaz'er Türköne, Professor of Political Science, columnist of Zaman, former student leader of the right-wing nationalist movement.**

In seven pieces related to the opening of the Akhtamar Church and Kurdish language rights, Türköne supports the liberalizing steps and evaluates them as critical steps of a transformation process of Turkey that frees itself from the burden of the past. While discussing a range of reforms that take place in Turkey, he does not refer to Turkey's EU accession process even once. Instead, he assesses the reforms and the transformation process at large solely from a domestic viewpoint as a necessary step in Turkey's development to a more plural society and sharply criticizes nationalist opponents to these reforms. One column from September 2010, a few days after the mass in Akhtamar and the protests by the nationalist parties, he begins his article by asking:

*"What is the source of this lack of tolerance and forbearance that comes up like a wall whenever we seek for solutions? Our culture is not a culture like that. From the first moment onwards, different cultures, languages, and religions have lived in these lands together. In this natural setting, tolerance and respect towards difference was a way of life. Living together has become a form of richness. It is impossible to forget this culture in only three generations. Honestly, where did we get this intolerance from, how did we learn this? What do we lose or gain when Armenians hold a mass in the Akdamar Church? What are we going to lose if the Sümela Monastery will revive through religious tourism? From which culture does this hostility and opposition to these religious mass services come from? Where did we get these hostile feelings? It is clear where we got this from: It comes from the foundation of this Republic, in which we not only put our hopes in, but also our fears. When there is a mass in Sümela, we think of the Pontus state. The Akdamar Church becomes a symbol for the aspiration of a Greater Armenia. (...) We have to confront these fears that have become a paranoia and understand how idiotic they are. Our biggest enemies are our fears. (...) We have to think about them, ask what they are good for, and whom they serve well."* (Türköne 2010a, my translation)

What is striking is how Türköne dislocates intolerance outside of Turkish culture and locates it into the Turkish Republic, which was built after a European, Western nation-state model. Thus, though only implicitly, he makes Europe responsible for intolerance in Turkey because of the Westphalian idea of a homogenous nation-state. This externalization of the problem is rather symptomatic for a convenient national narrative. Given that the Armenian Genocide and the deportation of the non-Muslim population preceded the Turkish Republic, this neat division of the good "tolerant Ottoman Empire" vs. the bad "intolerant Turkish Republic" is part of the nationalist rhetoric itself, which retains only a selective memory vis-à-vis the treatment of the non-Sunni population in the Ottoman Empire (Ungör 2011; Ayata 2011). Similarly, Türköne rhetorically asks in another article on the protest by the MHP to do a Friday prayer on the ruins of Ani "Would the Ottoman's have gone and done a Friday prayer at Ani?" (Türköne 2010b). He urges the nationalist MHP to rethink their nationalism beyond the republican framework, and hence implicitly urges them not to be more "modern" but more "Ottoman". This reframing and rediscovery of the Ottoman past as a tolerant, plural society corresponds rather well with the government's emphasis on tolerance and its efforts to embrace cultural richness as a positive value. Certainly, such a reconstruction of tolerance is rather easy to adopt without an open confrontation why all these churches are empty today, and why there are only about 100,000 Non-Muslims left in Turkey. Hence, even though the embracement of tolerance and cultural richness figures very positively and prominently as a demarcation from being an

intolerant republic throughout most opinion pieces on the Akhtamar Church, the resistance to engage with the Armenian Genocide or with the murders of non-Muslims in the past years in Turkey does not really speak for an internalization of norms. Rather, it seems that a disassociation from an orthodox secularism in Turkey towards a new self-definition of a national identity where tolerance extends as so far only as to cultural artifacts, whose preservation also happens to have the beneficial effect of opening a new door for economic growth through faith tourism, is at stake.

#### 4. Conclusion

While Turkey's EU candidacy negotiations are still ongoing, and domestic reforms are still taking place that comply/fulfill (with) the *acquis communautaire*, this study showed that the normative reference point of Turkey's transformation process is no longer linked to a (Kemalist) project of Europeanization and/or Westernization. Instead, this study argues that Turkey's transformation process entails a reinvention of Turkish national identity through a nostalgic embracement of the history of the Ottoman Empire, which has been reinterpreted as a homegrown, successful example for multiculturalism, religious plurality, and tolerance. In this sense, this reinvention of Turkish national identity entails an overcoming of both orthodox Kemalism and of a European ideal through a rediscovery of the Ottoman heritage. Yet, this reinterpretation occurs on the rather shaky grounds of a blindfolded view of the past, in particular the denial of the Armenian Genocide. I illustrated this process with the example of the renovation and opening of the Armenian Akhtamar Church, which became a showcase for Turkey's self-promotion as a tolerant nation. A closer examination of this church opening through a media analysis revealed how this church opening becomes an instrument of the government to ward off international pressure to recognize the Armenian Genocide and to reassure the world that Turkey is tolerant towards its religious minorities despite the murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007 and other murders of Christians in Turkey between 2006 and 2008. The analysis of the public debate in columns and op-eds in four Turkish dailies showed that the government initiative to open the church was overall welcomed, yet also criticized for its shortcomings such as the musealization of the church and the turkification of its name into Akdamar. While some journalists and columnists took this church opening as an opportunity to fundamentally question previous state policies suppressing cultural and religious diversity and to call upon to replace fear with tolerance, it is rather striking that this critical questioning only extends to the Republican period and falls short of confronting the Armenian Genocide itself. Hence, while the public debate does not follow the government's strategic approach towards the church opening, the uncritical resorting and embracement of the discourse on Ottoman tolerance in this context shows that the public debate does not depart from this transfiguration of the past.

The absence of European references in this debate is striking, but not surprising given the deteriorating EU-Turkey relationship. That the reference point for debates on tolerance has become mainly the Ottoman past could – at first sight – be read as a successful norm adoption and norm internalization. Yet, as the analysis of the debates on the Akhtamar church unfolds, this resorting to the past when recasting Turkey as a tolerant nation today continues to rest on the fundamental denial of what exactly happened to the multicultural plurality of the Ottoman Empire and on the denial that minorities are still endangered in present day Turkey. To conclude, without an acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide, Turkey's nostalgic

embracement of the Ottoman past and representation of norms such as tolerance as the 'true' Turkish/ Islamic norms does not stand for a norm internalization or norm adaption process, but instead, for a dis-connection between the norm and the practice.

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