

Why nationalism works — and how capitalism might help

Tuesday 26 June 2007, by [Mustafa Akyol](#)

It is no accident that the proponents and followers of militant nationalism are at best indifferent to and most likely antagonistic towards free markets.

I was taking a nap on Cem Uzan's "election bus" last Wednesday when the shiny vehicle was about to reach Trabzon, a city that has been on the news lately for its rampant nationalism. The loud music and chanting coming from the party convoy woke me up, and the first thing I noticed was a pickup truck which had several youngsters hanging out from its windows. While the boys were cheering for Mr. Uzan's "Genç Parti" (Young Party), I noticed something more interesting on the back of their van. "I would rather have an enemy like a lion," a rusty plate read, "instead of a friend like a jackal."

That maxim told me a lot of things. Here was a mindset which perceives the world divided between friends and foes, and thinks that the most honorable thing to do is to act like a lion — brave, strong and fierce. It summarized to me much of the machismo that many commentators agree to be widespread in the Black Sea region of Turkey.

"Here men have an erotic relationship with their guns," a local journalist explained. "High school kids feel great when they carry them; it is like having a girlfriend."

That well-established affinity to arms and bravado might be one element that can help us understand why the ultra-nationalist zeal haunts Trabzon and its surroundings. But it can't be all about that. Gun-o-philia doesn't necessarily lead to crime. And, moreover, there is a difference between mundane crimes and ideological ones. So what is it exactly that cooks up a dangerous militancy in the northern coast of Turkey?

More than just gun-o-philia

It is not too hard to see that one answer might come from the lack of economic opportunity in this area. Unlike the south and west coasts, which border the Mediterranean and thus continuously receive a flow of worldly tourists, rich entrepreneurs and trade benefits, the Black Sea region can only open itself to the ex-communist world, which simply cannot offer the same vitality. Moreover, unlike the central Anatolian cities such as Kayseri or Konya which have created success stories of capitalist production, the Black Sea region still relies on traditional modes of agriculture and fishery — sectors which are becoming less and less profitable in the globalizing world.

In other words, there are parts of Turkey which have started to integrate into, and benefit from, the global economy, but the Black Sea region is not one of them. Nor is the South East, the predominantly Kurdish part of Turkey. And while the lack of economic opportunity in the South East fuels Kurdish nationalism (and its violent form, PKK terrorism), the same problem fuels Turkish nationalism in Black Sea.

Yet poverty doesn't simply create radicalism. You would also need an ideological catalyst to turn economic destitution into militant action. In the Kurdish areas, this is provided by the PKK and other Kurdish nationalists, which explain the hardships of the region by referring to an imagined Turkish conspiracy. "The reason why our cities are poor," the Kurds argue, "is that the Turkish state has been deliberately keeping us backward." The only way for salvation, according to this argument, is to break the chains of the "Turkish yoke" and create a brand new state, i.e., a "Kurdistan."

In regions such as that of the Black Sea, there is again a belief in a conspiracy, but this time the plotter is

not the Turkish state. It is rather foreign powers such as “global finance,” the IMF, the EU, and the US. This is a line of reasoning continuously propagated by two centers

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1) Nationalist politicians who hope to gain votes by attacking the AKP government, whose Thatcherite policies transform the economy for the better but also create dissatisfaction among groups who used to live on state subsidies.

2) Kemalist bureaucrats who hope to gain not votes but political leverage by, again, attacking the AKP government, which they despise not only for being Thatcherite but also Islamite.

Preventing economic progress

The result of this systematic nationalist propaganda is the hindrance of the very things Turkey’s destitute areas desperately need : working hard, inventing better ways of production, and building strategies to attract investment.

Of course people will consider these options only when they realize that they control their future and that they can make a difference by taking initiatives. But if you tell them that they are the victims of conspiracies and that they only need an almighty state to save them, then you will get economic stagnation and political radicalization — the latter including a deep hatred against all the “internal and external enemies.”

This is a very brief summary of the political-economy of Turkist and Kurdist radicalisms in Turkey. It is no accident that the proponents and followers of these ideologies are at best indifferent to and most likely antagonistic towards free markets. On the other hand, those who engage in free markets — such as the “Islamic capitalists” of Central Anatolia — don’t buy into such xenophobic ideologies. They seem to have grasped the fundamental truth of economics: States do not create wealth, and the best thing they can do is to allow individuals and companies to create it safely and freely.

The more we Turks — and Kurds — get that, the more we will be saved from xenophobia and isolationism. Only then the nationalist youngsters of Trabzon might stop looking out for friends and foes — and start searching for partners and customers.

Sources

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