

A visa to Europe

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For people in my profession, more gratifying than the memory of their first kiss is the memory of their first front-page news story, and I suspect it will come as no surprise that I am about to tell you the story of mine.

It was 20 years ago that I mustered my nascent investigative skills to investigate the mysterious closure of the social club that was located just inside the gate at the British Consulate in Istanbul. The answer warranted a little paragraph at the bottom of the front page of the Daily Telegraph with a longer piece inside.

It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect that such a social club could even have existed. I never had the chance to visit it, but it was open, not to anyone wandering off the street, but to people who had an acquaintance or a connection to the consulate or who had been living in the city long enough to be on nodding terms with the gate house guard. The tragic bombing of the consulate general in 2003 makes even the notion of such an "open" institution seem absurd. However, the reason the club was shut down had nothing to do with security, but with the fact that the consulate needed the building to house a new visa section. It was an early warning that citizens of Turkey would no longer be able to travel to the United Kingdom on the spur of the moment, but would have to have their passports stamped with a visa before they arrived.

The ostensible reason for this new regime and, indeed, unfriendly gesture toward a friend and ally, was the large number of those arriving in Britain, mainly Kurds, seeking political asylum. In May 1989 alone there were more than 1,500 asylum seekers, an uncomfortable mix of genuine political refugees and economic migrants, until the detention centers in Heathrow Airport could hold no more. Of course, in June 1989 there were more than 1,500 asylum seekers arriving every day in Turkey, Bulgarians of Turkish origin who were being forced to abandon their homes by the Zhivkov regime. Public sentiment in Turkey kept the frontiers open.

Britain was not the first or the last country in Europe to impose restrictions on Turkish visitors. Since that time, Ankara and Brussels have grown used to the paradox that even as Turkey made progress in integrating itself economically and politically into Europe, ordinary contact between peoples has been subject to nagging restrictions. "Why should I go to London on holiday," asks a professor friend who just can't be bothered to go through the hassle and expense of filing a visa application. A neighbor who sold his taxi permit and used the funds to strike it rich in the stock market had been planning to go to England to fulfill his life's ambition and purchase a cargo ship that was going cheap. By the time he filed his application (which involved showing the title deed of his house), the opportunity had passed. And for those without Maastricht visas, the irritation is just as great.

The situation, however, is in an unexpected state of flux. A series of legal decisions dating from the successful appeal of Dari and Tum against a ruling by the UK Home Office to the European Court of Justice (2007) and the more recent "Soysal Decision" in a Berlin administrative court last month are providing a wave of precedent eroding the visa restrictions. Turks still need visas to travel, and few suggest this will change overnight. However, the rulings characterize restrictions imposed after the 1973 Additional Protocol to Turkey's Association Agreement as impediments to the guaranteed free flow of services. The Berlin ruling suggests that those engaged in trade "do not have to obtain a visa in order to provide services in a member state on behalf of an undertaking established in Turkey."

European statesmen who understand the need to keep Turkey on board also grasp that while there are many factors that keep Europe and Turkey apart, the visa regime must come high up on the list. At one end of the spectrum is the European fear of economic migration, and at the other is Turkish indignation at being forced to wait in a queue.

Europeans of good will should not be deliberating how to frustrate the will of the courts, but should instead be one step ahead of the game in making the commerce of people as free as possible.

Sources

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