

Why I am turning my face East

Friday 3 June 2011, by [Mustafa Akyol](#)

It has been argued lately that Turkey is “turning its face to the East.” The country’s traditional “Western orientation,” real or perceived, has claimed to be replaced by a different direction, including the all-scary Middle East. Some blame the incumbent Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and its “covert Islamism” for this shift, whereas others point to tectonic changes in the world’s political economy, to which Turkey is only adopting.

I have my humble opinions about this debate as well. To illustrate them a bit, let me tell you a personal story.

It all began a couple of weeks ago, when a European think tank invited me to give a talk on Turkey and Islam in Vienna. The hosts were very kind, the topic was relevant, and the Austrian capital, as usual, was appealing. So, I happily accepted the invitation, and put it on my calendar.

But, soon, I noticed a little problem: My Schengen visa – that colorful piece of paper people from the third world need to set foot on Europe – had expired. So, I simply needed a new one.

Schengen matters

But getting that small paper is no simple matter. You first need to prepare several documents proving you have a job in Turkey, and a bank account with some decent amount of money. It will be even better if you have documents showing that you own a car or a house. You have to prove, in other words, you really are not desperate enough to enter Europe with the intention of staying there illegally for years to come to wash dishes in, say, a German beer hall or a Spanish tapas bar.

But all that tedious paperwork is just the first step. For the second, you have to go to an insurance company to buy health insurance to cover you for the days you plan to be in Europe. The idea is if you lose a leg or get a heart attack during your trip, you will not exploit the healthcare system of those super-civilized countries, which have given you the gracious permit to enter from their borders.

Yet with all this, you are only at the end the beginning. For the real thing, you have to take all your documents and go to a nearby European consulate, to fill a long form and submit all of those papers, along with a dull photograph of yours and some money, to the officials there. When you arrive at the consulate, you often wait in a long queue in front of a well-guarded building. When you get in, an often-unsmiling diplomat who sits behind a thick glass questions you, and sometimes admonishes you for not completing all the necessary papers.

After all that, you have to go back to the same building a few days later to get your passport back and to see if the Schengen masters have been kind enough to welcome you.

Now, as you can imagine, I hate this “visa process,” with all my heart, all my soul, and my entire mind. But I can understand countries might need such screenings before allowing people in. What I don’t understand, and find simply maddening, is the duration of Schengen visas: In average, they are a few weeks long. If you are lucky, you can get a six-month-long one.

My most memorable experience was with the Danes: A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference in Copenhagen, and thus planned a three-day-trip. Having scrutinized my schedule, the all-generous Kingdom of Denmark gave me a permit, which was notably more than what exactly needed: a

visa for four days. A total sum of 98 hours.

On a luckier occasion, where I “knew people,” I begged for a “long-term, multiple-entry” visa from the Spanish. They indeed gave me multiple-entry one, which was valid for only a month. I should have gone back and forth every other weekend to make use of it.

None of this, honestly, makes me feel welcome in Europe as a Turk. On the other hand, I feel much more welcome in Amman, Beirut or Dubai, where I can fly without any visa, avoid all that pain in the neck, and don’t get treated as a potential parasite or terrorist. So, these days, I am very much hoping I will receive the next invitation to such Eastern cities rather than the European ones.

You can do better

Now, here is my humble call to all the European diplomats, politicians or statesmen who have something to do with the Schengen regime: You represent a great civilization, and you can do better than this. A simple visit to your countries shouldn’t begin with such a humiliating process. Once you decide someone is eligible for a visa, you can give him truly long-term ones, saving him from a lot burden.

Why don’t you just follow the example of the Americans? They are simply reasonable on this. They do scrutinize you as well before granting a visa, but once they decide you are kosher, they give a long-term one. I have a 10-year-long American visa on my passport, which stands alone like a beacon of sanity along with the more than dozen expired, and maddening, Schengens.

So, unless there is an undeclared European Union policy for discouraging tourism, or creating more employment in European consulates by maximizing paperwork, the Schengen system needs a radical reform. Let us know if there is anything we can do. If you need higher fees from us, let us happily pay. The British do that, by granting long-term visas, which cost you an arm and a leg, but save your mental health. Do whatever you want. But please do not keep on imposing this impractical, inefficient, irrational and insensible visa regime on us.

Sources

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