

In Turkey, the Novelist as Lightning Rod

The New York Times

October 23, 2005

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ISTANBUL — AFTER years of waiting, [Turkey](#) was invited this month to begin discussions that may lead to membership in a very exclusive club: the European Union.

The stakes are high for Turkey and possibly even for relations between the Western and Islamic worlds. A legal fight between a Turkish prosecutor and the country's leading novelist, [Orhan Pamuk](#), however, has complicated the talks.

Mr. Pamuk, who was scheduled to receive the Frankfurt Book Fair's prestigious peace prize Saturday, has been charged with making a statement that "explicitly insults" the Turkish state, a crime that carries a sentence of up to three years in prison.

The alleged insult was Mr. Pamuk's statement to a Swiss newspaper in February that "30,000 Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands." He was referring to the civil that raged in Kurdish regions of Turkey in the 1980's and 1990's, and to the massacre of Armenians as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing during World War I. Most of the world considers this to have been a case of genocide, but Turkish leaders reject that label.

The prosecution of Mr. Pamuk is intensely embarrassing to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and others who are eager to show Europeans that Turkey, long a conservative society dominated by the military, now embraces human rights and free speech.

"Our E.U. prospects will most likely be adversely affected by this lawsuit," Mehmet Ali Birand, one of Turkey's best-known journalists, warned in a recent column. "Anti-Turkish campaigners won't let it go. They will use it as fodder for one resolution after another. This will tarnish Turkey's already negative image."

Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, a leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party, suggested in an interview on Thursday that he disapproved of the indictment. "These are not good things," he said. "Free expression is guaranteed in Turkey. If a prosecutor opens a file, it doesn't mean the case is decided. Judges will decide."

Even a decade ago, it was considered taboo, and was often illegal, to express unorthodox views on sensitive matters like religion, ethnic rights and the fate of Ottoman Armenians. But Turkish society is now racing toward European-style democracy, and the new openness here alarms diehard defenders of the old order, known collectively here as "Deep State."

It is these old-line nationalists, said Mr. Pamuk in his sunny, book-cluttered studio overlooking the Bosphorus, who are using his indictment as a desperate attempt to keep Turkey from modernizing.

"It's a scandal, a shame," Mr. Pamuk said of his indictment. He described laws like the one under which he is being prosecuted as "hidden hammers that prosecutors want to keep in the drawer so they can hit whenever they want." Their purpose, he said, is to prevent Turks from speaking out on sensitive subjects.

When such issues are brought up, he said, the debate is "exaggerated, because taboos are still legally protected here." He added: "When people comment about political Islam or the army's role in politics or what happened to Ottoman Armenians or the way Turkey should treat its Kurds, unfortunately the comment does not appear neatly on the letters page of the newspaper."

Mr. Pamuk said he did not believe that the prime minister, who is leading Turkey's campaign to join the European Union, was behind his indictment. But he did suggest that Mr. Erdogan helped create the climate that made it possible.

"I blame him for his weakness and lack of determination," Mr. Pamuk said. "At the beginning of this year we had a wave of nationalist incidents and attacks on the E.U. project, including some by members of his own party. He did not look the problem in the eye and draw a clear line between anti-E.U. nationalism and the attitude of tolerance. He tried to avoid the subject."

Mr. Pamuk, 53, is not fundamentally a political figure, but he is a stubbornly independent one. In 1999 he refused an offer from the government to become a "State Artist," and he has criticized the government's policies on free speech, minority rights and other matters.

After the international success of his recent books, including "Snow" and "Istanbul: Memoir of a City," Mr. Pamuk has become to many here and abroad a symbol of Turkey's Westernizing ambitions. Last year, for example, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a member of the European Parliament and a former French student leader, told The Guardian, the British daily, that Mr. Pamuk "was one of the intellectuals who made me understand the importance of Turkey joining the European Union. It is so important for democrats in that country. Orhan is not only one of the most important modern writers in Europe, he is one of the examples of the possible modernity of Turkey."

While Mr. Pamuk encourages Turkey's democratization and strongly supports its campaign to join the European Union, however, he also reveres its age-old traditions.

"I have always believed Turkey should be proud of its two spirits, and not try to impose one above the other," he said. "My novels are a combination of experimental, modern innovations that come from the West, and the traditionalism of Persian epics, Sufi allegories and 19th-century Ottoman poetry. We should enjoy the fact that we have these

two spirits, and combine them to create something new and rich, something that has never been done before."

Mr. Pamuk said that recent turns of opinion in Europe, reflected by votes against the proposed European constitution in [France](#) and the [Netherlands](#), complicate Turkey's prospects for union membership but do not necessarily doom them.

"The French and Dutch referendums showed that voters in E.U. nations are more and more nervous about this enlargement process," he said. "It means taking Turkish Muslims and treating them as brothers. They don't want to do that. Unfortunately, there is a lot of anti-Turkish resentment. And in Turkey, which is getting more nationalistic, people see this and react against it. It makes Turkey's prospects of joining seem harder and harder.

"The E.U. with Turkey is a good project, but both sides still need to be convinced. If we reach the criteria for human rights, democracy and business ethics, then we can join the E.U. with our mustaches and water pipes."