

# Zombie politics: Europe, Turkey and the disposable human

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Who will think of the EU as a global actor with normative power, now that it finds itself in the role of rubberstamping and in fact facilitating Turkey's slide into the abyss?



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In his book *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* [1] the US American public intellectual Henry Giroux examines the emergence of the culture of sadism, cruelty, disposability, and death in America. His metaphor, the Zombie, is a pertinent one: dead but not quite, the Zombie does not make autonomous decisions but is driven by higher powers. He or she nevertheless wreaks considerable havoc, kills, terrorises and disposes of bodies with ease. The Zombie derives its power from the anxieties of the common man and woman.

## A Zombie deal

At first sight, the 'refugee deal' between Turkey seems to have little in common with Zombies.

The Zombie derives its power from the anxieties of the common man and woman. The ostensible intentions of its authors (the initial 'Merkel Samsom' plan, which formed the basis of the deal reached was authored by the [European Stability Initiative](#)) are commendable and simple: to stop the suffering of Syrian refugees. The plan promises a win-win for all parties involved: the EU will be able to revive Schengen and resettle refugees in an orderly manner. Turkey's burden in hosting refugees will be eased and its citizens will benefit from visa-free travel to the European Union. And the refugees will be spared the terrors of crossing the Aegean in unseaworthy plastic boats and facing death. To achieve this, all refugees crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands will be returned after a three-day process to Turkey, which is now declared a safe country. In exchange for the refugee returned, another refugee who has not attempted the crossing will be accepted into a willing European host country.

Straightforward as this deal sounds, it is a fantasy scenario. There is no institutional capacity on the Greek islands that could process refugees' applications in such a short time, while keeping within the confines of international

refugee law. There are no willing European host countries apart, maybe, from Germany. And finally, Turkey is not a safe third country. It is a country deeply implicated in the Syrian War and it wages a campaign of extermination against Kurdish separatists that has led to the death of several hundred civilians and the forced displacement of tens of thousands in only a few months.

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It is now a country that is not able to ensure the right to physical integrity of its citizens, let alone of refugees. It goes without saying that the promised visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens is a charade. To be realised, it needs Turkish compliance on basic fundamental rights, which are not forthcoming. There will be no long-term visa-free travel for Turks in any case, since it is not possible legally, but also because there are a sufficient number of EU member state governments to ensure that visa liberalisation does not happen. Once the visa deal falters, the Turkish President Erdoğan can only benefit politically by accusing the EU of double standards. And for very good reasons indeed.

On the level of principles, such horse-trading is unethical, as Iverna McGowan of [Amnesty International](#) posits: "The idea of bartering refugees for refugees is not only dangerously dehumanising, but also offers no sustainable long term solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis". On the level of the empirical realities of migration and refugeehood, we know that desperate people cannot be stopped. They will simply resort to [new routes that will be more dangerous](#), more lethal and more expensive, whether it is the land borders between Turkey and Bulgaria, the boat journey from Libya to Italy or a new trajectory through Ukraine and Eastern Europe. But if the deal is so dehumanising and cynical, and ultimately offers no sustainable solutions to the refugee challenge, then why have the EU and Turkey been so upbeat about it?

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## European Zombies

Before the European debt crisis, the austerity regimes in Ireland, Spain and Portugal and the meltdown of Greece, large parts of the European Union almost felt like the self-ascribed identity discourse of an enlightened, liberal, tolerant polity cognizant of its own dark pasts and its current diversity. Today, we are facing a very different continent. Right-wing populist, neo-fascist and racist parties have moved from the margins into the centre of politics, and so have their ideas.

Understandable but diffuse anxieties over globalisation, competition over social services and perceived cultural distance to immigrants have solidified into Islamophobic resentment and racialised ideologies of European supremacy.

Racist populist parties shape political discourses from the most advanced Scandinavian democracies to the illiberal polities of Hungary or Slovakia. Recently, a member of the European Parliament of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn [spoke of Turks](#) as "dirty and polluted ... wild dogs" in a plenary session. The President, Martin Schulz, immediately understood the strategy behind the diatribe, i.e. to push the boundaries of acceptable discourse in the European Parliament. He expelled the MEP. His deliberate action, however, only reinforces the tragic state of affairs. One has to be courageous and resolute to stand up to an ideology which has been invented in Europe, destroyed much of it and is now being legally represented in one of the centres of European power.

One has to be courageous and resolute to stand up to an ideology which has been invented in Europe, and destroyed much of it.

Unlike the more recent rise of European racist parties, the Freedom Party in Austria has been around for thirty years and is now about to become the country's largest party. Like other populist parties, it has carefully avoided public Anti-Semitism and replaced it with a narrative of [European regime failure](#) and Islamophobia.[2] The Freedom Party

has succeeded in reframing political problems on all levels – from the local to the national and European – through its hatred of Muslims and particularly of Muslim refugees. They have done this to the point that a majority of Austrians today see Muslims as a threat to Austrian culture. Based on my work for the Yearbook of Muslims in Europe[3] and continuing fieldwork, I can infer that for a significant part of Austrian society, a notion of a shared humanity with the Muslims in their midst and those on their doorsteps does not exist. The logical conclusion is that there is no obligation towards Muslims and refugees – two terms that have come to signify the same anxiety – and no obligation for care.[4]

I would have liked to suggest that the Austrian case should serve as a wakeup call, as it is a prescription for the inevitable trajectory of populism, dehumanisation and disregard of fellow human beings to the point that these lives become disposable. But with the remarkable exception of Germany for now, this is the point much of Europe has reached, and this also explains German and maybe to a lesser extent, European eagerness to reach a deal on the refugee challenge at almost any cost.

The populists have succeeded in framing the refugee issue through the prism of 'Muslim demographics',[5] i.e. the thesis that an aging European civilisation is about to be dealt its death knell by mounting immigration from Muslim majority countries. And it is the fear of these populists that most probably has forced Merkel's hand in pushing the deal with Turkey. This is not about refugees. It is about saving Europe by demonstrating that 'we are in control'. It is the desperate attempt to push Europe's zombies back into the closet.

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## Zombies in Turkey

Quite a few zombies have left their closets in Turkey too. In fact, Turkey is in the process of what an [increasing number of critical observers](#) have likened to the fascist takeover in inter-war Italy and also to Weimar Germany. For almost a decade, a more or less benign government under the Justice and Development Party created global enchantment with a Turkish model synthesising Islam, democracy and capitalism.[6] Turkey was booming economically and culturally and inspiring many beyond Turkey's borders. In tune with Turkey's – albeit always cumbersome and slightly surreal – EU accession process, freedoms were expanding in some areas. Crucially, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government seemed to be set on achieving peace with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), thereby raising hopes that the core conflict of the modern Turkish state might be coming to a peaceful conclusion. The process achieved [some level of binding formality](#) with a meeting between representatives of a pro-Kurdish party and the government in February 2015. These were hopeful moments.

The Turkey of such hopes does not exist any more. It began to vanish much earlier of course, probably since the 2011 elections, when then Prime Minister Erdoğan reshaped the AKP. If it was a broad coalition of conservative, Islamist, entrepreneurial and liberal constituencies before, it morphed into a vehicle for Erdoğan's bid to turn Turkey into a presidential autocracy. It almost disappeared during the Gezi protests, when the young people of Istanbul and those appalled by the city's complete sellout to neoliberal interests were tear-gassed and baton-charged into submission and a series of corruption cases, which exposed the current ruling elite as corrupt beyond imagination. The Turkish Republic as we have come to know it, with its terrible democratic deficiencies and ideological monstrosities yet also with hopeful openings and potentialities [is indeed no more](#).

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What we are witnessing at the moment in Turkey is not business as usual in an incomplete democracy vying for eventual accession to the European Union, but an escalation of illiberal governance that has no equal in Turkey's violence-ridden recent history.

The acceleration of eroding freedoms has been widely documented, whether in the almost complete [erasure of the](#)

freedom of speech through the government takeover of major opposition newspapers or in the shelling of [entire neighbourhoods](#) in the fight against the PKK. Members of the public, who attempted to express a position against these multiple escalations, are faced with the full force of a security state gone out of control. The [case of the 1128 academics](#), who signed a petition for peace and have been facing harassment and persecution since has become [a cause célèbre](#) for global liberal academia. Many academics have lost their jobs, and three scholars are in jail for reading out the petition at a press conference. They are being hounded on pro-government media, exposed with their institutional affiliations and photographs so that they can be spotted on the street.<sup>[7]</sup>

Has this all happened hidden away from the gaze of the European Union and the think tanks and experts advising EU governments? Not really. While the European Council President Donald Tusk was probing the waters for the refugee deal in Ankara a few days ago, the government he was talking to took into state administration the country's largest opposition newspaper. When the deal was signed in Brussels on March 18, supporters of academic freedoms were being tear-gassed in front of an Istanbul prison, where they were holding a vigil for the release of the jailed academics. So many bombings and attacks have happened in the last few months that the death toll has to be updated almost daily.

Has this all happened hidden away from the gaze of the European Union? Not really. It has probably surpassed a thousand. President Erdoğan, stubbornly wedded to his survival strategy of a regime change to presidential autocracy that will save him from prosecution, has clearly [outlined the rules of the game in the new war on terror](#): "Nobody raises an eyebrow when France puts in place emergency measures after suffering a terror attack, but when we do it they preach freedom and democracy at us. These statements no longer have any value in Turkey." Freedom and democracy do not mean much any more in Turkey. This is a clear message that even the most deluded spin doctor floating through the veins of power in Brussels should be able to comprehend.

## **After the disposable human: is a post-Zombie Europe possible?**

Zombies – racist, Islamophobic, neoliberal, authoritarian, Islamist – have colluded to create a political space wherein refugees have become bodies that can be disposed of in the waters of the Aegean, where Kurdish civilians caught in the crossfire can be buried in basements and where scholars can be jailed for supporting peace and criticising the killing of civilians.

Zombies – racist, Islamophobic, neoliberal, authoritarian, Islamist – have colluded.

Turkey has moved several steps closer to violent self-destruction, while the European Union has turned itself into a farce. Who is going to think of the EU as a global actor with normative power – even on a regional level – now that it finds itself in the role of rubberstamping and in fact facilitating Turkey's slide into the abyss? That question, naturally, has only a very limited life-span, since this is certainly not the first time the EU leaves reformists, revolutionaries and liberals in the cold, whether in its potential pre-accession neighbourhood in the Balkans or in the Middle East, whose people only ever have been disposable entities.

So what do we learn from all this, apart from the unspectacular revelation that a benign European teleology, with the holocaust as regrettable aberration and colonialism as really not that important is but a fantasy? And that the darkness in European history is much more salient than its discursive negation.<sup>[8]</sup> Certainly, that we are women and men in dark times, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt. Maybe that we have to insist on the post-colonial, self-reflective and emancipatory moment that we can also find in enlightenment thought if we look for it closely enough. That we will have to continue the struggle to ensure that the Zombies cannot dictate the rules of the game.

We also have to prepare ourselves for the possibility that many more people will die. The most trying challenge will therefore be not to turn into Zombies no matter how terrifying our immediate prospects are, but to hang on to our common humanity. No, we are not Zombies, and no human being is disposable.

- [1] Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, New York: Peter Lang, 2011.
- [2] Matti Bunzl, *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Hatreds Old and New in Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- [3] Cf. Kerem Öktem, 'Austria', *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Volume 7, Leiden: Brill, 2015. [Available here](#).
- [4] A recent video of PSV Eindhoven supporters humiliating a group of Roma women strongly suggests that this ejection of the other from the universe of mutual obligations is now a universal reality among segments of European societies. I do not provide a link to the video, as I find it grossly indecent and dehumanising. I would like to add an anecdote though: I came across these terrifying scenes the day after I attended a workshop at the Dutch Centre for Genocide Studies, where among many great scholars, a respected Dutch genocide scholar spoke of the cultural dispositions of Middle Eastern men, who are prone to violence and inhuman behaviour.
- [5] There is a wide range of videos with this title (often with add-ons like "The Tidal Wave" or "The death of Europe"), translated into all major languages available on Youtube.
- [6] Yohanan Benhaim and Kerem Öktem, 'The rise and fall of Turkey's soft power discourse. Discourse in foreign policy under Davutoğlu and Erdoğan', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (21) 2015. [Available here](#).
- [7] This author is also one of the signatories to the petition, '[Academics for Peace](#)'.
- [8] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York: Random House, 1998.