



Turkey and Kurdistan, can it be like Austria-Hungary?

Remembering Austria-Hungary, an Italian ambassador asked whether Turkey and the Kurds could not reach the same relationship.

What Michelangelo or Dante are to Florence, is – as I am aware of – what Gian Lorenzo Bernini is for Rome. One of my unavoidable rituals whenever I visit the city is to go to Piazza Navona, to sit in a café next to the fountain and to watch Bernini's sculptures.

I did it this time too, but I also went to Villa Borghese, where I had never been yet. I was told that Villa Borghese was the most important museum of sculptures and paintings after the Vatican. There I saw Bernini's Apollo and Daphne and David sculptures for the first time. And I learned something that confirmed the intuition I had through all these years: Pope Urban VII once said to Bernini: “You were made for Rome and Rome was created for you”.

I find it exciting that such a unique city in the world might be linked to the simple name of a man. I felt a profound admiration for this artist who was born in 1498 and lived in the first three quarters of the sixteenth century, practically a contemporary of Suleyman the Magnificent and Mimar Sinan. Once I had finished the job I had to do in Rome, I considered the time spent with Bernini as a reward to myself. My job was to give a lecture about the domestic and regional dynamics of the “process” in Italy's number one think tank, the Istituto Affari Internazionali. Before the conference I met with the highest ranks of Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs which wanted to speak about the Kurdish process with me.

My first interview was at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The meeting was asked for by the Italian authorities who had heard about the conference at the IAI. Three ministers of Italy's new government actually belong to IAI's board of directors, Italy's new Minister of Foreign Affairs Emma Bonino first and foremost. Emma Bonino's and her colleagues' sympathies for Turkey, the Kurds, and their interest on the Kurdish process are well known.

But the curiosity and the attention for the theme were highly surprising. The conference room of the IAI was crowded and I was very surprised to see an audience made up of the Italian foreign policy elite. The questions from the audience presented a depth and an insight that are not easily found in similar conferences in Turkey.

I felt that the starting “process” in Turkey was seen as a heartwarming hope in contrast to the tragedy of the events in Syrian and in a broader view of the Middle East. In fact, my old friend Marco Ansaldo said he didn't recall such a crowded conference at the IAI and that a similar meeting on Turkey months ago wouldn't have raised the same high interest. I noted that, just like in Turkey, the issue raised a number of “legitimate” question marks in many people's minds.

Most of these questions focused on the possible outcomes of the process and were based on beliefs in a peaceful resolution. So many “futuristic” hypothesis were raised that, as a speaker, I had to make an effort to broaden the horizons of my thoughts. For example, Italy's former ambassador to Baghdad, asked whether in the future Turks and Kurds could be comparable to Germans and Hungarian's as "two constituent elements" of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The question, which was legitimate and clever, was made by the meeting's chair - I will say her

name as she is very well known in Turkey - Nathalie Tocci. "In order to overcome Turkey's Kurdish question and before Turks can form a regional hegemonic force with the Kurds, the danger of the centrifugal forces existent in the region must be neutralized", declared Tocci, and asked what may be the conditions to realize this task might be.

Even if it may be disturbing for many in Turkey to me the answer was pretty easy: "There's just one road to this", I said; "Turkey has to become a completely free and democratic country. If we do not achieve this, Turkey will never be an attracting pole for anyone. Being a truly democratic country means to treat both Turks and Kurds as free citizens, governed by truly democratic rules. Only this kind of country can rise both in the regional and in the international system."

While I was pronouncing the words "free and democratic" I noticed that in the crowded conference room Italian diplomats and several members of the audience were nodding their heads.

During the question-and-answer section, Hasan Cemal's ears must have rang loudly; especially on the subject of the presidential system, the new constitutional reform and all the other issues related to the Kurdish process. Indeed, to all the questions raised on these themes, I clarified who Hasan Cemal was, described what has happened in the PKK areas of Kandil, and explained the importance of the interviews that had been carried out by him. I also explained the importance of Friday's interview to Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık and Sabri Ok.

When Hasan Cemal asked Karayılan about the presidential system he answered: "Turkey has formed a parliamentary system but has not achieved democracy. This was clear from the very beginning. But the AKP can't be blamed for that. If we achieve a democratic basis then we can debate". Also Cemil Bayık said "Did we achieve democracy through a parliamentary system? If we'll set up a presidential system will we lose democracy?"

I told the Italians that these declarations had two addressees. First, the BDP, which after these considerations of Karayılan and Bayık, cannot be said to categorically oppose a presidential system. The second "addressee" was Prime Minister Erdogan. With these statements the PKK wanted to say that it will influence not only the current process but also the Prime Minister's "planned game" and "agenda". It is difficult to understand the "symbolism" behind the "process" but Italians understood more quickly than any other western country. For example, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs suddenly asked many questions, one right after the other: "How many people actually withdrew from the borders, how long will it take to complete the withdrawal? What if they don't withdraw, what if, still carrying arms, they would like to go back to their cities, towns and villages? To what stage of the "process" would this belong? Did they discuss this, did they take decisions about this?"

"I should have expected such a question by a politician with a great knowledge of the Middle East; I should have expected this thought to be expressed with a typical Western and Cartesian logic" I said and he laughed. "But nothing is as it seems in the Middle East, isn't it?"

We suddenly understood each other with no need for longer explanations! I was once again surprised by how far Turkey has gone if we happen to be talking about it and the Kurdish question even in Rome. One more thing: in Rome we were able to discuss about our own country in a deeper way and in a freer atmosphere...