

Tarman, Bülent (2008). *The European Union and the Modernization of the Turkish Education System*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

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The question of Turkey's entry into the European Union has been on the political agenda for decades. Although obtaining candidate status, there has not yet been any definite date set for the country's admittance. According to Bülent Tarman, this reluctance can be attributed to Turkey's ambivalent relationship with the European Union, and the European Union's reluctance to classify Turkey as a European nation (10). Such ideological obstacles can only be negotiated through a change of mind-set both on Turkey's and the European Union's part.

*The European Union and the Modernization of the Turkish Education System* looks at how this issue might be addressed from a Turkish perspective. Tarman argues that the best way to alter anti-European attitudes is to reform the education system,

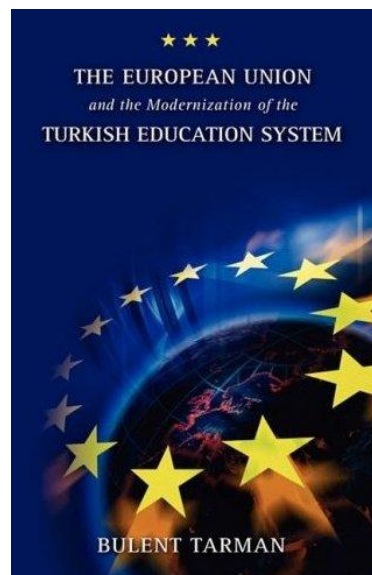
#### **About the Author**

Bulent Tarman is the CEO and principal of Young Scholars of Central PA Charter School in State College in Pennsylvania. He holds a PhD, with an emphasis on social studies education, as well as comparative and international education, from Pennsylvania State University.

which he believes is too limited in scope, based on teacher-centered methods and using textbooks with a nationalistic focus. Tarman sets forth a program of reform, focusing in particular on the teaching of history and social studies. His research is based on two major data sources – a series of interviews with policy-makers and academics and a 2004 document “The Curriculum of Social Studies and Citizenship,” which proposes a radical shake-up of existing high school curricula.

Tarman’s interviewees criticize previous Ministers of Education and their civil servants, who tended to be “incredibly backward concerning the establishment of human rights consciousness [...] they still regarded the citizen as different from the state” (p. 109). However the Turkish people have been incredibly adaptable once they understand the significance of a particular cause: “When we came from Central Asia and met with the Muslims, we proved that we can carry and live Islam better than the Arabs do” (p. 110). In terms of history and social studies education, the main objective consists of developing a persuasive strategy that will encourage reform. Tarman argues that this can be best achieved through a bottom-up approach, encouraging teachers and students to develop their own curricula attuned to their specific needs. The Ministry of Education’s role should be to provide resources designed to expedite this process – in other words, acting as a facilitator rather than as a monolithic organization imposing their will on high schools.

Tarhan shows how the 2004 “Curriculum of Social Studies and Citizenship” was inspired by the example of other countries within the European Union. It proposes an emphasis on skill-based learning and on more democratic approaches to classroom practice promoting collaboration rather than teacher-centeredness. The document also proposes a variety of approaches to historical enquiry – while not underestimating the importance of Turkish nationalism (and its origins in the creation of the Republic in 1923), the authors recommend the



development of oral, family and local histories. Perhaps “herstory” should be studied alongside “history.” Students should develop a more open-minded approach to the subject; rather than focusing on fact-based learning, they should learn to question written and/or visual evidence, and participate in research trips both in their local area and elsewhere, to learn how the past influences the present.

However there are certain obstacles to reform. Tarman suggests that the Turkish education system lacks the resources, both financial and educational. While inner-city schools could readily redevelop their curricula, the majority of rural institutions lack textbooks as well as access to the internet. Tarman also quotes from certain unnamed left-leaning teachers, who approach such initiatives with suspicion as examples of “rightist, liberal and conservative thought [...] based on the globalist liberal mentality [and] does not include the variety and richness in this country [i.e. Turkey]” (p. 140).

*The European Union and the Modernization of the Turkish Education System* ends on an optimistic note by showing how Turkey has already embarked on the reforming process, with the nationalist mentality being gradually superseded by beliefs in individual rights, pluralism and democratization. Tarman believes that this change can be expedited through a variety of strategies – reducing the influence of the military over the educational agenda; abolishing the Higher Education Council (a government-appointed body responsible for all state university education) and allowing universities to govern themselves; and promoting greater exchanges between teachers and administrators in Turkey and the rest of Europe.

Tarman’s book offers a coherently argued blueprint for the future of history and social studies teaching in Turkish schools. Sometimes it betrays its origins as a doctoral thesis; the author draws on Milton J. Bennett’s model of intercultural sensitivity, which contributes little to the overall argument. As a work advocating a bottom-up approach to educational

practice, I'd have liked to read more from history or social studies teachers in high schools, focusing in particular on their day-to-day experiences in class, and assessing whether there are any realistic opportunities for reforming the curriculum. Sometimes their views offer an important counterweight to those expressed by academics or policy-makers. Nonetheless, Tarman's book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in educational reform in the social sciences, whether in Turkey or elsewhere in the Near Eastern region.

### **About the Reviewer**

Laurence Raw is a professor in the Department of English, Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey. He is especially interested in developing teacher-centered methodologies, particularly in the area of TESOL. He will publish an anthology of essays on *The Pedagogy of Adaptation*, co-edited with James M. Welsh and Dennis Cutchins, in 2010 (Scarecrow Press)



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