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## An Interview on Alevism with Ambassador Kretschmer, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Turkey

Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, co-editor-in-chief of *Kirkbudak*, and Dr. Aykan Erdemir, member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *Kirkbudak*, conducted an interview with Ambassador Dr. Hansjörg Kretschmer, the Head of the European Commission Delegation to Turkey. The interview took place in the Ankara headquarters of the Delegation on March 10, 2005, Friday, between 11:00am and 11:30am. We would like to present the transcripts of the interview which was carried out in English. No editorial changes have been made and the conversation is presented in its original form.

ERDEMİR: When was the first time that you heard the term Alevi? Do you remember?

KRETSCHMER: Well, I think this was rather early after my arrival in August 2002. Yes. But, I mean, at that time it was rather theoretical for me, and I only rather recently got more familiar with their way of life and their cult.

ERDEMİR: What was the first Alevi organization or religious site that you visited? Do you remember?

KRETSCHMER: I was visited, I got visits several times from Alevi representatives. The Alevi Bektâşi Foundation or Federation... I don't know. Well this, you see, is already fine differences that I am not so familiar with. But they visited me a number of times, and I once, I visited one *cem* house in Tunceli which was last summer. Then I went to Tunceli, Bingöl, and Elazığ. And that was the time I got most close to Alevi.

ERDEMİR: Do you recall your first impressions back then about Alevi?

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KRETSCHMER: You mean in...

ERDEMİR: In Tunceli for example. The first, let us say, in-depth encounter.

KRETSCHMER: Yes, I... What struck me in Tunceli was of course first of all I was surprised that it was such a small place as a provincial capital. It is a small town of 25,000 people. I had the impression that it was a very quiet town. Now this may be simply due to the small size. But maybe also different, somehow different habits of the people living there. And, in general, but this is I think an experience which I have made all over Turkey that people there extremely friendly. But I must say this also occurred to me in many many other places in Turkey. And so far it is not somehow specific.

ERDEMİR: Where there any traits which you somehow associated with Alevism? Like some kind of culture shock for you.

KRETSCHMER: No, no cultural shock. Absolutely not. And I think this visit to the *cem* house where they performed, you know, shortened version of this normally much longer procedure or cult. This was the only real encounter with the difference of Alevi religion and other religions in the country.

ERDEMİR: And do you think that your impressions have changed over time vis-à-vis the Alevis?

KRETSCHMER: These questions are really difficult. No they have not changed because in the end I must say when I came here I had not much of an idea. And so the more and more I have been talking to Alevis and making this visit in Tunceli I got a better picture, so... but there was not a change that I would have corrected some impression I had before.

ERDEMİR: Would you consider attending any other Alevi festival if you received an invitation, for example from Hacibektaş?

KRETSCHMER: Well, I mean, of course I receive so many invitations. So the prime question is always whether it fits my schedule because normally I get, I am invited to so many different events, be it now this sort of festivals be it lectures or seminars or whatever that I possibly cannot attend and follow all of these invitations, so it really would depend when it is and what it is.

ERDEMİR: But in principle, if you had the time...

KRETSCHMER: Of course, of course, of course, I would have nothing, nothing against.

ERDEMİR: In general, based on your impression here and in European Union what is your assessment of the Alevi movement or organizational activity?

KRETSCHMER: ...

ERDEMİR: Here or in EU member countries.

KRETSCHMER: Well, what I observe is that the Alevis are not very happy with the present situation in this country and somehow I can understand because they are not accepted by the authorities as a religion. And they have difficulties to get permits to construct *cem* houses and so on. So this, of course, is somehow a difficult situation from their perspective.

ERDEMİR: In the European Commission's *Regular Report on Turkey's Progress towards Accession*, the definition and portrayal of Alevism seem to change over time slightly. Would like to comment on this, regarding the changes in the Commission's reports?

KRETSCHMER: Well, as I can see we have more recently, especially in the last report, put more emphasis on the situation of Alevis in Turkey, more than we did this in previous reports which is simply due to the fact that we recognized that there may be a problem which may have to be corrected.

ERDEMİR: In commissioning that report which sources does the Commission utilize in gathering information on Alevism or Alevis?

KRETSCHMER: Well, of course, there is no difference in general to our gathering of information in relation to whatever happens in Turkey. Of course, this report, as you know is a comprehensive assessment of Turkish reform process on the path on Turkey's path to European Union integration, and so we use, of course, all sources. In the first place, direct contact with people in Turkey, with all groups of people whom we can meet. We visited before these reports many places. Then, of course, we have information from the media, we have information from other international organizations which also look at the situation in Turkey. We have close contacts with the embassies of the now 25 European Union member states of which, I believe, 21 are present here in Turkey. So it is a... and of course from the Turkish authorities. We also are in a constant exchange with the Turkish government. And so we try to depict a picture of what is going on in Turkey which is as close as possible to the reality. And the report is basically a report which is an objective statement of facts. It does not make a judgment. It just describes what the situation is.

ERDEMİR: Are you totally satisfied with your existing sources and way of gathering data? If you would like to diversify your sources of information which other sources would you prefer to turn to? If any?

KRETSCHMER: I guess, in today's world, information is never enough. And I am sure that if you look at more information the picture could be even more precise. But in general, I think, our reports have been considered also by the Turkish government as being solid pieces of work, objective, and we did not encounter much of a criticism in relation to these reports from the Turkish

side. Of course, there can be here or there small misperception, or one or the other fact might not have been taken account of. But in general, I think, we came quite happy with the results we have achieved with these reports.

ERDEMİR: In our surveys of the Commission reports on Romania and Bulgaria we did not come across any references to the Bektaşî minority in those countries. Would like to comment on the absence of any references?

KRETSCHMER: No, I cannot. Because, I mean, these reports are also Commission reports but I do not bear any responsibility, and frankly I do not follow in detail what is going in Romania and Bulgaria. So I cannot make any statement on that.

ERDEMİR: Various organs of the European Union first considered the Alevis as a minority recently, and then revised its opinion following reaction from certain groups in Turkey. Would you like to comment on these developments?

KRETSCHMER: Well, I understand that the concept of minority is, for some groups in Turkey, I mean, which are concerned by this, not acceptable because the number of Alevis in Turkey, and I think you say that Alevis are somewhere between 12 and 20 million in this country, or the Kurds who are 20, 25 million in this country that this by itself would exclude that they are considered as a minority. But I think the concept of minority or not minority is not so important here. What is important is that all these groups are treated in a way which is appropriate and obtain the rights which in other countries are given to them. For example, freedom of religion. We are very concerned still about the situation of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. Now, I think, Alevism is perhaps somewhere in-between Muslim or non-Muslim. Some say they are not Muslim but other say they are Muslim so I am not a scholar. I do not want to argue on that but I certainly recognize that there is a problem also for the Alevis, that some ramifications of the Alevi cult, religion is not recognize din this country.

ERDEMİR: Do you believe that the European Commission reports have a positive contribution to the Alevi campaign for claiming rights in Turkey?

KRETSCHMER: Well, I think, in general, not necessarily. The Commission reports are just reports. What is important is that in Turkey we see a reform process which has started two to three years ago which has the objective of bringing Turkey, the system in Turkey and Turkish rules and laws and practice in line with European practice and so far we are certainly convinced that these reforms proceeding the situation of the Alevis may also change over time.

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ERDEMİR: Do you think there is any instrumental value of the reports from the point of view of the Alevis?

KRETSCHMER: What do you mean by instrumental value? The reports are basically description of the situation once for year. We review the progress achieved. And, of course, in as such these reports also are, of course, good benchmarks for the Turkish authorities, for the government that they learn through the reports where we think they stand. And there are further progress has to be made. In so far, of course, these reports are somehow instrumental in promoting reforms in Turkey.

ERDEMİR: What are the minimum improvements you expect from the Turkish government so that the issue of Alevisism stops being an obstacle to Turkish membership? Are you satisfied with the substance and the pace of ongoing reforms vis-à-vis Alevisism?

KRETSCHMER: That is, of course, a very complex question which is difficult to answer in a few words. And I would not like to do this in such a short interview. I would more look at the situation from a standpoint of freedom of religion in general, and not focus so much on the specific situation of Alevis, and would not like now to confirm that the situation of Alevis is an obstacle to Turkish integration into the European Union. But certainly, in general terms, the freedom of religion is an important fundamental freedom. And, as you know, Turkey has to adhere to these and respect these fundamental freedoms of human rights as they are applied in the European Union before it will be able to join. And certainly this will also have reflection on the situation of the Alevis but I do not want to become here more specific. I cannot be more specific. But religious freedom has, of course, many many aspects. It encompasses the possibility of having appropriate worship places. It concerns the issue of clergy and training of clergy. It concerns question of religious instruction to children, and all this, I think, has to be worked upon, will be worked upon more in the coming years in Turkey.

ERDEMİR: Alevis see their congregation halls, called *cemevis*, as their worship halls. But certain politicians in Turkey claim that *cemevis* are simply cultural centers and that the mosques are the only sites for the worship of Muslims. Can we learn your views on this controversy?

KRETSCHMER: Well, I personally always have difficulty to understand the power of the state or the government to define what is a religion and what is not a religion. I think a religion is something which is grown in the people, and the people concerned have to say whether their cult and belief is a religion or not. This is a very private thing. It is difficult to see how the government could define what is a religion and what is not a religion. And that is one of

the essential aspects, in my view, of religious freedom. That, in fact, people can follow their beliefs without being unduly restricted in these beliefs.

ERDEMİR: Can I learn specifically your interpretation of three issues which are most contested in Turkey? One is the Directorate of Religious Affairs. One is the compulsory religious education in schools. And the third one is the indication of religion in the Turkish identification cards. Three issues of most importance to Alevi.

KRETSCHMER: Yes, I know. These are three points which are in the center of your criticism of the current situation in Turkey. I mean, the Diyanet is, of course, somehow a unique institution which has a big influence on the issue of religious freedom in this country. And I do not now want to say that I support or do not support claims which are made from the Alevi side concerning the continued existence of the Diyanet. But what is important is that, in my view, that the government and its institutions are somehow neutral in respect to religions and allow all religions the same possibility of the government. In terms of religious instruction in schools, it would certainly be good if instruction, religious instruction of a certain kind in one religion, is not compulsory for children who do not follow this religion. This is the practice in European Union member states where for example a Catholic is not obliged to follow a Protestant religious instruction where also parents can also opt for their children not to attend religious instruction at all. And there are possibilities of having religious instruction in respective beliefs even if this is not in the schools. Obviously a school system cannot provide religious instruction in all types of beliefs. And we have many, for example in Germany, quite a number of different churches, not only Catholic and Protestant. And for these two types you have religious classes at schools. But there are others who are neither the one nor the other. And they have then their religious instruction outside in their churches or their temples. So that is what is essential element in the area of religious freedom. And the third question?

ERDEMİR: The third one was the identification cards.

KRETSCHMER: Yes, I mean, you see, I know that you have problem with that. And probably this should not be in the ID cards. I had a conversation the other day with a high-ranking politician on this here in Turkey, and he mentioned that this according to the law, this need not be in the ID cards. Now I do not know details about that. But on the other hand I can also say about 30 or 40 years ago in Germany, when I was young, when I got my first ID card, at that time also in the ID card, it was indicated whether you were Protestant, whether you were Catholic also. Nowadays it is no longer indicated I believe.

But these are things which also developed over time. As long as no discrimination follows from this indication of religion in the ID card, I think the situation is not so dramatic. But if it would be used for discriminatory purposes then of course there is a problem.

ERDEMİR: Shortly, how would you summarize the European Union's politico-legal framework for governing worship and association of religious congregations and the relations to nation-states? Some guiding principles of the Union on the relation of the religious communities and the nation-states. You have mentioned a few...

KRETSCHMER: You see, the way in which this is handled is not laid down in detail in European Union *acquis*. This is something which is regulated in member states somehow in different ways. It is not identical. But what is important, and what is laid down in the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the European Union, and what will figure also in the future European Union constitution is the principle of religious freedom. And I think everything in this regard has to be deducted from this fundamental principle, and if the practice in one or the other member state is considered by someone not to be in-line with this fundamental freedom, of course, there is the possibility to have this corrected by going to the court. And in the end it is the European Court of Justice of the European Union or also the European Court of Human Rights which are there in order to look at the situation and to correct certain situations.

ERDEMİR: Does the European Commission have any expectation of Alevis in Turkey or in Europe?

KRETSCHMER: ... What would you suppose? What should we expect from the Alevis? You have such well prepared questions.

ERDEMİR: The European Commission's Delegation in Turkey might have some expectations, for example, of Alevis not to disturb the ongoing talks with the Turkish government...

KRETSCHMER: You have more expectations from us than we have from you; namely that you have expectations of us that we help Turkey to reform in a way which would also facilitate the situation of the Alevis in terms of free exercise of their religion and recognition of this. But we do not have really, in this sense, expectations. Certainly not the expectations that you would not disturb. Because one important aspect in the whole reform process in Turkey is also the people in Turkey must become aware of their fundamental rights, of their human rights, and fundamental freedoms. You may have beautiful laws which grant all these rights. You may have which is already more difficult and the process of this being, becoming reality may have the implementation of

these rights that the administrations, and the courts respect these new laws, and they make decisions according to these new laws, and they behave according to these laws. But the third element is perhaps the most difficult, and that is that people, everyone in Turkey, becomes aware of the rights he or she has, and has the courage to exercise these rights. And in so far, I think, we would hope that all citizens in Turkey, and also the Alevis, become active citizens who become aware of the rights which they have and additional rights which they will be granted in the process of the reforms, and make use of these rights so that Turkey really becomes a living liberal democracy. This very active and vibrant civic society which also includes, of course, associations, organizations which have some religious overtones. And so that is the image which I have at the end of the reform process foresee in Turkey and of Turkey. And democracies are only living and good democracies if people participate fully in the democratic process. So this would be perhaps an expectation also to the Alevis as to all other citizens in this country that they become active citizens in the democratic process of the country.

ERDEMİR: A final question. Is there any message that you would like us to convey to the Alevis in Turkey or to the Alevi citizens of European Union member states? There could be separate messages.

KRETSCHMER: I mean, I made now such a nice message. My last answer to my last question was such a message. And I... What is important is that everyone in this country who is interested in Turkish membership in European Union is supporting this reform process actively by also participating in civil society organizations because democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms are issues which always in all countries continuously have to be defended. There are always risks for these very sensitive principles and especially in a country like Turkey which is just learning all this, reforming all this in order to comply with European standards and principles. In a country like Turkey, it is particularly important to be vigilant and to defend your rights and your freedoms.

ERDEMİR: Thank you very much.