BRIDGING BARRIERS INTERVIEW #5 – ZEYNEP U. KAHVECI TRANSCRIPT

CAN YILDIRIM

OK, well, thank you so much for coming to this interview. I really appreciate your time and your insights. For my sake and for the sake of anyone who might be listening, could you briefly introduce yourself, your personal background, your academic background, and your current professional background?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yes, thank you, Can, for inviting me to this project. My name is Zeynep. I studied law at Galatasaray University in Istanbul, and immediately after graduating from law school, I went to the US to pursue an LL.M. degree at Harvard Law School as a Fulbright scholar in 2017-18. Upon graduation, I returned to Turkey, where I practiced as a lawyer for a year, which was a requirement for Istanbul bar registration.

CAN YILDIRIM

Hmm.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

After completing that one year, I transitioned to academia and began a Ph.D. at Istanbul University, where I also started as a research assistant at Istanbul Bilgi University. I recently defended my Ph.D. thesis, which was only six months ago, and I have since started working as a lecturer at Istanbul Bilgi University. *(At the time of the interview.)*

CAN YILDIRIM

All right, so you know, taking a step back on your journey, going to the very start, why study the law? Why not music or history? Why law school?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I think that was a tough decision, and especially in Turkey, you have to make this decision at the age of 17 or 18, which is quite an early age. I was in the MUN club during my high school years, and my experience at the MUN club primarily involved participating in conferences, taking the floor, and delivering speeches. I've just realized that I mostly enjoy the process, and I thought law might be a good career fit for me. Also, my father is a lawyer, and I think seeing my father practice as a lawyer, witnessing the life of a lawyer, might have motivated me as well. Then I decided to study law, although I wasn't 100% sure. I made the decision to enroll in law school.

CAN YILDIRIM

Fair enough, so you know, of course, MUN has this international perspective as well, but was it sort of that international route that then brought you to study in the US? I mean, was there another point at which, while you were in Turkey, you said Wow, I do want to study abroad as well for a long time?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Well, actually, I can phrase it like this: the reason I stayed in Turkiye to study for my bachelor's degree was that I decided to study law. I thought that if I were going to study law, I would also want to practice it in the future. I want to practice in Turkiye. I thought studying in Turkiye would make sense to learn Turkish law. However, I had always had it in mind that I would find a chance to study abroad sometime after graduation. Additionally, during law school, I think I participated in the Philip Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition as a student. Twice. We went to Washington, DC, for the global rounds of the competition, so this competition is about public international law, and it also has this international dimension, and going traveling to DC, actually visiting Georgetown, was something we did as a team. All these things, I think, make me consider studying in the US in the future. I think what had an effect on my decision was that I applied for various scholarships before graduation, and I got a Fulbright Scholarship. I was really surprised and happy. Additionally, since the scholarship is only valid in the US, this also narrows my alternatives. As a result, instead of applying to European universities for an LLM, I have only applied to US universities.

CAN YILDIRIM

Fair enough, so that sort of divides your legal education into the Turkish side and the American side. How was that transition for you? Did you find it easy to adapt to a new, you know, language, new legal system, new legal culture, new academic culture?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

To be honest, I found it extremely difficult to adapt to the US legal education system. Part of the reason might be that I came here directly after graduating from a Turkish law school, so I didn't have any prior practicing experience. If I had some practicing experience, maybe that could have prepared me for a different jurisdiction as well, but I came here directly after graduating from Turkish law school, so even though the Turkish legal education was fresh in my mind, I hadn't really digested that part. Adapting to the US legal education system, which I think is entirely different from the Turkish legal education system, was challenging. We had an orientation for 2 weeks before the LL.M. courses started in August, which I think helped me to at least know how to read legal decisions, how to complete the reading, etc., but that definitely wasn't enough, so I kept learning new things in the course of the year, and I think I'm still learning new things. There are many differences; perhaps we can discuss them in more detail, but it was difficult to summarize them all.

CAN YILDIRIM

So, among those different experiences, would there be one that stood out to you particularly in terms of differences?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Uh, one thing that stood out to me was that, and it still is something that academically I'm working on improving, is that I think here legal theory has a very important place in legal education. It might be because, you know, in the US, law school is a Graduate School, so students have to first graduate from an undergraduate school. And there they already take classes like philosophy or liberal arts classes, or maybe they don't, but I think they all do, even if they graduate from a scientific track, they take some of these liberal arts courses, and they have some base of some theories. In law school, there are the rules that you have to learn,

there are the holdings of important decisions, but you always have to interpret them from the view of legal theories, and that requires a background in theory, which I definitely lacked, because in Turkey, as I said, you start law school at the age of 17, 18. And, you directly start by learning what the code says, what the courts say, so it's definitely different, and I actually prefer the US system in a way that it teaches you how to think critically. Even if you have to consider new concepts, such as AI technology, you can still apply these theories and develop your own thoughts convincingly. However, that was not the case for me, and I realized that I needed to do extra reading to keep up with my classmates. Contributions to class to understand what the professors were actually talking about.

CAN YILDIRIM

So you know you came into the system, you say you have some difficulty, but you slowly adapted, and how did you find that sort of reflect on you that the extra effort you put in in what ways did you feel that you grew you said critical thinking do you think your communication was impacted by that reading writing if I find my sort of. Transition to that a little bit.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I think it basically changed the way I think, and so I, yeah, I did the extra readings, extra writings to understand that, but also it taught me that in Turkiye what we learn is more like you listen to the professor and you take notes in class and in the exam you just see one of the questions that is part of the book so you need to actually without critically thinking and questioning things kind of more like I don't want to say memorizing but you don't you just need to know the essence of the rules and that's enough. I think the critical thinking part here in the US changed the way how I think and apply it to different areas of law and also it I think it also kind of changed the way I teach as well right now when I'm teaching in Turkiye. I also try to teach my students this way of thinking, but of course, it's not easy to do that. Because it's a whole system and you can't change it, so I have also to teach the codes and the courts' opinions, but in addition to that, I also try to teach critical thinking. Yeah, I think in essence that would be it.

CAN YILDIRIM

And you know many people before have said things like Oh well you know in one language I feel as though like in Turkish I feel a certain way or I think a certain way right a certain way in an English I do the same but with critical thinking it feels like more of a like pervasive kind of character change so do you think that it reflects in your Turkish legal analysis as well. What's the sort of impact that this critical thinking that you've now integrated into your legal thinking has on you as a Turkish lawyer or a legal educator?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Whenever I encounter a rule in Turkish law that I have difficulty understanding, I try to trace its origins back to the year it was codified and determine which jurisdiction served as the example, as Turkish law was often heavily influenced by foreign jurisdictions. If I can't find any resources in Turkish, I try to go to those jurisdictions and do some readings on that, and I do my best, but it always requires a lot of time, so it's not always possible. As a researcher and teacher, I do my best, but it really requires time and effort. However, I definitely enjoy it; whenever I find something new, I feel really happy about it.

CAN YILDIRIM

Fair enough and then you know if the transition goes one way, I assume it goes from one language to the other, it goes the other way as well, so when you work in English, do you see traces of your Turkish legal training or maybe cultural style coming through in your arguments and you're speaking and your thinking?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Since 2018, after graduating from Harvard Law School, I have been teaching US copyright law as part of a project led by my professor. So, actually, I also have this experience in teaching U.S. law, as in the beginning, it was really hard for me to adapt to this because, you know, my Turkish education taught me to first talk about rules and then talk about how to apply them, and just give some court and that's it. But, in the US class, you have to do more. First of all, you expect students to come to class having read all the materials, so you don't actually spend any time teaching the rules from scratch because they are supposed to have already read

everything, so class time is dedicated to only discussing why these rules. Like that, and maybe doing some case studies and trying to see how courts reacted differently to different cases, and actually question, like it, not outright accepting what the court. Set as right but questioning if it was how it was supposed to be and giving the floor to students more, it's like in Turkish legal education, it's more of the professor speaking and students taking notes, and there is not much time left for discussions because basically, you have to cover. The professor needs to spend most of their time on the materials, but in the US style, since you have to do the readings before class, the materials are already done before class, so the professor has more time to create these discussions. There's this Socratic method, which is also unique, and the professor asks questions to students and leads to points. But to a point, but not actually leading them directly to that point, but making them reach that point on their own, so I mean, in the beginning, it was really hard. Still, I think over time I adapted to it. I definitely have a different professor identity for Turkish legal education and the US legal education.

CAN YILDIRIM

So sort of taking a step back from that and perhaps asking the why, I mean, you know, the Turkish system, I think, at many levels, has the sort of lecture style professor teaches, students learn, which is just absorption; and then in the US you say Socratic method there's Harkness methods and all these like discussion-based styles do you think that reflects something perhaps? Deeper into the legal system, or the professor-student relationship, or why would that be? I mean, why do you think there's this?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

The lecture style is not unique to Turkish legal education; I believe it is more common in civil law countries, which include most European countries and a few American countries. This is the way law is taught; it may be because civil law is based more on codes, which are the binding rules, and everything is shaped according to these codes. Common law is based more on jurisprudence, so court opinions and how judges interpret them, as well as their reasoning, are more critical. Any practitioner needs to be able to understand that way of thinking, which might be why, but I really don't know. I have also been thinking about it. And that's the explanation I came up with that might be why.

CAN YILDIRIM

Yeah, it's fair enough. I feel like that's a pretty good explanation, so then, perhaps, you could take a step back and look at something a little more overarching. I do want to ask you, though: there's probably a certain way you would look at yourself if you were just a lawyer that their legal educator had gone to university in Turkiye, but now have this foreign experience as well and you say you try to sort of cross those bridges and connect different elements from different sides so do you think sort of going to the US has changed how you perceive yourself as someone professional in the legal field.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yeah, definitely. I think this, especially the critical thinking aspect, has definitely changed the way I practice, and even in my personal life, apart from my professional career. I think it taught me to question things, and I think more about the theories behind them. I think it really changed me, and that's why I'm so happy to have had this experience. I was there at the right time, at the right moment. I'm very fortunate to have received the education, and I tried to make the most of it. I'm still trying to keep in contact with professors in the US. I try participating in conferences and like keep myself updated about what's going on because it's not something you can learn and just leave it at a certain point of your life; you have to know law is a living thing and you have to keep yourself updated. Since I saw how much of a positive change it caused in me, I was always motivated to do the extra work, not only that. Keeping up with Turkish law but also keeping up with the US law, with global changes and comparative work, which I definitely think made me who I am now, so I can definitely say that all this experience has had a real impact on me.

CAN YILDIRIM

So, looking ahead with that, as well as this more global perspective, where do you see yourself in, say, 5 to 10 years? I mean, do you see a more global path, or do you still see a more traditional Turkish path with some mixture?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yeah, it's a hard question. Well, who knows? After graduation, I considered pursuing another graduate degree abroad, but then COVID-19 happened, which was unexpected, so I couldn't even leave the country for three years. It's tough to predict, but I think, in general, I chose the route to stay in Türkiye and contribute to Turkish academia, which is challenging but rewarding. I am aware that I have valuable contributions to make to Turkish law, particularly in academia. I mean, maybe not the practicing world, but, academia. So, I think I will continue to do comparative work, publish, and teach as well. I will try. So if I can reach as many students as I can and also definitely keep in touch with all my colleagues globally, because just having a 10-minute discussion with a colleague can really change the way you think about a certain thing, so these exchanges of ideas are really important. And I want to just keep doing them. These are very broad goals, but I don't know specifically what I will be doing in 5 or 10 years. I think we'll see together.

CAN YILDIRIM

And as you sort of look at this academic landscape that's surrounding you and in front of you in your career forward, what are some of the main maybe downfalls that you'd like to address? What are some problems that you know more about on the institutional side that you feel should be looked at in terms of cross-border, cross-cultural, cross—linguistic education?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I think one problem we all have globally is the use of AI. In our professional careers, initially, everyone was trying to deny its existence. Still, we came to an understanding that we have to live with, and especially law schools were really pioneering in this field, as they developed AI policies because students and professors were already using it. Hence, it's not that you can't use AI outright for a bit, but you have to. Maybe at least come up with sensible rules and try to apply them. I think this is a problem that everyone faces. I don't think we are making the most out of it. I believe we need to work more on, first of all, guiding students to use AI effectively, and also on how we, as professors, can utilize AI. I work on the intersection of AI and law, like in my papers, but actually, I don't think I'm doing my best in using it myself, and so I think we should educate ourselves and learn how to use it as a tool that can improve the quality of the work you produce. However, be aware of the dangers, since it's a very easy tool

to use. If you get used to it, you can. As we said, going back to the beginning, we can lose our critical thinking skills, so without losing that we have to find the middle way so I think that's something a problem that everyone is facing globally. I don't think we have found the optimal solution yet, we have the basic rules, but we have to do more.

CAN YILDIRIM

I know this is sort of beyond the bounds of the question but I just out of curiosity what do you think the kind of optimal use means for you know a young law student today or a young legal professional today and how they shape their future. I mean should they worry about becoming obsolete in 20 years when an AI can do research better than them or do you think they'll synergize and make themselves more efficient?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I think that's why the critical thinking part will become even more important, because you know I can do research and analysis, statistically finding the patterns or words in a certain document so that these things will be optimized. But the critical thinking part, where we can as humans contribute, will remain important, I think, and that's why going back to the roots, we need to work more on the theory part, but of course this is me as an academic so practitioners can have different things to say about the use of AI.

CAN YILDIRIM

Fair enough, so sort of looking at it more holistically with these future challenges or perhaps opportunities, and your own experience with an LL.M. What sort of advice would you give to a young Turkish law student or a young lawyer who's considering an LL.M, who's considering a JD in the US? How should they strategize their path forward, what advice would you give them? I know it's more of a larger question but I guess to more centralized it if you were taking these steps forward today with the knowledge that you also have what would you do differently or what would you do similarly?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I would definitely recommend them to be braver. As we all come as students, you are at the lowest level of the hierarchy, and you often, especially in Turkiye, learn to respect your boundaries and refrain from questioning. But if you're going to pursue another land or in another graduate degree in the US I would recommend them to be brave if you're interested in something don't think that you are not qualified to do it just ask for it, the worst answer that you can get is no, which will not cause any damage, so just try, if it works it will work, if it doesn't you can try another path. So I would try to encourage them to be brave and that's actually how I would give a personal example about this teaching copyrights project. When I asked the professor if I can be a part of this project I hadn't even taken the copyright class at Harvard so I didn't know anything about US copyright law, but a friend actually encouraged me to apply and I just asked the professor if I can be a part of this project of teaching the US copyright law and he was like if you feel like you can do it I think you can do it. And that was it. Of course it was a lot of work, I had to learn and digest it and then teach it doing all of them at the same time was really really hard, but I think I'm still enjoying it and it was something that also changed my professional career, and if I hadn't asked I wouldn't have been a part of it, so that's one thing I definitely recommend everyone to do so, just be brave.

CAN YILDIRIM

Fair enough, and you know, since we have a little bit more time, I want to circle. Back. On something you said, which is this idea of the sort of hierarchy, particularly in the Turkish system, or you're the student I know I guess, know your place, don't ask, don't question very much and I, you know because I I sent you some questions about the cultural side as well I want to get your opinions on. You know, if there are some different opinions on these topics, these cultural values, like hierarchy, questioning authority, that you see reflected in your Turkish education and teaching, versus in your American education and the projects you've worked on here.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yeah, so I think this is also a result of this chain. There's definitely a difference between the Turkish and US cultures about that, but I'm going back to your question about the Socratic method and the lecture-type class. I think it is also related to the legal tradition, so I believe

it applies in most civil law systems, this is the way it is. The professor is the one giving the lecture, and just teaching you the codes and the rules and hierarchy is in. Per year, the position and the students are the ones you know, hearing it for the first time in class, taking notes, and maybe asking questions, but not really going beyond that, since there is no time for extensive discussion. But in common law systems, if you think about the Socratic method, the Socratic method is something that kind of equalizes the professor with the students, so you are engaging in a discussion. The professor asks for your opinion, and you are free to share it. Typically, the professor does not tell you whether you are right or wrong. He or she will just go with whatever response you give and try to continue the discussion in a way that will lead to a certain point, but will not lead you to a certain opinion. I think that kind of equalizes and destroys the hierarchy, although not completely; there's still a little bit of hierarchy, but not as much as you would see in a lecture-type class. So, I think this cultural difference exists. It's not a US-Turkiye comparison, but rather a comparison between common law and civil law, I guess.

CAN YILDIRIM

Makes sense that the legal system would impact the legal education to that extent, so as we sort of wrap up with respect to your time as well, I do want to ask you, know, and you can think of this question however you may, but if an archaeologist 1000 years from now or 2000 years from now. Finds this video. And they're listening to us talk. What would be the sort of one thing that they'd wanna they you'd want them to take away from hearing this and I would assume that archaeologist would be a young lawyer so what's the sort of one thing that you want to highlight a story and experience a thought or an insight from what we've spoken about or what we haven't spoken about?

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yes, it's a tricky question, so I'll probably be obsolete back then. I think. Oh, it's hard, really. I don't think I can find one thing that they can take away from it, but maybe they can say that even in 2025, the law was evolving, so the law constantly evolved; it was never a stable, passive thing. It was always a living thing. Perhaps they can simply apply this to their world 2,000 years from now.

CAN YILDIRIM

And then perhaps coming back to the present, what would you want these sort of law students today to take away from what we've talked about, as they go not 2000 years from now, but maybe 20 minutes or 20 hours from now, would be the sort of main takeaways you'd want them to have.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

I think one takeaway they should take from this interview is that they should strive to challenge themselves. Studying in a different jurisdiction is a very challenging thing, and it pushes your boundaries, gets you out of your comfort zone, but in the long term. It definitely puts you in a better position than you would be without this challenge, so they should give it a try and see how it changes them.

CAN YILDIRIM

Yeah, well, fair enough. Thank you so much for coming to this interview. Thank you for your insights. If you don't have anything else to share, I'll pause the recording briefly.

ZEYNEP ULKU KAHVECI

Yeah, thank you for your very well-thought-out questions. It was a pleasure, and I'm really curious to see what the outcome will be.

CAN YILDIRIM

Thank you so much.