

EU's soft power is defunct in Turkey

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At the end of last week, the think tank where I work in Brussels — the European Policy Centre — held a breakfast meeting with Turkey's chief negotiator for the EU, Ali Babacan, at which he gave a presentation on "Turkey and the EU: Relations, Negotiations and Challenges Ahead."

This was the first time I had heard **Babacan** speak in English for quite some time and I was impressed. He delivered an impressive and information-packed speech to a captivated audience of some 200 people. He then went on to answer numerous questions on many different issues, including regional development, climate change, foreign policy, the economy and relations with Cyprus. Could it be that he is being groomed to be the next foreign minister? I believe that it is a real possibility.

Babacan's message was very clear — what happened in December happened and there is nothing anybody can do about it now, but the effects of the EU decision to freeze eight negotiating chapters continue to be felt in Turkey and recovery is not guaranteed. Although Babacan emphasized that Turkey would never be the party walking away from the negotiating table, he also said that the EU's famous "soft power" no longer had any major effect in the country.

To my mind this is not really surprising given that a number of member states continue to repeat like parrots that Turkey's negotiations are open ended, that alternatives should also be looked at. As Olli Rehn, European commissioner for enlargement, has rightly pointed out on many occasions, these people are doing more harm than good as they are creating a negative wave in Turkey towards the EU which has affected the relationship and the pace of reform. It is also particularly pointless when you bear in mind that in at least one member state — France — Turkish accession will face a referendum, leaving the final decision, for all intents and purposes, up to the citizens. Indeed, there are no longer any guaranteed places at the EU table given that after the accession of Croatia — probably in 2009 — all countries who aspire to be members of the club will have to face a referendum in at least France.

Babacan emphasized that Turkey still had many, many reforms to do in many areas and that numerous reforms, already carried out, still needed to be implemented. He added that the only way forward was for the reform process to be owned by the people.

The AK Party aspires to remove all "taboos" from Turkish society. This was one of Erdoğan's goals when he created the party. The time he spent in jail during his time as mayor of Istanbul for reciting a poem gave him a taste of Turkish justice and more particularly the stranglehold on freedom of expression. Pressure for change on such sensitive issues very much linked to Turkey's nationalistic past has to come from within. Although it is totally unacceptable to see academics, journalists, writers and others marched back and forth to the courthouse, the necessity for change has to come from the hearts of the Turkish people and not the EU or the US.

An EU Strategy for 5 years

Regarding progress in the negotiations, Turkey will not wait for the EU's formal decisions to proceed but will proceed with their own program of adapting the *acquis* on all chapters, including those that are frozen. Civil society is being consulted on every single negotiating chapter in order to give real Turkish ownership to the process. At the end of March the government will release its EU strategy for the next five years. Babacan believed this would be a win-win strategy for both Turkey and the EU as both parties

can only gain from the process in which Turkey will go through a tremendous metamorphosis, transforming into a country that will complement and strengthen the EU. However, this buoyant approach will come as a challenge to the European Commission, which has the prerogative of monitoring progress and setting timetables. A program to win the hearts and minds of the public in both the EU and Turkey is also being prepared.

Turks may be doing it for themselves but accession processes are meant to be based on good, strong teamwork between the EU and the candidate countries. Therefore, the EU-Turkey relationship badly needs some confidence injected into it. Turkish citizens feel unwanted by the EU at the moment and it is therefore up to the EU to try and get some new impetus into the process. The German presidency therefore needs to do at least two things: push to have the maximum number of chapters opened during their term in office and make some progress on lifting the isolation of Turkish Cypriots. This might result in a much needed "*climate change*" in Turkey-EU relations.