

Promoting Turkey in France

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The Institut du Bosphore, a Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TÜSIAD)-sponsored independent think tank aimed at promoting better dialogue between Turkey and France, has just held its first seminar in İstanbul.

Among those present were well-known "friends of Turkey," such as former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, former European Union minister Pierre Moscovici and historian and journalist Alexandre Adler. But sitting at the round table with Turkish academics and businessmen were also members of parliament from the Turkey-skeptic Union for a Popular Movement Party (UMP), President Nicolas Sarkozy's party, who were less convinced that Turkey could positively contribute to Europe.

At a time when Turkey is so busy forging ties with neighbors who actually welcome Ankara's attention, why waste time on the thankless task of convincing a hostile French public, many would ask. The frustration and resentment on the Turkish side, particularly among those who were very enthusiastic about the EU project, are slowly giving way to indifference, which is detrimental not only to Turkey-French exchanges but also to the EU accession process as a whole.

Meanwhile, French officials continue to speak of deepening bilateral ties, apparently unaware that the very vocal and oft-repeated rejection of Turkey's EU ambitions by French leaders is in fact eroding them.

So why is the TÜSIAD initiative important? France, like it or not, remains a key player in Europe. Entry into the EU club is obviously still a way off for Turkey, even if reforms pick up speed, but keeping the process going will require jumping the hurdle of Cyprus and getting over France's objections to the opening of five chapters it says are linked to eventual membership.

Turkey has been discussed and dissected in France in recent years and used as an electoral tool by populist politicians. Through Turkey, France has mainly been debating its own identity, its fear of immigrants, its position in the world and its role in an evolving of Europe.

Many opinions have been expressed, often negative and at times based on a gross misunderstanding of what Turkey is today and what it wants to become, but they have nonetheless triggered greater interest in France. Yet Turkey has been largely absent from the debate, slow to jump in and make its own voice heard.

I recently spoke to Ümit Boyner, one of the initiators of the Institut du Bosphore project. She explained that the think tank aims to broaden the field of debate, talk to opponents as well as advocates of Turkey and address contentious issues head on.

To get its message across, Turkey needs more than this single platform. Although the Turkish authorities were initially half-hearted in their support of the Turkish Season in France, events organized in towns across the country have brought a taste of Turkey to provincial centers. Decentralizing the debate, promoting cultural events and creating spaces for dialogue in the provinces is important to reach the general public.

New players, aside from the traditional francophone elite, should also speak for Turkey. So far few people in the circles close to the ruling party have jumped into the fray, perhaps put off by France's focus on secularism or simply hampered by the language barrier. Yet close encounters could help combat deep-set prejudice on both sides and identify potential areas of cooperation.

Whenever Turkish and French people get together, they inevitably discuss the vexing topic of EU

membership. Perhaps a way of establishing trust would be to focus instead on areas of joint interest, be it Middle East or Caucasus policy or ways to mitigate the effects of global warming in agriculture.

Overcoming preconceived notions is always challenging, and Turkey can be clumsy in its communications, at times adopting an official tone that sounds too much like propaganda. The country has a lot of progress still to achieve before it reaches EU standards, but it also holds some important strategic cards.

For the time being, the main aim should be to give the EU accession process new momentum. To keep the hope of EU entry alive in the long run, Turkey will have to find creative ways of reaching out to European public opinion, starting with the younger generation, less set in its ways and more open to cultural diversity.

Sources

Source: TZ, le 27.10.09