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What does Simitis really mean?

Monday, February 11, 2008

The Europeans, or at least some Europeans, are gathering force to spell out a clear message of rejection for Turkey

Ariana FERENTINOU

The energy spent recently by Turkish society on the political battle over the headscarf pushed another ongoing debate to the backstage, albeit temporarily: the stance of the Europeans toward Turkey. But while Turkey continues her painful soul searching by trying to define an identity through the freedom of faith, on the opposite side of the river, the Europeans, or at least some Europeans, are gathering force to spell out a clear message of exclusion to Turkey. It has been less than a month since we welcomed the prime minister of Greece in Turkey in a visit initially hailed as a turning point ♦ the first visit by a Greek prime minister in 49 years ♦ but in produced very little in terms of results.

The forgotten agenda:

As the visit of Karamanlis here has been almost forgotten under a heavy domestic agenda both in Turkey and Greece, a former prime minister of Greece grabbed the opportunity in his speech to students of Cambridge University a few days ago in order to describe his position on Turkey. Costas Simitis, during whose premiership the roots of the present honeymoon between Greece and Turkey were seeded, has changed his mind. Speaking about the future challenges for Europe in view of the new European treaty, Mr Simitis said: ♦The best solution is a framework of a special relationship with Turkey,

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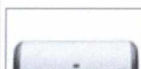
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and through this special relationship Greece may solve some of its problems in southeastern Europe. ♦ Simitis is no longer a political leader. His foreign minister, George Papandreou, a great favorite of the Turks since the 1989 rapprochement, is now running PASOK, a party in opposition to the Karamanlis government but also to itself; the party is free falling in the polls, attempting an almost impossible political and ideological resurrection. Nonetheless, it is still a party that remains supportive of the full integration of Turkey into the European Union. So, when the most senior member of the party challenges its official line and indeed challenges a policy that he himself had drafted, defended and applied during his premiership, what are we suppose to think about it? Does he speak as a politician or as the academic as he was? Does he speak confessing a miscalculation of the past, or with a view of the future? Let's listen to him a bit more:

♦If Turkey becomes a full member in the EU, it will be difficult to solve the problems (with Greece) and it will be easier to develop two and three speeds (related to the level of development for new members) within the Union... In a few years, Turkey will become a country of 100 million. It will be the biggest country in the EU and will have the highest number of votes in the European Parliament. It will be an unusual situation which I do not see it being accepted by the European countries. ♦

The revamped position:

Tomorrow, Costas Simitis will be delivering a speech in Athens where he is expected present his analysis and thoughts over the current political situation in Greece and his views on the developments within the EU. He is expected to clarify the statements he made at Cambridge over Turkey.

Of course, his ♦revamped♦ position on Turkey is not news for the French, the Germans or the Austrians. My question is, does he only express himself or is he voicing a future position of the Greek government? Does he act as a free rider against his own party and the party in power, or does he act as the precursor of a change of policy by the Greeks? Or is he looking for a high job in the new leadership structure in the European Union as shaped after the new approved treaty?

I hope it is the latter. Because with the current crisis of confidence in all the political parties in Greece, the Greeks could ill afford yet another Turkey-bashing phase to be exploited domestically by extremists for gaining ground in this reshuffling of political balances.

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