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Between a rock and a hard place: Italy and Turkey at the cross roads

Thursday, November 15, 2007

Dennis REDMONT

It is the best of times and it is the worst of times for Italy and Turkey and their prime ministers Romano Prodi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

These are two men who are strongly powered by their private religious beliefs and their strong faith, each in their own way.

It is the best of times because trade, finance, tourism, and culture are booming and blossoming between these two Mediterranean nations. And both of them want to push even harder.

But both prime ministers are between a rock and hard place domestically. Formerly Christian Democrat Prodi is in trouble, because of the strong influence of the leftist parties, some of them extreme left and Communist, on his shaky nine-party center-left coalition, a constant source of embarrassment. He is also weathering a wave of hysteria over the large influx of Romanian immigrants, after a grizzly crime involving the 47-year-old wife of an Italian naval officer who was brutally attacked, beaten and robbed by a Romanian suspect in Rome. She died two days later at a hospital.

Romanians make up Italy's biggest ethnic minority. Immigration of all nations to Italy grew 21 percent last year. Immigrants constitute 6.1 percent of Italy's total population.

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Prodi under center-right pressure

Prodi is under pressure from the center-right opposition for strong law and order measures and the government rushed through a decree that gave emergency powers to local authorities specifically naming Romanians for expulsion. Erdoğan is also facing intense pressure at home and needs also to apply it on Turkish allies for help in the current crises of increased Kurdish separatist terrorism.

Note that he stopped in Rome practically on his way back from Washington after seeing U.S. President George Bush at the White House, where Bush declared that the Kurdish PKK was a terror group and that it was the enemy of Turkey, the U.S. and Iraq.

Whatever each man does now will have consequences for their own political survival. Prodi stay only thanks to the left and extreme left and seven lifetime senators, including 97-year-old Nobel winner for medicine Rita Levi Montalcini. The former president of Italy, Francesco Cossiga, who is a lifetime senator, recently told a TV interviewer that "this is the government of the prostate" because every time someone leaves the senate to answer nature's call, the government is threatened with collapse.

The Italian senate has 315 votes. For the past weeks it has been voting daily on the key budget sometimes 50 times a day (with the score 158-156). If the majority fails, the government may face several times it is being saved by the votes of the seven lifetime senators.

The Italian budget must be passed before Dec. 30 and first by the senate, before the chamber of deputies. This budget and last year's have been particularly punishing on Italians. (One satirical comment on TV said about the budget: "the Romanians have Dracula, we have Economy Minister Tomaso D'Alagni Schioppa.")

And it is exactly in the Italian senate where the destiny of the two prime ministers met last week.

While Prodi was meeting Erdoğan, his old friend Berlusconi was receiving him at his own offices getting an interview exclusively on his own TV networks), while Italian Confindustria (the equivalent of TUSIAD) was setting new targets in trade between two countries, there was a news conference in the senate which was swept under the rug by much of the media.

It involved Italian Senator Giovanni Russo Spina, president of the Italian Refounded Communist Party, who stood next to the president of the "Kurdistan Information Office" in Italy and the president of the Union of Kurdish Communities and accused Prodi of capitulating to U.S. pressure. Spina said: "there should be dialogue of peace opened with the PKK."

Turkey would like those Kurdish offices disappear as well as their source of financing.

A TUSIAD mission headed by Arzuhan Yalcındağ the week before Erdoğan's visit to Rome told Italian officials and business leaders that financial sources of the Kurdish groups must be cut and their leaders extradited.

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At his Rome news conference, Erdoğan said "certain European countries" are not sufficiently collaborating with Ankara on terrorism.

Prodi replied by praising Erdoğan for his so far "attentive and measured reaction" saying, "there should not be a response to excessive provocation" of terrorism and Turkey should be proof of democratic strength. (Italy, after all, has some experience having coped with the Red Brigades terrorists, who are still occasionally active).

But Prodi still has not responded directly to Erdoğan's request. Erdoğan did concede, "some European countries had sent back Kurdish terrorists to Iraq. But this is not acting together against terrorism," he said.

Italian initiatives

Nevertheless, Italy is going ahead with many new initiatives, internationally and bilaterally to do a lobby for a pro-Turkish position in Europe. One interesting initiative is the groundwork for an FT (Friend of Turkey) club which includes Italy, the United Kingdom, Sweden and some other prospective members inside the EU to give Turkey an extra push.

On the bilateral front, Italy and Turkey will now have a formal annual bilateral summit (the only other countries outside Europe that Italy has this institution with are Algeria and Egypt).

On the trade side, Italy wants to increase investments in Turkey from \$4.5 billion to \$7 billion by 2010 and increase trade from \$17 billion to \$25 billion.

Italy is Turkey's third commercial partner after Russia and Germany and the balance of trade til Italy's favor. But Italian companies in Turkey number 580 in sixth place while Germany leads the with 2,588 and between those, there are the U.K., the Netherlands, Iran, and the U.S. (statistics Italian Chamber of Commerce).

In the pipeline are also more Turkish exhibits in Italy, a Turkish language school in Rome and more intense business meetings between the two countries.

And next week, Istanbul will host the fourth Turkish Italian Forum sponsored by the Unicredit Group (The Yapi Kredi partners), coinciding with Italian Foreign Minister D'Alema's visit. D'Alema has much changed since the days of his role in the PKK chief Öcalan affair.

Will the economic boom be sufficient to overshadow political differences?

That will determine the future relations between Turkey and Italy and therefore of the whole EU.

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