

Europe-Turkey Media Exchange

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Early in 2014, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a London-based think-tank, launched a 'Europe-Turkey Media Exchange' (ETME) designed to discuss the challenges faced by the Turkish media and to explore the desirability and feasibility of establishing closer supportive links across national borders, building up a media network and holding periodic meetings. The BIAA was attracted by this. We felt that the project would probably undertake work relevant to our interest in contemporary Turkish political affairs, and that the scoping conference for the project, which was held in Istanbul on 10–11 May, might also yield material which could be the basis for academic research. We therefore agreed to share the cost of the conference with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and to participate.

ISD's initiative was prompted by their successful Europe-China Media Exchange project, now entering its fourth year of alternate meetings in Europe and China. Both European and Chinese participants have emphasised how much they benefit from these exchanges, gaining in-depth knowledge of key political, economic and cultural issues, and improving their understanding of the challenges faced by the media in their respective countries. The China exchange focuses on young and medium-level journalists, rather than senior figures who already have their own foreign networks, and ISD plan that ETME should do the same.

The conference was organised in cooperation with the Media School of Istanbul Bilgi University and was held on its campus. It brought together a group of 32 leading Turkish and European media academics and journalists, who would be well placed to set the process in motion, and was held under the Chatham House rule. The BIAA participants were Council member Gülnur Aybet, Assistant Director Marc Herzog and I. The meeting was timed to take place between Turkey's local and presidential elections, and so provided an excellent opportunity for the western Europeans to learn about the political, economic and media forces at play in Turkey today from the Turkish participants. There was lively discussion of the challenges to press freedom and the influence of the media on public policy, and of the role of social media and the future of print media. Unsurprisingly, the conference demonstrated the profound polarisation of political views in Turkey from which the media are not excluded and where they are clearly in no position to act as bridge-builder. This point was reiterated by Turkish participants time and again throughout the two-day meeting, and was best illustrated by the fact that the only two pro-regime journalists who had promised to participate failed to turn up.

Additionally, it was clear that the Turkish media's problems are compounded by the structure of their industry, whose origins, of course, were laid before the emergence of

the AKP government. Participants described how media independence was weakened by the fact that virtually all of the outlets are owned by Turkish businesses, whose interests often conflict with the requirements of objective journalism.

Among the Turkish participants, enthusiasm for the role of social media in Turkey was muted; the citizen journalist could not be trusted for accuracy and was apt to reflect the polarisation of political positions. The western Europeans pointed out that many of the problems associated with social media – and the future of print media – were common throughout the world. But because of its political polarisation, the problems were more acute in Turkey and were magnified by a shortage of well-trained professionals. European participants described some of the sophisticated ways of fact-checking and analysis that are being developed by their news organisations.

It was clear that the Turkish and European media share many common problems and confront similar challenges in adapting to technological advance and integrating social media into the broader media landscape. In all these areas they can learn from each other, even though the balance is uneven, with Turkey still lagging behind in terms of exploitation of the internet. But in the broader political context in which the media operate, there was a world of difference between the freedom of expression enjoyed by European media and the restrictions under which the Turkish media have to work.

After so much gloom, there was unanimity that the Turkish media deserve more support from European colleagues and from NGOs. A series of offers and suggestions was made for taking some of the issues forward and developing collaboration. Proposals included:

- the establishment of a web-based platform for European and Turkish journalists to keep in touch with each other and to provide opportunities for Turkish journalists to publish material they could not otherwise find an outlet for;
- collaboration with institutions such as the South East Europe Media organisation and the Columbia Media project on Press Freedom;
- the 'adoption' of Turkish journalists by European colleagues, acting as mentors and offering moral support;
- short-term placements for Turkish trainee journalists in European media organisations;
- annual meetings of European and Turkish journalists at Bilgi University.

As for the BIAA's role, we judged that our sponsorship had made a worthwhile contribution to a potentially useful process, and was also useful in terms of the opportunity the event provided to raise the Institute's profile with senior Turkish media figures. We don't yet know how ISD will take the process forward. When we do, we shall of course need to decide about the BIAA's future involvement.