

„Rotarian solidarity today“

My dear fellow Rotarians, ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening or “kalispera”, as we say in Greece.

First, I'd like to emphasize, that my opening statement reflects only my personal opinion, nothing else. In that sense, please let me share with you two small anecdotes of my Rotarian life:

First anecdote:

One day in the 80ies, in the middle of the so called “cold war” between Greece and Turkey, I visited my old Rotaract Club in Northern Greece. When my Greek Rotaract friends told me that they are going to visit their Turkish friends in “Constantinople”, as we in Greece call the wonderful city of Istanbul still today, I was quite surprised. Because it was and still is common knowledge especially in Germany, that the history between Greeks and Turks is full of - let's say – “accidents”.

“But, aren't the Turks our enemies?” I asked my Greek friends a little bit ironically. And their answer was: “No, of course they are not. That's only what our parents and grandparents tell us, but we indeed do not have any problems with Turks or Turkish Rotaractors at all, they are our very good friends, we visit each other, have fun and we organize social projects together.”

From that day I knew how good the idea of Rotary is.

Second anecdote:

About 20 years later, in 2007, there were huge demonstrations in Turkey. Especially in Izmir, which traditionally always was and still is a very open minded and tolerant city, more than 1 million people went on the streets to express their concerns about an upcoming Islamization of their secular country. At that time, I had an appointment with a leading local Rotarian, who was quite disappointed about European Rotary Clubs.

„You know” he told me, „our great leader and founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, once taught us, that Turkey would look only to the west, not to the east, meaning that he supposed Turkey to become once a modern European country. So, the Turkish Rotarians also nowadays look to the west, but what do they see? They see the European Rotary Clubs looking to the west too, simply showing us their backs and giving us the cold shoulder.“

Dear friends,

some people think that Turkey is not a European country. That isn't very surprising, since many European countries were under the cruel rule by the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years.

Some people think that Turkey is not a real democracy. That isn't very surprising either, since a high EU-politician welcomed a few years ago even an EU-prime minister with the words "Hello, dictator!", as you maybe remember.

Fortunately, we are not only "people", but we are also Rotarians.

And I think, that it shouldn't be the business of Rotarians to discuss about, if a country belongs to Europe or not.

Further I think, that it shouldn't be neither the business of Rotarians, to decide or judge if a country does comply with certain cultural or political standards or not.

Instead I think, the only business of Rotarians should be, to act in the spirit of Rotary and based on the constitution and rules of Rotary International.

Well, what does this mean?

While the engagement of especially German Rotary Clubs decreased as more, as the political situation in Turkey changed and terrorist attacks there increased, the failed putsch attempt in 2016 made the situation between Turkish Rotary Clubs and Rotary Clubs abroad even worse. Due to the restriction of fundamental democratic rights while the state of emergency, that has been declared in that context, created an atmosphere of a general uncertainty, lots of NGOs, not only Rotary Clubs, stopped their engagement in Turkey almost completely.

So, what can we do?

As you know, after WW I the imperialism of the western great powers tried to split up the empire of the so called "sick man of Europe". And yet, although after defeating these intentions coming from Europe, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk proclaimed that Turkey's future can only be found in Europe.

A part of this future from the west however was Rotary, who's special commissioner **Jim Davidson** first arrived in Istanbul by the Orient Express in 1928. The result of his mission for introducing the ideas of Rotary into the Middle East was and still is very exciting.

So, according to the anecdotes, I shared with you at the beginning of my statement, it's up to us, it's up especially to European Rotary Clubs, to turn around again and to focus our Rotarian view not only on Turkey, but on any other country, that is affected by exceptional, political circumstances. Rotarians from such countries do not expect political solidarity, since politics is not the business of Rotary. They expect Rotarian solidarity. They expect us to support again their Rotarian life by carrying out common projects and exchange programs together, based on international friendship, mutual understanding and goodwill. In that sense not only Rotarians from the west, but also from the east, the north and from the south are called up to show Rotarian solidarity again.

Thank you and since today it's the Ramadan holiday: To all our Muslim friends and especially to all Turkish friends please let me say Happy Ramadan – İyi bayramlar!