

The Founding of Galatasaray University

Mr. Tolan's Presentation at the Galatasaray Day at the Senate of the Palais du Luxembourg

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1. The Birth of the Idea of Creating Galatasaray University

At the beginning of the 1980s, the overall situation of the Lycee left much to be desired in every respect. The buildings were in ruins, the facilities were dilapidated, and no laboratory was operational. An all-pervading mediocrity had descended upon the school. Classes were overcrowded, attendance was uncertain and impossible to control, and the boarding school, which had once played such an important role in shaping the community's collective memory, had been transformed into a low-class hotel. The authority of the administrative staff had been reduced to nothing. The quality of both Turkish and French teaching staff was far from satisfactory. The Alumni, accustomed to seeing *agrégés* or, at the very least, graduates (*licenciés*) serving as French teachers—many of whom had left a lifelong impression on them—were now shocked to see inexperienced young people arriving from France to teach (VSNs).

The Ministry of Education remained inactive in the face of such a situation, for reasons that were more or less ideological. For the left, Galatasaray was a privileged institution of the bourgeoisie; for the right, it was a vanguard of cultural imperialism and secularism. Although they remained admiring, and even somewhat envious, both sides converged in their negativity.

The Galatasaray Foundation was born under these circumstances and became the spark that initiated the revival. Its fundamental aim was to reorganize the community, to mobilize the energy of the Alumni, to modernize the infrastructure and the level of education at the Lycee, and to transmit this renewed dynamism to the students. Without the existence of the Foundation, and at least in the early stages, without the initiatives of the Ankara-based Alumni, we would not be where we are today.

It is true that a considerable number of Alumni did not see the need for the establishment of a university, and some were even openly opposed to it. For them, reforming the Lycee alone would have been sufficient. I remember a meeting held in the office of Mr. Yayla, who had become the Principal of the Lycee, where prominent Alumni, who were also distinguished professors, expressed their skepticism regarding the feasibility and success of such a project. There was also opposition to Francophonie, which was considered to be in decline in the contemporary world.

Who first put forward the idea of a university? Today, many Alumni claim to have been the first to introduce the idea. It is possible that the idea was raised and vaguely discussed during meetings among Alumni, but, to my knowledge, the first written document was the report I submitted to the Board of Directors of the Foundation, through Mr. İnan Kırac, at the end of 1986. This report was entitled "Goals and Strategies: The Greater Galatasaray." Later, there was also an article by Mr. Tolga, the current President of the University, published in the daily newspaper *Milliyet*. However, for the idea to become operational, it was necessary to wait for Mr. Kırca's return after being released from his diplomatic duties. This brings us to examine more closely the leading figures involved in this project.

2. The Main Actors or the Leading Figures

In all projects of this magnitude, individuals always play an important role. Who could deny the paramount importance of the efforts and contributions of His Excellency Kırca in the development and implementation of the project? Minister of Foreign Affairs, ambassador, member of parliament, constitutional law expert, specialist in international law, journalist and columnist, writer—so many talents and abilities are needed to define Mr. Kırca.

He was also a man of culture who was difficult to equal, a Cartesian thinker who, when it came to the Galatasaray project, sometimes pushed beyond the limits imposed by reality and ventured into utopian thinking. He displayed the same unwavering commitment to the interests of his country and his state—the nation-state to which he remained uncompromisingly devoted. He was a strategist, but also a formidable tactician. What particularly interests us here is that he was a passionate advocate of Francophonie, with an extraordinary command of the subtleties of vocabulary and grammar. He had great sympathy for French educational and political institutions, which he often cited as examples.

People generally feared and respected him more than they loved him. At times, they even called him a megalomaniac behind his back. But I, who accompanied him in the Galatasaray adventure from the very beginning and for more than ten years, often witnessed that behind this stern façade was a modest man, with all the simplicity that characterized him, including his gastronomic inclinations, through which he revealed himself to be a true connoisseur.

As for Mr. İnan Kırac, the person who revived the community through the establishment of the Galatasaray Foundation, it was he who introduced Mr. Kırca into the heart of the project. Mr. Kırac, a renowned businessman, extremely serious and even strict in professional matters, became overwhelmed by unconditional emotion whenever it concerned the colors of Galatasaray. As a representative of one of the country's major economic forces, his political connections facilitated the economic, but above all the bureaucratic, progress of the project.

Within the limits of the time allotted to me, I will simply mention here the invaluable contributions of Professor Yayla, who served as Principal of the Lycee for seven years and as President of the University for six years, as well as those I myself made. Much later, they were joined by Messrs. Tolga, Öktem, Çakalır, Oğuzman, Teziç, Zıllıoğlu and Insel.

3. Motivations (Turkish side-French side)

Apart from the individuals involved, it is also necessary to emphasize the reciprocal motivations behind the project.

On the Turkish side (by which I mean the Alumni), these motivations can essentially be summarized in three points. First, there was an awareness of the impossibility of sustaining the existence of a community based solely on a lycée, regardless of its historical significance and its social prestige rooted in tradition.

Second, there was a desire to protect the lycée, the source from which the community had emerged, from interventions of all kinds—primarily bureaucratic, and even political—by placing it within a relatively autonomous university legal framework.

Finally, there was a profound aspiration of Mr. Kırca, stemming from his analyses of the Turkish state. In his view, this new university should respond to the urgent needs of a declining and insufficiently qualified bureaucracy. He envisioned creating something equivalent to a combination of the ENA and the School of Magistracy. This institution would train senior officials

for the bureaucracy, diplomacy, finance, and the judiciary. Hence the first title given to the university's main branch: the "School of State Sciences." It was an ambition too grandiose to be realized in the Turkish context of the time.

On the French side, the main objective, I believe, was essentially to create a political endeavor based on a major cultural foundation, in a Middle Eastern geography where France had enjoyed considerable influence, as it had once done in Turkey itself. Certainly, there had already been some modest initiatives in Beirut and Cairo, and later in Bucharest, but all of these remained limited in scope.

Furthermore, there were already several French-language educational institutions, most of them former denominational lycées, in Istanbul. Having fallen into a certain level of mediocrity in terms of the quality of education, these lycées had already lost the influence they had enjoyed in the past, as social demand was increasingly shifting toward English-language institutions. The creation of a French-language university—the only one of its kind in Turkey—would give them new momentum by making them more attractive. This is why the French side strongly insisted on facilitating access to the University for students coming from these institutions, without requiring them to take the national entrance examination.

4. The Preparations, Negotiations and Content of the Franco-Turkish Agreement Establishing Galatasaray University

The preparatory work for the University began as early as 1988 in a rather run-down small office on the top floor of the Lycee, with Mr. Kirca and myself, naturally under the auspices of the Foundation, where we spent many long months. Mr. Yayla participated in the work to the extent that his duties as Principal allowed him to do so. Much later, Messrs. Tolga, Öktem, Çakalır and many others joined the team.

Realistically recognizing the impossibility of creating a university within a confusing political context, especially at a time when the Higher Education Council (YÖK) was restructuring universities, Mr. Kirca gave priority to convincing the French side of the feasibility and legitimacy of the project. It was therefore necessary to prepare a solid project, with the maximum possible level of detail, in order to secure French partnership, which had already successfully completed a century-long collaboration with the Lycée. The Turkish government could only be approached once this support had been secured.

During the preliminary work, committees appointed by the Foundation examined the issues in greater depth through various reports, including the one dated May 1990, which proposed 29 principles to be taken into consideration. Fundamental questions quickly emerged: Should the institution be a private or public university? Should political and legal sciences be accompanied by technological studies? Should it be called a university or a school? And many other questions...

Regarding the first question, we ultimately remained faithful to our historical mission and opted for a public institution, although a significant part of the Alumni community wished otherwise. Moreover, the opposite option would not have been possible because the Lycée had always operated within the public framework.

As for the second question, the French side strongly insisted on the inclusion of a technological branch.

The third question was even more complicated. If we used the label “University,” we would fall under the authority of YÖK, which at the time was highly centralized and authoritarian and did not tolerate innovation. Moreover, this institution prohibited the establishment of new public universities in Turkey’s three major cities. On the other hand, the label “School”—Mr. Kirca’s preferred term, which made him think of, or rather dream of, the French *Grandes Écoles*—sounded inappropriate in the Turkish context, as it evoked existing vocational schools that were regarded negatively by the general public.

Ultimately, I was the one who coined the somewhat ambiguous term “Integrated Higher Education Institution,” which encompassed (and here Mr. Kirca’s preferred term reappears) a Higher School of State Sciences and a Higher School of Industry and Technology.

The first School consisted of six departments (Law, Economics, Management, Public Administration, International Relations, and Communication), while the second consisted of two departments (Industrial Engineering and Computer Engineering). There would be two preparatory years for the first School: one year devoted to language training and a second year organized as a “language improvement and introduction to social sciences class,” certainly inspired by the French *hypokhâgne* system. An innovation in the Turkish context, this class enabled first-year students—particularly those studying Law, and later Philosophy or Sociology—to overcome the difficulties posed by the French language.

In both Schools, a common core curriculum was planned for the first and second years, so that students would not become lost too quickly in the complexities of overly early specialization. The final project submitted to the French authorities also included detailed educational programs at all levels, from the final years of the Lycee to the Master’s level. The content of higher education programs in France and other Francophone countries, as well as in other European countries and the United States, was studied in depth, requiring months of work.

Throughout this entire period, extending from 1989 until the signing of the agreement, official and unofficial contacts became increasingly frequent, particularly with the Directorate of Cultural Affairs (then DGRST) of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The delegations were led by Mr. Kirca, often accompanied by Messrs. Kırac, Okur, Vice-President of the Foundation, Yayla, and myself. The contribution of Turkish diplomats, which intensified as the signing of the agreement approached, greatly facilitated our task, because most of them were Galatasaray Alumni and allowed Mr. Kirca, one of the senior figures in the diplomatic profession, to take initiatives freely.

A small anecdote: I will always remember a meeting with the French delegation led by Ambassador Bayens of the Quai d’Orsay, held in preparation for drafting the agreement. Addressing Mr. Kirca, he said to him in a friendly and admiring tone: “But, Your Excellency, before we have even had time to finish discussing the previous article, you are already proposing the content of the next one. We simply cannot keep up with you.” May he rest in peace.

There remains one important point to clarify before the signing of the agreement. Among the relevant bureaucratic authorities, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave its full support to the project. The Ministry of National Education remained more or less neutral. It is not known how and why Mr. Kirca was able to obtain the approval of Mr. Doğramacı, who was then the leading authority over universities, before the latter consulted his decision-making bodies.

The agreement was signed on 14 April 1992 by Roland Dumas and Hikmet Çetin, the French and Turkish Ministers of Foreign Affairs, respectively, in the presence of the Presidents of the French and Turkish Republics, Mr. Mitterrand and Mr. Özal, during the former’s official visit to Turkey. The

agreement largely incorporated what has been described above, while also providing for the establishment of a joint committee, an academic council, and a consortium of cooperating universities.

5. Realization

First of all, it was urgently necessary to prepare the facilities in Ortaköy with a minimal infrastructure. With no real budget available at that time, Mr. Kırac personally took responsibility for this task. It was a heroic period during which a handful of people undertook all kinds of tasks, many of them difficult to imagine. Personally, I even had to listen patiently to the complaints of a French lecturer who reproached me for the condition of the sanitary facilities.

The issue of academic staff came next. We had rather naively assumed that there would be a large influx of applicants, particularly from former academics already working at other university institutions. This was not the case. It seems that titles such as “Integrated Higher Education Institution” or “School” made them hesitate, and even discouraged them. They did not see these titles as offering any guarantee of employment for the future. This influx would occur much later, once the train had been put on the tracks. We therefore had to begin primarily with young academics.

In 1994, a Turkish law established Galatasaray University, followed by an additional protocol to the Franco-Turkish agreement in 1995. It was therefore no longer possible to operate separately; the central authority, namely YÖK, would not allow any specific arrangements at the institutional level. The new law established five faculties: Law, Economics and Administrative Sciences, Communication, Engineering, and, obligatorily, Arts and Sciences, as well as two graduate schools. Apart from this, there were no major changes.

During this period, we also attempted to recruit, as our French partner had wished, students from the newly independent Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. This initiative proved unsuccessful and was not pursued further.

Furthermore, according to unofficial sources, the shift in French policy regarding Francophonie seriously threatened the Galatasaray project during the 1990s.

6. Successes

The Galatasaray project remains an important project for both the French and Turkish sides. “Galatasaray is a window open to the West,” said Tefik Fikret, the renowned poet and Principal of the Lycee at the beginning of the 20th century. Galatasaray remains the only university in Turkey to have been established through an international agreement among the more than one hundred public and private universities currently existing in the country.

The social demand for our university remains very strong. If we consider the results of the Central University Entrance Examination, our non-French-speaking students are ranked among the top five thousand out of 1.5 million candidates, that is, within the top 0.3%, regardless of the department or faculty they choose. Let us take the example of the Sociology Department, compared with around fifty other sociology departments existing in Turkish universities. From the very beginning, we ranked third, and shortly afterwards second, just behind the English-speaking Boğaziçi University.

What have we done that is so special in order to generate such privileged demand? Did we have internationally or even nationally renowned professors? Certainly not. In my opinion, there are three essential reasons explaining this strong demand:

- First, the fact that education is provided in a foreign language. This point deserves particular emphasis.

- Second, the content of the Galatasaray myth within the collective consciousness, according to which an institution carrying the Galatasaray name can only be excellent. Whether real or imagined, this is our historical heritage, whose resources we have not yet exhausted.

- Third, student numbers have remained at a reasonable level despite strong pressure from YÖK. This allows students to maintain more direct relationships with their instructors.

In relation to this strong demand, I would like to mention an anecdote. Mr. Kirca once told me that, during a diplomatic reception in Ankara, the American ambassador serving there in the 1990s (whose name I still remember, if you allow me) had told him, more or less: “But really, what is this Francophone university? Why spend so much effort establishing an enterprise whose consequences are bound to be insignificant?”

Could it be merely a coincidence that ten years later, during the NATO Heads of State Summit held in Istanbul, President Bush chose the campus of Galatasaray University as the place to deliver an internationally significant speech? Semiotics and semantics teach us that the choice of the location of an action always carries great importance!

Under the heading of successes, one could also mention the effective functioning of the bodies created by the agreement. The Joint Committee, as well as the Academic Council, which met twice a year during the first years, continue to hold their meetings regularly every year. The Consortium of Cooperating Universities carries out its functions, directly or indirectly, in a satisfactory manner. At the very least, it makes it possible to find French academics willing to spend time at Galatasaray, although ideally we would have wished for longer stays. It has also served as a key instrument enabling Turkish academics at the University to establish personal relationships with French scholars and, in turn, to go to France to teach.

We quickly succeeded in expanding the list of partner universities included in the Consortium, because here too there was significant demand. The number of university institutions increased from 7 in 1993 to 38 today, not including certain partial bilateral agreements. It was in this context that our Sociology Department was able to organize and host, in July 2008, the 18th Quadrennial Congress of the International Association of French-Speaking Sociologists, with nearly 1,350 participants coming from all parts of the Francophone world.

Our participation in the Erasmus programme was also a considerable success. Thanks to this programme, which allowed us to make international comparisons, we were able to objectively assess the quality of education provided at Galatasaray. Almost all of our students achieved very good results in their host institutions, mainly in France, but also in Belgium and Switzerland. The same situation was observed among students who went abroad for Master’s or doctoral studies.

In summary, viewed as a whole, the outcome—or, to put it in more human terms, the fruit of the project (the quality of the students)—appears to be satisfactory. However, we could have done much better. It should not be forgotten, as mentioned above, that our students are selected from among the best in Turkey, already at the time of admission. Yet our project is a project of

excellence. This leads us to examine the other side of the coin, namely the difficulties and problems encountered, without using terms such as “mistakes” or “failures.”

7. The Main Problems Encountered in the Development of the Project

Some of these problems originate from the internal functioning of the University, and sometimes even from that of the community, while others stem from the functioning of the Franco-Turkish partnership. Let us begin with the former.

First, there is the issue of a genuine university campus. Obviously, thanks to renovation, restoration, and construction work, the usable space at Ortaköy has more than tripled within a relatively short period of time, despite the legal restrictions concerning construction along the shores of the Bosphorus and the restoration of historic buildings. The project to build a campus in Riva on a 120-hectare site was quickly abandoned, for reasons that remain unknown to me to this day. Today, no one even speaks of a campus anymore.

Second, there are budgetary problems. Far from benefiting from privileges that would correspond to the special status of this university, Galatasaray University has received little or no benefit from the generosity of the State. For reasons related to management and accounting, the support provided by the Foundation remained modest, while needs continued to increase.

Third, we were unable to fully integrate the University into the Galatasaray community. To achieve this, we should have developed activity programs aimed at fostering this integration. This would have prevented certain misunderstandings that are observed today within the community—misunderstandings that sometimes have a direct impact on the functioning of the University.

Fourth, there are problems concerning the recruitment of academic staff. We have witnessed the appointment of non-French-speaking academics, and even administrators, fortunately not in large numbers. At the same time, those who, at least initially, did not believe in the necessity of creating a university and were even openly opposed to it, eventually obtained important positions. Still in this area, the creation of new academic positions is facing increasing resistance from YÖK, the central authority responsible for universities, for objective reasons (the limited number of students) but also for reasons that remain more or less implicit. However, the redistribution of existing positions within the University is not balanced. This imbalance benefits a single academic unit, namely the Faculty of Law, where the weekly teaching load of some academics amounts to only three hours.

Fifth, we changed the administrative regulations governing the University as a whole, or each of its faculties, too frequently, without allowing sufficient time to assess the results. The same observation, even more importantly, applies to the curricula specific to each field of study. In general, each new academic, failing to fully grasp the specificity of Galatasaray University, ends up imposing the habits and practices acquired from their former institution.

Sixth, the changes affecting certain texts of fundamental importance require closer examination, because they lead us to the heart of the main problem: that of Francophonie. First, there is the abolition of the second preparatory year, known (as I have already mentioned) as the “Language Improvement and Introduction to Social Sciences Class.” This abolition allowed students coming from French-language high schools to enter directly into the first year of the undergraduate program. However, we know very well the level of their linguistic proficiency, as well as that of non-French-speaking students after one year of preparatory study. They will eventually lead Turkish lecturers teaching first-year courses to deliver their classes in Turkish, particularly in fields

such as philosophy, economics, law, or sociology. These lecturers will eventually succumb to this temptation, as has already been observed in practice.

Another example concerning institutional regulations relates to doctoral studies in Law and Management. Knowledge of the French language is no longer a required condition at the time of admission to doctoral programs.

In short, as the saying goes, we are in the process of cutting off the branch on which we are sitting. This brings us to the crucial issue of Francophonie, which falls within the scope of the Franco-Turkish partnership.

Even before these changes, a significant proportion of courses, varying according to the faculty or department, were being taught only partially in French, or simply not in French at all. I often see Erasmus students coming from France searching for a course taught in French, even when such a course remains marginal to their academic interests. Yet the founding agreement that gave birth to this university clearly stipulates that teaching must be conducted in French. The exceptions are explicitly defined.

It was first the legal scholars who circumvented this exception clause by interpreting the term “Turkish law” in the broadest possible sense. Since then, this departure from the text of the agreement has spread to other fields of study. Francophonie, as is said in private conversations, now concerns only a few departments, including Economics and Sociology. From the perspective of a certain generation of older academics, one may perhaps understand this lax attitude. Teaching in French is highly demanding and requires additional preparation; yet there is no corresponding financial compensation. In the early years of the University, there was at least a moral motivation: being part of a project of excellence. Over time, this motivation gradually gave way to fatigue, accompanied by a certain degree of bitterness, the analysis of which would be far too complex to undertake here.

As if the two partners had anticipated this evolution, they initially agreed on the presence of a “core group” of French academics within each teaching unit. This would have consisted of a core of two professors or associate professors. However, this agreement in principle remained merely an aspiration, was never included in an official document, and was eventually forgotten. Today, there are only a few isolated positions here and there, while the essential contribution of French academics consists of one- or two-week missions, mainly serving to enhance the institution’s public image.

It is true that much water has flowed under the bridge since the establishment of the University. The Directorate of Cultural Affairs had to undertake more or less similar projects in Central and Eastern Europe, especially following the most recent enlargement of the European Union, while at the same time complying with recommendations concerning budgetary restrictions. Indeed, even before the recent crisis, I often heard French officials make remarks such as: “Listen, Mr. Tolan, do you know how much Galatasaray costs the French budget?” or “We cannot do more, given the extent of the budgetary restrictions.” The term “budgetary restrictions” has never disappeared from the discourse of French representatives. Should I say: “They should have thought about it before the wedding!”?

Joking aside, over time, the French side has become accustomed to thinking and acting more in budgetary terms than in academic or educational terms.

8. Conclusion and wishes

I would like to say a few words by way of conclusion and express some wishes for the future. First of all, it is necessary to briefly emphasize that the future of the Lycee is more or less assured thanks to the existence of the University. Order has been restored, the quality of education is satisfactory, and the infrastructure has been renovated.

The next issue concerns the question of the glass being half full or half empty with regard to the University.

If the quality of our students and graduates appears to be above the Turkish average, this is because:

1. The Turkish university system is immersed in a state of obvious mediocrity; therefore, our assessment can only be relative.
2. Our recruitment is based on selecting among the best students in Turkey. Consequently, the half-full glass should not lead us to excessive optimism.

We must also ask ourselves the following question: Where do we stand today in achieving our initial objectives—certainly somewhat idealized—that emotionally motivated us at the beginning, particularly with regard to the career prospects of our graduates? It would appear that only a very small number of them have chosen to become “servants of the State” in fields such as diplomacy, public administration, or finance, while the vast majority have turned toward the private sector. What a contradiction with the “Higher School of State Sciences,” the first and dominant designation of our University!

I fear that, in the future, Galatasaray University may fulfill the role of the Higher School of Commerce, also Francophone (what a coincidence!), during the last decade of the declining Ottoman Empire—a school responsible for training and providing middle-level executives for European banks and companies. Would this be excessive pessimism?

Finally, we have described at length above the actual decline of Francophonie at the University, which remains the fundamental problem. Should we continue to pursue the ideal of an institution of excellence, or should we be content with what appears to have already been achieved, that is, with the half-full glass of water? If the answer is affirmative, a long-term collective effort must be undertaken. I continue to maintain my hope for this additional effort, which would be carried out jointly by the four partners: the French side, the Turkish State, the University administration, and the Foundation.

Thank you for listening to me with such attention and patience.

