

A Would-Be Role Model Hits a Dead End

Criticism of First Turkish-German Minister Grows

By *Anna Reimann*

Aygül Özkan was meant to be the hope of a new generation of politicians in Germany. In April she became the first politician with German-Turkish roots to become a minister in a state government. But her first months in office have proven to be a disaster and what could have been a public relations coup for her conservative party has backfired.

Aygül Özkan, 38, was meant to be the next great hope for a new generation of German politicians. In April, she became the first person of Turkish origin to be appointed as a government minister at the state level. Indeed, it was rare that a politician had been given as much advance praise or had been saddled with such great expectations.

"She's a major role model, with her competence and her character and she will get off to a good start and do a good job," Christian Wulff, then the state governor of Lower Saxony and now Germany's president, said at the time. He said she would also help to "prevent parallel societies" from forming, a reference to **immigrant ghettos** many politicians fear are developing in German cities.

At the time of her appointment as social minister, Özkan was feted not just by her party, Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), but across the political spectrum. But Özkan's time in office so far has been marred by controversy.

Only days before taking up her job, Özkan said in an interview that "Christian symbols" -- specifically crucifixes, "do not belong in state-run schools." She added that Muslim headscarves don't, either -- positions that had even been backed by Germany's highest court. But pressure from within her party was tremendous and Wulff reprimanded his protégé, who in turn apologized.

Later, Özkan sparked controversy because of employee contracts she had signed as a manager at TNT, a postal services company. At the company, some workers received wages of only €7.50 (\$9.80) per hour. Employment lawyers accused her of having created "working conditions that were at the legal limits." The politician responded by describing the criticism as "absurd" and "unfounded."

A Controversial Charter for the Media

And last week, she caused an outcry when she called on journalists to sign a so-called "media charter for Lower Saxony," in which they were supposed to agree to common standards for reporting about integration efforts in the state.

Those who signed the charter would be obligated to report on the facts and challenges of integration and to "support the integration process in Lower Saxony in the long term" as well as to "initiate and attend to projects" that further that goal. She also demanded that journalists use "culturally sensitive language."

The move drew criticism not only from journalists, but also from members of the political opposition as well as her own party. The state's new governor, David McAllister, who himself is the child of a Scottish soldier who was stationed in Berlin and married a German, made clear that media policies in the state would be determined by the government and not by the social ministry. "We have all learned from this and we will do everything we can to ensure that this mistake is not repeated," McAllister said, adding that press freedom was of particular importance to him.

Meanwhile, the media policy spokesperson for the opposition Social Democrats in the state, Daniela Behrens, said last week: "I am completely bewildered that a minister would dare to propose something like that. No representative of the media would sign that. It's censorship." While it was desirable for the media to boost coverage of integration issues, "that has to be achieved through political efforts," she said. "The media can only report about things that are happening."

A representative of the German Journalists' Association in the state described Özkan's initiative as superfluous, noting that similar language was already contained in the journalists' code of conduct in the state.

Two Major Gaffes after only Months in Office

Özkan then abandoned her plans. It was the second major gaffe in her short term in office. Indeed, the impression she has given so far has bordered on disastrous. Özkan is currently on vacation and has refused to grant interviews. So what has gone wrong with Germany's first minister of Turkish origin?

Those who have met her describe a contented woman who is both courageous and engaged. A woman who doesn't hesitate to state her opinion, but also one who is lacking in experience -- both in terms of politics and the media. Prior to her appointment as social minister in Lower Saxony, Özkan had been a member of the city parliament in Hamburg where, political contemporaries say, she mostly stayed in the background. She was considered a hard worker, professional and always well-prepared.

Her naming as part of Lower Saxony's state government was meant to send an important message -- that the glass ceiling for Germans with immigrant roots is slowly retracting, and that migrants, too, have hopes of making it to the top.

For Wulff and Özkan, however, it was a move wrought with risks. The fact that she was the first German with foreign roots to be appointed to such a high office also meant that the German-Turkish minister would be the subject of additional attention -- even more so given that she was also a member of the CDU, a party not always known to be the friendliest towards immigrants. After all, Özkan was supposed to give the party of more cosmopolitan face, but also to show that immigrants could share the CDU's more conservative view of the world.

Initial Political Pride

Following her appointment, Özkan became the subject of pride for politicians of Turkish origin in all of Germany's major political parties. Today, however, disillusionment is spreading.

"One would expect a minister to have positions she advocated and doesn't always veer away from," Mehmet Kilic, a politician also of Turkish extraction who is a member of the German federal parliament with the Green Party, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. He said Özkan was creating the impression she wanted to be a minister at any price. And Serkan Tören of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) said he was angered by Özkan's media charter initiative, saying it was "unacceptable" to deal with the media in that way. He said it looked like she was trying to force constraints on the work of journalists.

The head of the Turkish Community in Germany (TGD) organization, Kenan Kolat, also said he had been unimpressed with Özkan's work up until now. "Özkan is a competent woman, but the impression she is creating is less than optimal." Kolat, a member of the center-left Social Democratic Party, advised his CDU colleague: "She needs to coordinate better. It doesn't appear that her advisors are doing their jobs well."

More importantly, Özkan may show that political parties aren't doing themselves or immigrants any favors when they appoint people to office who have no experience. In neighboring North Rhine-Westphalia, the new governor, Hannelore Kraft, first planned to include a German-Turk in her cabinet -- but she later abandoned the idea after determining that the candidate was too inexperienced.

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