

More than ever, Turkey and EU need each other

Over the years, EU-Turkey relations have become stronger, helping the country's transformation through a number of landmark reforms. They have recently gained a new dimension with the start of visa dialogue. With its large, dynamic economy, Turkey is also key business partner for the EU: our Customs Union has been a success story for many European and Turkish companies.

Close ties with the EU continue to inspire developments and debates in the country. Take the current efforts to settle the Kurdish issue, where the alignment with European standards is bearing fruit: a historic process has now started, raising hopes of putting an end to the deadly cycle of violence. Or the individual complaint procedure, also inspired by EU models: since its introduction the Constitutional Court has taken key decisions protecting fundamental rights, proving the resilience of the country's constitutional system.

The European Commission has always recognised such achievements, giving credit where credit is due. But it is also its obligation towards a candidate country to highlight areas where substantial reforms are needed. This is also in the interest of the candidate country as a guideline in its own reform efforts.

The lack of transparent investigations following corruption allegations, the amendments to the Law on High Council of Judges and Prosecutors, massive reassignments of police officers, judges and prosecutors - all this has raised concerns over the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers. The blanket ban on social media – eventually corrected by the Constitutional Court raises serious concern in any democratic society.

I firmly believe that the EU accession process offers the best avenue for these issues to be addressed. Therefore I continue to advocate for the start of formal negotiations in the area of the rule of law as soon as possible. In the meantime, a close dialogue in this area must be resumed between Turkey and the EU, not least to prevent hasty adoption of laws in blatant contradiction with European standards. Turkey must strengthen its own capacity to bring its legislation in line with European standards. By strengthening our close engagement, we can tackle the difficult issues together. Equally important is to strengthen the dialogue between the government and Turkey's vibrant civil society: issues of fundamental importance for Turkish democracy need to be decided in the spirit of inclusiveness and consensus.

EU-Turkey relations conceal a huge, untapped potential in many areas. The situation in our shared neighbourhood - where Turkey plays a key stabilising role as recently demonstrated by its massive support to Syrian, Kurdish and Iraqi refugees - deserves a strengthened dialogue on foreign policy. Our cooperation in the energy sector is still far beneath what is needed. Finally, our companies could profit more from trade, supported by enhanced economic dialogue and a robust business platform bringing together European and Turkish business communities.

We share common challenges in the region and beyond: In the spirit of the positive agenda, we need to tackle them constructively. More than ever, Turkey and the EU need each other.

Štefan Füle

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy

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