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Turkey belongs to Europe

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

TUSIAD: on the occasion of the award of the Bosphorus Prize for European Understanding

Ankara, 19th January 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My first visit to Ankara was only in 1999. I came along together with J. Solana, late at night, in a plane from Helsinki to inform the Turkish government that the European Council has decided to accept Turkey as a full fledged candidate country to the EU, on equal footing with 12 other European countries striving for EU membership. We flew back to Helsinki to inform the 15 heads of States and governments about the positive response of Turkey and this was the start of an historical process.

Now, almost 7 years later, the EU and Turkey are already negotiating because Turkey, the Turkish nation has undergone decisive changes and already substantially changed compared to 1999 or even 2002 and in doing so the prospects of Turkish people have improved.

Some analysts call it a velvet revolution what has happened in Turkey within only a couple of years. To be fair – the credit for such a velvet revolution goes to Turkey itself – to its far-sighted political leadership, to the business community, including TUSIAD, to all people working courageously for a full fledged democracy, where human rights are respected and minority rights are guaranteed. It was not the EU, not the Commission, not me who can claim responsibility for that. What we could claim for ourselves is that we have offered helping hands for the ongoing reform process in Turkey: through partnership, through fair play and by placing trust in the Turkish nation's capability to change its future to the better, being convinced that Turkey as a European country shares the lessons of European history.

What are these lessons?

Some 60 years ago, a large part of the European continent has been wounded by the greatest tragedy of mankind so far – the Second World War -a consequence of German fascism. The political project of European integration started in the middle of destruction, with the bitter heritage of millions of deaths, millions of deported people, the near loss of the European Jewish community, in an environment of hate and guilt and not to forget that new dividing lines between East and West were looming on the horizon. In these bitter days, when European integration started to give the Western part of Europe a stable future, it was beyond any doubt that Turkey belonged to the free part of Europe, when it joined the Council of Europe in 1949.

Soon in March 2007, we will celebrate 50 years of the Treaty of Rome, which paved the way for peace, stability and equal chances, between meanwhile 27 European nations, which are bound together by the same values, the same rights, the same duties, the same political goals.

Indeed European integration has already profoundly changed the face of a large part of the European continent for better, since the break down of the Iron curtain will now help to heal the wounds of the European division. However the European mission, enshrined in the Treaties, to overcome the divisions of Europe has not yet been completed – the doors of the European Union are not artificially closed. On the contrary – the doors have been kept open, for the countries of the Western Balkans as well as for Turkey, however with a clear and non negotiable condition. Who ever wishes to cross the doorstep of the EU must fully subscribe to the main lesson of European history – that lasting peace, stability and welfare need democracy, the rule of law, the full respect of human rights, the protection of minorities and a commitment to good neighbourly relations. This is at the heart what we are expecting from Turkey- this is what the European Union has committed to support when it comes to its relationship to Turkey.

I wish to wholeheartedly restate the case for Turkish membership of the European Union. We are not contemplating an act of charity or doing Turkey some kind of favour. This historical project is in our mutual interest because it responds to today's and tomorrow's pressing challenges. In the world of the 21st century, the EU needs Turkey as an anchor and even exporter of stability and democracy in the most unstable and troubled regions of the world, where there is so much at stake at this juncture.

The press and television remind us everyday of our common foreign policy challenges: whether on Iran, Iraq, Middle East, the energy crisis or the overall dialogue with the Muslim world, Turkey can play a special role and enhance the capacity of the European Union to contribute to stabilising the region. Turkish diplomacy is very active in the Middle East while Turkish armed forces work side by side with EU Member States armed forces in Lebanon, Afghanistan and the Balkans.

Economic interdependence is another key force driving EU-Turkey relations. The EU is by far Turkey's main trading partner and Turkey on the other hand ranks seventh in the list of the EU's trading partners. EU investments in Turkey also grew significantly over the years. At present, there are more than 7500 companies established in Turkey with EU capital. This month we are talking of additional investment in Turkey of more than 1.1 billion € by Vodafone and Renault. We are clearly coming to a situation where, clearly, tens of thousands of jobs in the EU depend on economic growth in Turkey, while job creation in Turkey depends also on the fast growing interdependence with the EU economy.

Energy is another key area in which our cooperation with Turkey is set to grow in the coming years. Turkey is turning into a major energy hub for provisions to Europe from Central Asia, the Middle East and even Northern Africa. The completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline this year was a major step towards increasing security of the supply and mobilizing of the Caspian oil reserves.

Last but not least, Turkey is an essential partner for the EU in dealing with drugs and human trafficking, organized crime and illegal migration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe is our common destiny. Kemal Atatürk saw in Europe Turkey's future, the key to modernity, influence and prosperity. This strategic vision has not changed since then.

First and foremost membership of the EU means higher democratic standards and human rights for all Turks. Turkey has made impressive progress on this front in recent years. However we need to continue to work together on issues such as freedom of expression, women's rights, trade union rights, cultural rights and civilian control of the military. EU Membership also means more welfare and prosperity and means joining forces to address global threats and challenges.

For all these reasons, I could not agree more with Foreign Minister Gül when he says that reforms in Turkey are made by Turks for Turkey's sake.

Turkey can rely on European assistance in its own reform process. We are offering significant financial support. For example last year, pre-accession programmes funded by the Commission and managed by the Turkish authorities passed the threshold of € 500 million per year in non reimbursable grants while the loan approvals by the European Investment Bank have passed the € 2 billion mark.

The EU-funded programmes in Turkey are relevant for all sectors: infrastructure, environment, legislative and economic reform, business development, education, health, reform of the judiciary, civil society, culture. During last 6 years EU support was quadrupling. And what is more further significant increases are planned for the years to come. We are offering human support and advice. It is also not by chance that the biggest single-country Delegation of the European Commission in the world is in Ankara.

We are ready to listen, we are ready to cooperate and to work towards a better understanding between the EU and Turkey. We need to focus on our overall relationship, over and above the specific issues and the temporary problems that occupy the headlines of the media. It is crucial that the impressive vigour and vitality of our ongoing relationship be fully recognised. Interesting opportunities exist in the cultural field for example, an essential ingredient in the process towards better mutual understanding: take for example the *rendez-vous* of Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture, an event which should be seen as a great opportunity to represent Turkey in all its rich diversity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will however also not shy away from addressing tonight the recent difficulties in our relations, which reached their climax last December when the EU Council decided on how to continue accession negotiations with Turkey. I don't intend to launch yet another controversy on the reasons which led to this decision. I am aware of the disagreement on the conditions for the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement, especially regarding the access to Turkish ports and airports of vessels and planes from the Republic of Cyprus. I am also aware of the frustration this decision triggered here in Turkey.

However, the decision of the EU of 11 December keeps the doors open and allows progress in the negotiations.

In fact already before the end of last year the EU signalled its intention to open the "Enterprise and Industrial Policy" chapter and now we look forward to receiving Turkey's negotiating position.

I wish to flag that the Council also called for resumption without delay of EU efforts aiming to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community, in particular the draft regulation which, if adopted, would allow for direct trade between the Turkish Cypriots and the rest of the EU.

Through a statement by the Finnish Presidency, the EU also emphasised the urgent need for progress towards a comprehensive solution of the Cyprus issue under UN auspices, which becomes urgent indeed.

It is in the EU's interest to see a reunification of the island and the end of the over 40 years-old conflict on European soil. Such division is unacceptable within our European Union, which is founded on the principles of peace, reconciliation and human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have, I believe, set out a series of arguments for Turkish membership of the European Union which are grounded in today's reality and which will stand the test of time. Moreover I have shown how the process, for all its complexities, is moving forward, often with impressive results.

It is however also a matter of fact that wrong perceptions about the reality in Turkey create public fears in a number of European societies. That cannot be neglected. But fear does not take away our responsibilities. Political leadership means that we all have to stand up and fight for our European vision. Leadership is not based on opinion polls. It is based on clear views, strong convictions, character and courage. Political leaders in Europe must explain, again and again, that Turkey is the real test case for a fundamental question: will Europe ever be able to play a role as a global actor, to accept global responsibility and to contribute to the creation of a peaceful world, sustainable development, social justice and decent living conditions for people where ever they live. Only a strong European Union that joins its forces and speaks with one voice can make such a contribution. If we Europeans don't do it, others will do it, and we will have to accept what they decide.

Turkey's membership will make the European Union a truly global actor and that may be another reason why some people are hesitant. Let us not allow them to dodge the realities of the 21st century. As a strong and united Europe we can meet the challenges of our century. As a group of nations driven by fear and complacency we cannot.

Turkey will make Europe stronger. The membership of Turkey in the EU would demonstrate that a country with a Muslim population can fully share our European values and objectives. I do not believe in the inevitability of a clash of civilisations. I was very encouraged by the recent visit of Pope Benedict in Turkey and the way how he identified the European vocation of Turkey.

We should always tell people, particularly those who have still questions and doubts what the result of the accession process of Turkey will be. A Turkey that eventually joins the European Union will not be the same country that it was before the process started. It will be a country with a full fledged democracy where the rule of law and human rights are fully respected and where minorities will be protected and will have equal opportunities. The European Union as well as Turkey would make a serious mistake if we would let such an opportunity slip away.

We should also be frank and highlight that an eventual membership of Turkey in the EU will definitely change the EU as all previous accessions have contributed to the development of the EU. It is our responsibility as policy makers to demonstrate in the negotiations that Turkey will be not a threat but an awaited and welcome asset.

To that end we need to unite our forces, more then ever, and to involve the broader society. I think in particular of business people, of academics, the media, people of culture, the civil society, who can bring different, wider perspectives to the debate on Turkey's accession to the EU and help changing wrong perceptions.

In conclusion, despite the current, difficult circumstances, allow me to express my strong belief in our common endeavour. Is there another choice than European today's world? My clear answer is 'no'.

In this context, I would like to welcome the renewed commitment of the Turkish government to continue with determination on the reform track. Reforms are not needed to "please the EU or some so-called Brussels bureaucrats", as one can read in some misleading comments. Yes, they are key for meeting the accession criteria. But the objectives of the criteria coincide with the objectives of these reforms, that is first and foremost to increase the living standards of the Turkish citizens, reinforce human rights and governance and create a more competitive and economically strong Turkey.

The case for Turkey's EU accession is and remains strong, even more today. The accession process with Turkey will call for other difficult moments and difficult decisions. At each of these moments, I trust that Turkey and the European Union will keep in mind the key strategic vision which is the basis of this project that is peace, security, democracy and prosperity in Europe.

I am more than grateful to be honoured today and I wish to share this prize with all people in Turkey who share the European values and goals. Tolerance is a key for Europe, for its presence, for its future.

It was not accidentally that the first theatre play after the Second World War at the Deutsche Theater in Berlin was "Nathan der Weise" of Lessing. Why - because it is a centrepiece of the European Enlightenment– a call for tolerance. In the famous parable of the rings Nathan compares the 3 world religions and refuses any ranking but spoke in favour of tolerance and relied on the individual contribution of all 3 world religions in order to give this world a more human face.

I believe the ultimate accession of Turkey to the European Union will strengthen tolerance in Europe and world wide and will be understood as a strong signal that Europe is mastering its diversity and turns it into opportunities to the benefit of mankind...