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I will in a few days arrive in Turkey for my first official visit since the beginning of my mandate as European Commissioner for Enlargement. **Bringing Turkey closer to the EU is amongst my highest priorities** as Commissioner. As I said during my hearings in the European Parliament in January, asked if I could imagine a country like Turkey in the EU, my answer remains the same: yes, I can.

Turkey has always been a key country for the EU due to its location, its size and its strategic orientation. Its European vocation has been confirmed over and over again, through its membership in many European organisations, as well as through the choices of its political leaders over time. EU accession offers the most promising and efficient prospect for continuing the modernisation of Turkey, which Kemal Atatürk began in 1923. And what better proof that Turkey is in Europe than the selection of its beautiful Istanbul as the 2010 European Capital of Culture?

Our relations do not start from scratch. They already made history. There is now free circulation of goods between Turkey and the EU, bilateral trade has tripled, and today the EU is by far Turkey's biggest trading partner, while Turkey is the 7th most important trade partner of the EU. Mergers and acquisitions involving EU and Turkish companies have also increased dramatically, allowing our economies to become ever more closely interdependent. In a sense, Turkish economic competitiveness has become closely intertwined with European competitiveness. But even more could be done to make sure that Turkey's aspiration to join the EU could become one day reality. And the Commission is fully behind this objective. We need to pursue this objective credibly and consistently.

I am aware of voices both in the EU and in Turkey who question this course of action. But **I have no doubt that honouring our commitments is the right thing to do**, so that our

engagement remains credible. Credibility needs building with concrete actions on both sides. We will continue our cooperation programme and support the ambitious reforms undertaken in Turkey. We need to continue working together on the negotiations, opening new chapters as well as making progress in the chapters that have already been opened. We need to overcome the deadlock over Cyprus. With the ongoing negotiations in Cyprus there is a unique opportunity to find a comprehensive settlement to reunify the island. I will use all the instruments at my disposal to support a solution to this problem.

I am convinced that we can turn this around, from a vicious circle into a virtuous one, provided there is political will of all actors involved. I know it takes courage and determination to do so, but I believe none is in short supply in Turkey. We have seen it already in the constructive role that Turkey played in the efforts towards a normalisation of relations with Armenia. We fully support this process and stand ready to extend technical and financial assistance to help implementing the steps agreed between the two countries, including assistance related to the opening of the border.

Turkey is strategically important not only for its regional leadership, but also as the everyday demonstration that democracy, Islam and secularism can work together. We have a large Muslim minority living in the EU, practising freely their religion and acting as responsible citizens in democratic countries. Many of them are already EU citizens. The EU is not defined by its religions, but rather by its respect for the fundamental freedoms that make the fabric of the European societies, including freedom of religion. .

As a country aspiring to join the EU, **Turkey should make sure that its citizens enjoy the same freedoms in Turkey as they do in the EU.** New laws reinforcing the rights of citizens, workers and consumers, improving sound management of public funds or food safety, are needed not for the sake of the EU and of progress in the negotiations process, but first and foremost for the sake of Turkey's citizens. These reforms are demanding and difficult. They require open and frank discussions. They also require the capacity to have real dialogue and a spirit of compromise between the different segments of society and the political parties. Coming from the Czech Republic which joined the European Union only six years ago, I can assure you that this will be worthwhile, as it is the key to success in the accession negotiations.

