

Interview with Commissioner Füle published in Milliyet Daily on 7 November (unofficial translation)

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Füle: The 2023 debate distracts our attention

EU Commissioner for Enlargement Stephan Füle provided exclusive statements to Milliyet. *“I believe the 2023 debate distracts our attention and moves us away from the essential matters. Turkey will undertake its responsibilities. However you can not do it by constantly bothering about the dates and adopting the rhetoric of ‘we deserve it’. Imagine Turkey fulfilling its obligations stemming from additional protocols concerning Cyprus. This would provide a leap forward in the negotiations process.”*

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EU COMMISSIONER FÜLE RESPONDED TO THE 2023 TARGET ERDOĞAN PUT FORTH FOR EU MEMBERSHIP

No Need to Bother about Artificial Calendars

According to Füle the best and fastest way to provide a new impetus to relations is to focus on the main issues which disturb the process rather than “creating alternatives, bothering about artificial calendars and become obsessed with certain rhetoric.”

The EU, has been heavily in the agenda for the last one month like in the good old days. We have discussed the current state of play, from the Progress Report bombarded with criticism and thrown to the floor in a TV show to the 2023 target put forth in Germany by PM Erdoğan, with the most competent authority of the issue, EU’s Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Füle.

- Date for membership is back in the agenda after a long break. Turkey’s membership target was initially 2014 and now it is latest by 2023. Do you think it is a realistic target?

- I believe the 2023 debate distracts our attention and moves us away from the essential matters. I do not think that discussing about realistic or less realistic dates would remove the current barriers. Moreover, I believe that it would make things even more complicated since people may start thinking that the main problem is the date for membership rather than the real barriers before the target. Imagine Turkey fulfilling its obligations stemming from additional protocols concerning Cyprus. Right after that the Commission would ask for de-freezing of 8 chapters, which would provide a leap forward in the negotiations process. I believe this sort of an improvement would unequivocally benefit the negotiation process much more than the artificial debates over dates.

BAD FOR BOTH SIDES

- Then you are not concerned about the message ‘they would lose Turkey’ added to 2023 target?

- We would lose Turkey only if she does not focus on the barriers on the way, which would be bad for both sides. This process is to the benefit of both the EU and Turkey. We have common interests. Creating an additional agenda that would move us away

from the primary issues is of no use. The main issue is the negotiation process. Frankly speaking accession goal is in place however it is difficult to talk about a process. Positive agenda was launched in order to eliminate this gap to a certain extent. Focusing on artificial agendas rather than the real one is not the fastest way to overcome the problems.

- Then let's leave 2023 aside and focus on 2013. Turkey anticipates to achieve significant progress in negotiations in 2013. What is your expectation?

- I totally share this anticipation. Both sides are required to take strong and tangible steps. However there's a dangerous tendency which we should be ware of; the risk of becoming obsessed with the rhetoric of 'we deserve it'. We deserve 'visa exemption', 'we deserve a different approach in Customs Union', 'We deserve this, we deserve that'. I do not understand how this sort of an approach would contribute to elimination of problems.

Creating alternative issues, alternative problems, alternative agendas is one of the biggest barriers before Turkey. If our counterpart constantly adopts the rhetoric of 'we deserve this, we deserve that,' no matter how we try to launch 'positive agenda', 'super agenda', 'super positive agenda' this can not be expected to yield any 'super positive' results.

ITS TONE DOES NOT MATTER

- The last Progress Report has resounded a lot. Why did the report have a harsher tone than the previous ones?

- The important part of the report for us is not whether it has a harsh or soft tone but whether it is objective or not. We had to reflect the facts that no chapter could have been opened for two years, Turkey did not want to cooperate with the current term presidency and Turkey did not take necessary steps about freedom of expression and media, which are critically important issues, although we constantly underlined it. These emphases may have made the tone harsher, but as I said, what is essential for us is to become objective.

- Do you think that the report was taken seriously in Turkey?

- I hope the report is taken seriously both in Turkey and by EU Members, because we have certain appeals addressed to the Member States as well in the recommendations and conclusions. The current deadlock is an issue not only for Turkey but also for member states. Putting the negotiation process back on track and EU's continued role as a driving force for reforms is as much in the interest of EU as in that of Turkey. Let's not think that we don't have a key open the current lock. We have two keys to turn around the deadlock. One of these (keys) is in Turkey's hand while the other is in some EU states' hand. I won't get into the discussion as to which key is going to open the lock more easily. Both sides should do their share of work.

SOUTHERN CYPRUS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH IT

- Did the Term President (Southern Cyprus) play a negative role in the negative tone of the report?

- Member States or the Term Presidency do not have any role whatsoever about the report. The full task and responsibility of drafting the report completely lie with the EU Commission. Member States or the Term President was not consulted when the

Report was being drafted or finalized. Former, current or next Term President did not and won't have any influence over the Progress Report.

There is a credibility issue

- Are you aware that, at this current stage, EU lost all its credibility and influence in Turkey?

- Yes, we are going through a credibility problem, but this is the case for both sides. This problem is there because of Turkey's failure to do its share of work during the negotiation process and efforts of some countries at EU side to change the rule of the game at mid time. We, as the Commission, are going to pursue our resolved efforts to create opportunities to meet Turkey's expectations and to put relations back on track. And Turkey is going to do its share of work. This is the best way of regaining credibility. You cannot achieve this by lingering on dates or by constantly resorting to the rhetoric "we deserve it". We mutually deserve much better.