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"Turkey: Master of the Straits, Master of its Destiny"

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

Turkish Grand National Assembly

Ankara, 10 April 2008

Deputy Speaker,
Prime Minister
Honourable Members,
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to speak before you, in this assembly which played such an historic role for your country. The great Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded it to give the Turkish people a legitimate forum for discussing the future, and for transforming Turkey in a modern Republic. In the face of our ever-changing world and the growing challenges of this century, this responsibility – your responsibility – has even increased.

On this occasion, I want on behalf of the European Commission and on my own behalf to express my respect for this great country and my confidence in our joint future.

Forty years ago, during his visit to Turkey, the French President General de Gaulle said : "Here is Turkey, master of the Straits...guardian of several of the doors through which, in this region of the world, goes peace, through which can go war, and, as a consequence, holder of great and fruitful opportunities, but also exposed to the worst possibilities".

General de Gaulle had indeed grasped Turkey's key position and value for Europe. And, as master of the straits and master of its destiny, Turkey has chosen a European future.

The history of relations between Europe and Turkey is indeed the history of an ancient and lasting interdependence guided by strategic stakes, trade and cultural exchanges. The Ottoman Empire was always a key actor in European politics. Its role on our continent was self-evident, including for the world of arts: in his giant painting The Wedding Feast at Cana in 1563, the famous Venetian painter Paolo Veronese depicted among the guests around the table the main European leaders of the time. Suleiman the Magnificent sits naturally at the same table as Emperor Charles V and François I of France, amongst others.

Turkey's influence fluctuated across the centuries, but it remained an integral part of Europe's geopolitical scene.

After World War II, Turkey took part in the building up of European cooperation. Turkey was a founding member of the Council of Europe. As a member of NATO, Turkey is a cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic defence system.

In 1963 an Association agreement was signed with the European Community. It was followed by the Customs Union in 1995. 10 years later, on 3rd October 2005, the European Union and Turkey started accession negotiations. But as in every negotiation, the outcome cannot be guaranteed in advance.

In other words our relationship has been, ever since the founding of the European Community, one of constant deepening, culminating in the current accession negotiations. Since 2005 negotiations have progressed well. I am impressed by Turkey's efforts to adapt to European Union legislation. Work is ongoing in all areas and six chapters in the negotiations have been opened for formal negotiations. I am confident that there will be substantial further progress during this year, with the opening of more chapters.

The accession process is underpinned by a strong common interest. We are together contributing to a safer world. For our part, we appreciate Turkey's participation and support to a number of EU missions, from Bosnia-Herzegovina and

Kosovo to the Congo. The professionalism and competence of the Turkish military are a great asset. Turkey also offers a deep knowledge of and engagement with the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia.

This engagement demonstrates once again that Turkey is a key country for Europe, and the end of the Cold War did not change this fundamental feature of our relationship. On the contrary, the fall of the Iron Curtain brought about new, and more complex challenges in which your country remains a central player.

On almost all of the major topics which have been dominating international relations for years, such as the Balkans, the Middle East crisis, Iran, Iraq, the energy crisis or the overall dialogue with the Muslim world, Turkey plays an important role as an example of stability and democracy in one of the most unstable regions of the world.

Turkey demonstrates that a secular, democratic republic, with a predominantly Muslim population, well integrated in Europe, offers a powerful alternative to fundamentalist temptations throughout the world, as well as a major asset in promoting dialogue between civilisations and religions.

Economic interdependence is another important force in EU-Turkey relations. The European Union is by far Turkey's main trading partner. Trade with the EU represents 50% of Turkey's trade volume and Turkey is the EU's 7th trading partner, before Canada and India for example. Our trade has increased dramatically over the last five years. The impressive reforms of recent years have also transformed Turkey into an attractive country, not only for tourism, but also for foreign investors, especially those from the European Union. Today, 80% of the inward investment coming into Turkey comes from the European Union. This implies that thousands of jobs in Europe and in Turkey today, depend on our relationship continuing to grow.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished members of this assembly.

The European Union is a community of nation-states which decided to pool their sovereignty in a number of policy areas where they are more efficient, influential and successful acting together rather than separately.

I want to underline this point. The European Union is not about dissolving the power of our Member States, on the contrary, being in the European Union, it reinforces the national influence of our Member States in the world. And we see the European project one where we can do together the love of our country, to serve our country with patriotism, and at the same time being proud citizens of the European Union. There is no contradiction between patriotism belonging to a country and at the same time being committed to a project and a process peace, democracy and freedom like the European Union. The credibility, efficiency and weight in the European Union in the world lie in the respect of common rules and disciplines - starting with the basic values of democracy, rule of law and human rights, on which our common project is founded. Our policies include standards and legislation which create a level playing-field for our companies. They include improved social standards, protection of our environment, our health, and also efficient cooperation against organised crime and terrorism.

Therefore, any country that wishes to join the European Union must meet all the criteria to be fit for membership.

For Turkey as for all other candidate countries, there is no shortcut to accession. It is the role of the Commission to continue to assess, in a rigorous but fair manner, progress made by the applicants towards meeting the criteria. This also helps the candidate countries to focus on the necessary reforms, and improve their preparations in view of accession.

This is not about interference in internal affairs of a candidate country. This is a joint work that we have to do if we want to do, and to come, to a shared goal. Turkey has

carried out impressive changes already. For instance: abolition of the death penalty; reinforcing democratic primacy in civil-military relations; abolition of State Security Courts; broadcasting and education in other languages than Turkish; supremacy of international human rights conventions over domestic law; zero tolerance policy on torture and ill-treatment; strengthening of gender equality between men and women in the constitution and the civil code. More recently, the Turkish Parliament adopted the long-awaited law on foundations which is a welcome step forward to address the difficulties of non-Muslim religious communities.

However, more progress is needed on a number of key issues, such as freedom of expression, democratic primacy in civil-military relations, cultural rights, trade union rights, women's and children's rights. They are part of our common values, they are central to progress and modernity and, indeed, they are also the keys to accession.

Take the example of freedom of expression. It is a basic, fundamental right in any democracy. But it is also indispensable for addressing the problems of today. Like the EU, Turkey is facing a number of security threats including terrorism. Turkey and the EU are both adapting to globalisation and climate change. These challenges may shake up our habits and sometimes question our cultural identities, but in any case they invite us to think about our responsibility in the world, our future. Finding the right responses requires imagination and new ideas. It also requires open and frank debates and strong confidence between institutions and citizens.

In this context, it is not healthy in any society if the expression of non-violent opinions leads to indictments and convictions. This is why I am very pleased that the parliament will soon be working on amending article 301 of the penal Code. Article 301 and other similar provisions need to be brought in line with European standards.

Freedom of expression is essential for the functioning of democracies. And so is the existence of a true, multi-party system. The same way democracy is put at risk when people are convicted for expressing their views, democracy is threatened when conflicts, suspicion and intolerance between political parties risk replacing democratic debates.

I understand the importance for Turkish society of the current debate on secularism. In various periods of their recent history, EU Member States have also gone through such debates. But each of them found its own internal compromise. I hope Turkey will do the same. Therefore, do not expect the European Commission to take a position or to impose standards on issues such as the headscarf – because the EU has none. The only crucial principle that it is essential to defend is tolerance for each other's beliefs and opinions – in this case, the free choice of every woman, whatever her belief or opinion.

The European Commission is following the latest developments with utmost attention, as is its obligation within the context of the EU accession process. Turkey needs to devote all its energies to pursuing long-awaited reforms, and I believe should not be distracted from this goal. It is essential for Turkey's own development and modernisation.

Turkish citizens have shown they are in favour of a reform agenda. This opens the way for further progress in the accession negotiations.

Our main challenge now is to keep the momentum going. I was very happy to hear today from the President and the Prime Minister that the accession process remains a priority. The European Commission fully supports this strong commitment and looks forward to further progress soon.

It is essential that the reforms build on a broad national dialogue encompassing society at large. This is where you, the distinguished members of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, have a historic responsibility.

It is all the more important since the pace of negotiations will depend first and foremost on Turkey's own progress in these reforms. This is the underpinning principle of the enlargement policy of the EU. We are all aware of the overall political realities in EU Member States, but we should seek to avoid fuelling them with further reasons for unnecessary delays.

Let me now turn to the problems of the Southeast. The Commission fully understands the reality of the terrorist threat in Turkey. Over the years, terrorist attacks have led to numerous casualties and injuries, spreading despair within the families of civilians, conscripts, gendarme and police. My thoughts and sympathies are with the families of all the victims of terrorism. We stand together with Turkey in the fight against terrorism. PKK Kongra Gel is a terrorist organisation and is listed as such in the EU list of terrorist organisations. There should be no misunderstanding about this. We should and we will strengthen our cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Having said that, the problems of the Southeast need to be addressed through a comprehensive strategy. It should combine efforts for the socio-economic development of the region, and ensure cultural and political rights for Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin. I know that the Government is working on a plan in this direction and I look forward to hearing the details about it as soon as possible.

I come now to the Cyprus issue. The search for a settlement in Cyprus is a historical and political obligation. After Berlin, Nicosia is burdened with the last dividing wall in Europe. A settlement in Cyprus would generate tangible benefits for Turkey's accession process. It is in our common interest to see a reunification of the island and the end of this 40-year-old conflict on European soil. Such division is unacceptable within the European Union.

A new opportunity has been created following the elections in Cyprus. I trust that Turkey will remain fully committed to supporting efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement, under the auspices of the UN. The opening last week of the Ledra street crossing in Nicosia is a good omen. I am confident that Turkey will put all its weight behind a solution that respects the rights of all citizens on the island. The opportunity that we have this year might not return.

Meanwhile, I can only encourage you to make concrete steps to improve the overall climate. The first I can think of is, anyway, a contractual obligation under the Ankara agreement: the full implementation of the Additional protocol. This is today the main external obstacle for significant progress in Turkey's accession process. As you are aware, several negotiating chapters are blocked and no chapter can be closed until Turkey ensures full implementation of the additional protocol.

At the EU level, we will continue to provide financial assistance to the Turkish Cypriot Community, and work further to lift the isolation of Turkish Cypriots.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Distinguished members of this assembly

Let me conclude.

Those familiar with the history of European integration know that the enlargement of the EU is subject to never-ending, heated discussions. This has been the case for almost all past enlargements. One forgets that the United Kingdom only joined the European Community in 1973 after having been denied accession twice. The accession of Spain and of my own country, Portugal, in 1986, was also preceded by negative campaigns in several Member States.

There is no reason to believe that Turkey could be an exception. The European Union is indeed a unique construction, composed today of 27 Member States, each of them with a national parliament, with ruling and opposition parties, with regular

election processes. It is also composed of several institutions, such as the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. Therefore, please do not be surprised to hear different voices on Turkey's accession process. Let's be frank: discussions will go on until the end of this process – and even beyond. This is an integral part and normal part of the democratic debate; Turkey should not be afraid of it. On the contrary, we should resolutely engage in this democratic and open debate.

What counts are facts. And the facts are that the European Community started with six members and now has 27 members. The fact today is that the EU and Turkey are engaged in accession negotiations. This was the unanimous wish of the democratically elected governments of the European Union in 2005, and this is the framework within which we operate. I insist. This was a unanimous decision of the governments of the European Union. Compare where we are in 2008 to 15 years ago and you will realise the giant step we have made in our relations. So Turkey needs above all to focus on its reforms. They will be the best guarantee of progress in the negotiations and above all, they are in the interest of the citizens of Turkey.

Certainly, and I want to be very open and frank with you, certainly, fear and prejudice, based on mutual ignorance, remains one of the biggest enemies of this project. It is all the more crucial to address these since the negotiation process is anything but a technical, self-perpetuating mechanism. As I've said very often to the Turkish authorities, this is not only a process for governments and diplomats. It is a process for all the political forces. It is a process for the societies, the society of Turkey and the societies of our Member States. The Member States have to approve every step along the way unanimously. And if the negotiations are successfully concluded, an accession treaty will have to be signed and ratified by all Member States and by Turkey.

Thus, it is fundamental that people in the EU and in Turkey get to know each other better. We need to further support a genuine civil society dialogue between the business community, trade unions, cultural organisations, universities, think tanks and NGOs.

There will be other difficult moments, and difficult decisions during this process. However, I expect that Turkey and the European Union will always keep focused on their common interest. More than fifty years ago, men with vision and leadership decided to overcome once and for all centuries of war, hatred and prejudice between European nations and peoples.

In the multipolar world of the 21st century, which grows more complex and more competitive day by day, it is the strength of that vision, that vision of peace, freedom and solidarity that allows Turkey and the European Union together to face the challenges of the future with confidence.

Teşekkür ederim.