

Turkey and the European Union
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Turkey and the Copenhagen criteria
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Introduction

Ladies and Gentleman,

Let me first thank the Institut Français des Relations Internationales for inviting me here today and giving me the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience.

Today I would like to share with you some thoughts about the challenges facing the European Union and Turkey on the eve of the Roman European Council and in the run-up to the end of 2004. But first of all I would like to express the deep sympathy that we all at the European Commission feel with the victims of the recent bomb attacks in Istanbul, their families and all the Turkish people.

We are indeed living in very exciting and sometimes very disturbing times. I am confident that the present Turkish Government will do its utmost to make sure that the current reform path is continued and we quietly do everything to avoid any emotional reactions on the EU side.

Barely a month ago, the Commission presented this year's regular report for Turkey. In less than a year this Commission will present its recommendation on whether Turkey meets the Copenhagen political criteria.

Turkey in the European public debate

The discussion on Turkey's place in Europe is also gaining steam. This is welcome. We should however not be surprised that perceptions differ.

There will be wishes and hopes for some, fears and uneasiness for others. I know that in France in particular, there has been a very lively debate last year as a result of President Giscard d'Estaing's remarks and this debate continues.

As a matter of fact, a Center supported by the European Commission has even collected the different articles and opinions that were published across the main European newspaper at that time. The booklet which came out of it is very interesting as it shows how big a role Turkey's EU accession plays among the different perceptions in the public opinion.

Let me just mention two recent examples.

According to an opinion poll published by Eurobarometer at the end of 2002, Turkey appears to be the least popular among EU candidate or potentially candidate countries, supported by only 31% of respondents, ranking only one place ahead of Albania which is at the bottom with 26%.

Vice a versa, a recent opinion poll conducted right after the publication of the regular report in Turkey reveals that up to 83% of the Turks believe that the Commission will not recommend the opening of accession negotiations next year.

Needless to say, these examples are very telling about public opinion perception in the EU and in Turkey.

For us who are actively involved in Turkey EU relations the challenge will be to keep the discussion level-headed and objective. In this discussion I think we would all agree on one thing, it is in the interest of the EU to see Turkey develop into a prosperous and stable democracy based on rule of law and the values which we all share.

The wave of terrorist attacks recently perpetrated in Istanbul are just a reminder that there are forces which are opposed to the model of Moslem

democracy existing in Turkey and want to undermine the efforts of the current government by trying to precipitate the country in the chaos.

The recent evolution of EU-Turkey relations

When it comes to the evolution of EU-Turkey relations in the last four years, the lesson that we can draw is threefold.

First, Turkey is a candidate country. The Heads of States and Governments already in the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 decided this. Ever since, Turkey has benefited from a pre accession strategy in line with the other candidate countries. Turkey's vocation to join the European Union was confirmed once again in Copenhagen in December last year. So, the question whether Turkey can be a member of the European Union has already been settled.

Second, there is a clear political road map for Turkey. If the Commission concludes that Turkey meets the political criteria next fall, the European Council will decide on starting negotiations with Turkey without delay. The ball is now in the court of Turkey. Turkey has the same opportunity as the 12 other candidate countries had and seized. The sequence is clear, first the political criteria and then negotiations.

Third, since the Helsinki decision in 1999, there has been an impressive progress in Turkey. The strategy has proved successful. The candidate status has led Turkey to start a process of far-reaching political reforms. We have been impressed by the determination of the AKP Government. By publicly declaring that political reforms are first and foremost for the benefit of Turkey's own citizens, the current government led by Prime Minister Erdoğan is following the footsteps of Turkey's march towards modernisation. In that Turkey has understood that the Copenhagen criteria

have not been invented for Turkey. They have been applied indistinctly to all candidate countries.

The new climate in EU-Turkey relations

There has been a profound change in the climate of our bilateral relations since November 2002. We have moved a long way in terms of how we approach and perceive each other. Whereas only one year ago we could not agree on Turkey's position with respect to the political criteria, we now very largely share a common assessment of the situation, including in the area of human rights. We have deepened our dialogue on the political criteria and we are discussing issues in great detail, very openly and without taboos.

To give you just an example, barely one year ago we were sitting at the same table with representatives of a government which did accept that there were torture cases occurring in Turkey or that there were political prisoners. By declaring a "zero tolerance policy" towards torture and by deciding to release some political prisoners, this government has shown that it was seriously determined to address some of the most sensitive outstanding issues.

Another important signal is that the Turkish government no longer considers that Turkey should be treated as an exception and that therefore, the Copenhagen political criteria should be adapted to suit Turkey's peculiarities. According to this idea, Turkey should have been granted some sort of "preferential treatment" justified by country's awkward geographical location and permanent external threats.

A great majority of Turkish citizens believe instead that Turkey should become a normal democracy at peace as shown by the huge support for the democratic reforms by the population.

The messages of the Regular Report

This year's Regular Report on Turkey has conveyed a message of encouragement. The efforts made by Turkey have been explicitly recognized. We have praised the determination of the government in accelerating the pace of reforms. We have given credit to Turkey for the concrete steps taken to ensure full and effective implementation of the reforms.

However, at the same time, we have identified areas where more efforts are needed. This is particularly the case in the area of human rights and fundamental freedoms where a number of deficiencies remain.

In concrete terms, it is clear that some of the reforms introduced over the last year amount to real breakthroughs in the Turkish political context. Many impinge upon issues which until now has been particularly difficult for Turkey to make progress on. This is true for the reforms relating to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, cultural rights and civilian control of the military. Turkey has also ratified two major UN Covenants on Civil and Political rights as well as on Social and economic rights.

However, further efforts are needed in terms both of legislation and practical implementation. Let me start with the legislation.

- The independence and the efficiency of the judiciary should be strengthened.
- The problem of State Security Courts should be addressed and the rights of defense should be aligned with EU standards.
- The respect for cultural rights should be ensured for all Turkish citizens regardless of their origin.
- Civil-military relations should be aligned with practices in the Member States including full parliamentary control of defense expenditure.

- The overall legislative framework for the exercise of rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association should be overhauled
- The representatives of the National Security Council should be withdrawn from civilian boards and,
- The economic and social problems in the Southeast should be further addressed.

The challenge of implementation

But for reforms to be credible there must be real changes on the ground. Turkish citizens must experience the improvements in their daily life. Legislation is just not enough. The Turkish Government is well aware of the importance of this issue. Prime Minister Erdogan has made it clear that the remaining months will be used to that purpose. This is welcome.

Absolute perfection cannot be expected, not even from EU Member States. It is however of crucial importance that Turkey shows that it has embarked upon an irreversible process, leading to respect of the political criteria in the same way as other candidate countries. The newly established Reform Monitoring Group on ministerial level with a role in overcoming such bureaucratic resistance is in this context welcome.

As we mentioned in the Regular Report, the far-reaching changes to the Turkish political and legal system over the past year are part of a longer-term historical process, and the full benefit of these reforms will accrue to the Turkish people over a number of years. It will take time before the spirit of the reforms is fully reflected in the attitudes of executive and judicial bodies, at all levels and throughout the country, ensuring a track record of effective implementation.

Human Rights situation

When it comes to human rights and fundamental freedoms, there have been clear signs of improvement. But the picture is mixed. There are persisting cases of torture. Cases continue to be opened against people for non violent expression of opinion. We have also signals that human rights defenders are subject to judicial harassment. Religious communities continue to face serious restrictions, which fall short of European standards. Some political parties face considerable pressure in view of their closure. And there are signs that the reforms are interpreted in a very restrictive fashion as suggested by the case of Leyla Zana which is currently being re-tried amidst suspicions of violation of rights of defense. Needless to say, all these shortcomings will have to be addressed in order to comply with the Copenhagen political criteria.

There have been encouraging developments on the ground recently. In the sphere of cultural rights, a certain relaxation towards the use of the Kurdish language is noticeable. A Kurdish School has been opened in Batman and several conferences have taken place in Diyarbakir in Kurdish language. These events would have been punishable under heavy penalties.

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Looking to the future

Now allow me to make some comments in relation to the future. In October next year, this Commission will present its recommendation on whether Turkey fulfills the Copenhagen political criteria. The recommendation will base itself on an objective regular report. It will be a thorough analysis and no room for any political fudge. This year's report does not give any guidance on what the outcome next year might be.

If the decision next year would be to open negotiations with Turkey accession is not for tomorrow. The negotiations will take substantial time, reflecting the scale of the difficulties faced by such a large country in an array of sectors. Turkey is taking some time in fulfilling its obligations under

the existing Customs' Union agreement and this will clearly also influence the way we will conduct accession negotiations.

In a nutshell, since we evaluate the capacity to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria all along the negotiation process, the EU leverage in terms of helping the reformers reform will continue for some time.

We also need to integrate the time factor in terms of the economic progress that Turkey is making. The political reform process has not crowded out the economic reform agenda and the progress made is substantial. A more prosperous Turkey with a higher share of GDP in the EU average would be, for many reasons, a partner more easy to accept and integrate in an European Union of with by then over 27 member states.

In parallel, the EU will have to ask itself the question of whether it stands ready for Turkey's accession. It is clear that Turkey's EU accession will have far-reaching consequences on the functioning of the European Union. A country with the size and the population of Turkey will inevitably affect policies such as the structural funds or agriculture. Turkey's share and representation in the EU's future institutions is also a matter of discussion. A membership of Turkey without a developed common foreign and security policy, based on efficient decision making mechanisms would also be unthinkable. We would therefore have to embark on a process of reflection about how to best meet these challenges. We did the same when we embarked on negotiations with the Member States that will accede next year.

Cyprus

Let me also say two words on Cyprus. It is clear that Cyprus will become a member of the EU on 1 May 2004. It is also clear that the preference for the EU is the accession of a united Cyprus. I am convinced that there is a window of opportunity to reach a settlement on the basis of the Annan plan in the coming months. The issues are well known but there is a need for

the necessary political will from all involved. After 1 May 2004, the terms of any settlement will almost certainly become less favorable. A swift settlement would also remove an issue which otherwise could become a serious obstacle for Turkey's own EU aspirations.

Let me be clear, this is not creating a new condition or a formal link. It is just stating a political fact. It is unlikely that EU could start accession negotiations with a candidate that does not recognize one of EU's member states. After May 2004, the terms of a settlement will almost certainly become less favorable for the Turkish Cypriots and for Turkey.

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Conclusive remarks

Turkey is endowed with rather unique characteristics among European countries. The combination of a secular state with a prevalently Moslem population is a central feature. In this context, I am convinced that Turkey has a unique contribution to give to peace and regional stability on the eve of this new century.

I would like to seize this opportunity to stress that the European Union is based on a community of shared values as explicitly reaffirmed in the resolution of the European Parliament adopted in 1997. These values are based on the principles of liberty, democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. All these values are enshrined in the Draft

Constitution of the European Union currently discussed by the Intergovernmental Conference.

Across democracies around Europe, people have the same aspirations and anxieties. The Turkish society increasingly resembles our societies in the EU as reflected by the much greater degree of freedom in the public debate compared to the recent past. It is my sincere hope that the process will continue and deepen, which will allow Turkey to prepare for next year's challenges.

Thank you