

Council of Europe

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Speech by Abdullah Gül, President of Turkey

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Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary General,
Honorable Members of the Assembly,

Before I deliver my speech, I would like to express my deepest condolences to the Russian people. I strongly condemn, once again, all kinds of terrorism.

It is a great pleasure to be back in the Council of Europe. I served, here, as a member for almost 10 years. Being a member of the Parliamentary Assembly was a source of huge personal experience and enrichment for me.

In fact, my commitment to the Council of Europe entirely overlaps with my 20 year long political career.

I first took the floor as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly. Then, I had the opportunity to address the Assembly as the Prime Minister and represented my country at the Committee of Ministers as the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

As I address the Assembly for the second time as the President of Turkey, my fellow citizen Mr. Çavuşoğlu is now presiding over the Assembly, and my country is currently holding the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

On this occasion, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the member states for the trust shown to my country.

Mr. President,

While we gather here in Strasbourg at the beginning of 2011, Europe is in a mood of deep pessimism. Our continent is trying to come out of the severest economic crisis. Although global in its scope, the economic crisis has affected Europe more severely than other regions in the world. It is gripped by high unemployment. Huge debt compels many governments to adopt harsh economic measures.

For the most part of the last four hundred years, the West has enjoyed a huge comparative advantage over the rest of the world in developing ideas, materializing industrial revolution, innovating technology and generating economic growth.

Only ten years ago, the industrial democracies dominated the world economy, contributing around 70 percent of global economic output. Today, that share has fallen to just over 50 percent. In another decade from now, it is estimated to fall around 40 percent. Then, the bulk of global output will be produced in the emerging world.

Different growth rates lead to a new distribution of global power. It is obvious that the centre of gravity is shifting towards other parts of the world, particularly towards Asia. If the present trends continue, Europe's role and influence in economic terms would gradually decline.

Nevertheless, Europe is not just about industrialization, technology or economic power. It is also a cradle of notions such as democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Enlightenment and democratic revolutions were all original European achievements with historical global appeal.

The relative economic powers of countries and continents have risen and declined in the course of history. However, the values which have been developed in Europe will persist and continue to guide humanity in the coming centuries.

Therefore, we should not lose sight of the huge strengths that Europe still holds.

Ruined by warfare for centuries and having experienced several tragedies in the 20th century, Europe proceeded to produce humanity's noblest works.

Our continent has come a very long way in the last sixty years, in building a common democratic order based on the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Post World War Europe was constructed as a house where being a European citizen or resident means belonging to a community based on enjoyment of individual rights and freedoms. Those rights are guaranteed by democratically elected governments and protected by an impartial and independent judiciary. Tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect of diversity have become our shared norms.

Membership of such a community entails accepting certain obligations in respect of others and contributing to the development of a fair and cohesive society.

These democratic achievements continue to be the best that Europe offers to the rest of the world.

Europe represents a way of life based on shared common values and standards with universal relevance.

This remains its strength and relevance in the contemporary world. A divided Europe has led to war and oppression, whereas a Europe without dividing lines based on the shared democratic principles has led to peace and prosperity.

Our organization has been at the centre of this democratic construction. Its pioneering work has transformed our continent into a single legal space.

However, I should admit that Europe is not fully aware of its soft power. The European institutions have positively transformed the security and economic climate in broader Europe since the Second World War. Yet, we are not active enough to project our enormous soft power on the global scale. As a result, now Europe is seen as an "absent player" in world affairs.

Mr. President,

The growing pessimism in today's Europe is reshaping its political life. There are growing manifestations of intolerance and discrimination in many of our societies. Over the past few years, our member states have been affected by weakening social ties. Radicalization and increasing gaps between different religious, ethnic and cultural communities started to harm the social fabric of our nations.

These contemporary trends challenge the cohesion of European societies and may even endanger Europe's democratic acquis.

Racism and xenophobia represent a major cause of concern in connection with the current economic crisis. They lead governments and political elites to take a tough line on immigration.

Roma and travelers, Muslims or Jews, and more generally, those who are different, experience hostility and social exclusion in many of our societies.

There is a rise in electoral support for political parties which portray immigration as the main cause of insecurity, unemployment, crime, poverty and social problems.

These are trends which should concern us all. Those pathologies are weakening Europe and decimating its soft power in the world. We should work hard to defeat these problems to reassert Europe on the global scene.

Distinguished Parliamentarians,

The Council of Europe has done and continues to do much for promoting peaceful co-existence and mutual respect between peoples of different origin, culture and faith living in Europe.

You in the Assembly have devoted many of your sessions to this task.

The European Court of Human Rights has many judgments supporting this objective. The Committee of Ministers, the Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Committee against Racism and Intolerance have made their contribution to living together as equals in dignity.

Therefore, the Council of Europe has the duty to address and counter these new challenges.

As the guardian of European Convention on Human Rights, we have the obligation to defend our values which are preconditions for democratic security and stability in Europe.

Mr. President,

Let me make the point clear: European societies will eventually become more diverse. As demographic trends indicate, with declining and aging populations, continued prosperity requires some degree of migration for most European societies. Experts are united in their opinion that migration will compensate slower economic growth stemming from the aging population.

On the other hand, we have also seen reverse migration among our member states due to differences in economic growth rates.

For example, my country, Turkey is now experiencing immigration from Western European countries, whereas it was a source of migration beginning from the 1960s. Therefore, "fortress Europe" is not a rational choice. It is an illusion. If our societies will become more diverse, we have to address the growing political and social consequences of that diversity.

European democracies have begun to identify what the American democracy had discovered earlier: Separate but equal is a wrong idea. Separate cannot be equal. Both migrant communities and host countries should do their utmost to avoid segregation, separation and parallel communities.

For harmonious democratic societies, diversity has to be inclusive. Successful integration of migrants has to be a two-way street.

European Muslims have perhaps been more affected than others by these tendencies, particularly after the terrorist attacks since September 11 in New York, Madrid, Istanbul and London.

Muslims in Europe are very diverse not only in their geographical origins and cultural heritage, but also in their ways of interpreting and practicing their faith.

Yet, there is a misperception to view these diverse communities as a unitary one defined by religion. This is fundamentally at odds with "European values".

The perpetrators of these crimes have nothing to do with Islam. One should also bear in mind that those terrorist organizations are attacking many Muslim targets too. They do not have achievable political objectives, but rather pursue their archaic and illicit utopian ideas.

Islam, like all other religions, teaches tolerance and respect for human beings of all faiths. It is the abuse of faiths for political purposes leading to intolerance and exclusion. The same applies to almost every ethnic minority of recent immigrant origin in Europe. Those communities have found themselves the subject of stereotyped portrayal in public opinion and the media.

We must retain the confidence in the ability of our democratic institutions to promote human rights, tolerance, dialogue and social cohesion. We need to develop a democratic framework for living together.

By doing so, Europe can remain as a beacon of respect for human rights in the world. It is said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. The rise in popular fears about immigration and minorities has led to larger popular support for marginal political parties. Let me emphasize that I am even more concerned by the reaction of mainstream political parties in addressing such popular fears.

I have been advocating construction of a new political language for some time both at home and abroad. I believe, the nature of the political language determines the outcome. The political language can be either constructive or destructive. With their choice of language, political actors can serve to foster a common understanding or division. Therefore, mainstream politics in Europe has to address these fears in a convincing manner while defending respect for diversity and human rights.

We have to make the argument much more forcefully that the continent will not be safe with politicians who claim that Europe is at war with other cultures and religions.

On the contrary, if unchecked, the growing influence of such arguments will make Europe not only less tolerant and democratic, but also a more dangerous place to live in. European values are based not only on our achievements, but also on bitterly learned lessons. Let us not forget that the popular support for explicit anti-Semitism was only 5 % in the late 1920s. With the snowball effect, this poisonous minority paved the way to the Holocaust in the late 1930s. History does repeat itself, if we do not draw lessons from our past mistakes.

Our organization, the Council of Europe, has a major role to play in meeting these contemporary challenges.

That is why, I am particularly pleased to see the establishment of a Group of Eminent Persons at the initiative of the Turkish Chairmanship. I would like to thank Secretary General Jagland for bringing together such eminent Europeans to form this group. I am equally delighted to see that the group is headed by my dear friend, Joschka Fischer. I call on your Assembly to bring your contribution to this project, appropriately called 'living together'.

Democracy and human rights can never be taken for granted. As guardian of these values, the role of the Council of Europe, I believe, remains as relevant today, as it was sixty years ago.

Dear Friends,

Some members of our organization have joined in a qualitatively different relationship in the EU. But Europe is not just composed of the EU. The Council of Europe, embracing 800 million Europeans, remains the only pan-European value-based organization. In fact, thanks to the Council of Europe, now millions of Europeans are enjoying their fundamental rights such as equal treatment, expression of opinion, gender equality, good governance, transparency, and accountability.

It is the Council of Europe which translated these values into binding commitments through monitoring mechanisms and created a European legal space.

Therefore, it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the merits of our organization in the construction of free, safe and prosperous Europe.

To maintain and enhance this role of the Council of Europe, I call on all members of the organization to increase their political involvement in the work of the Council of Europe. I know Secretary General Jagland is firmly committed to political reform to make the Council of Europe more relevant and visible.

I shared my views about the future of the organization when he visited me in Ankara. In our meeting earlier this morning, he informed me that he will soon be presenting new ideas for more reform. Turkey has been supporting his efforts. To this end, the Turkish Chairmanship has identified the reform of the organization as one of its priorities. The next meeting of the Committee of Ministers is scheduled next May in Istanbul. I hope this meeting will be the appropriate occasion to finalize some of the reforms presently under consideration.

The most successful and transforming body of our organization has been the European Court of Human Rights. This unique institution is a success in itself.

It is a paradox that the Court today faces the most serious challenges. Therefore, the reform process which was initiated at the Interlaken Conference during the Swiss Chairmanship, should continue. And I am pleased that the Turkish Chairmanship will organize as a follow-up to Interlaken, a high level conference in Izmir in spring.

Mr. President,
Distinguished Friends,

Like the state of affairs in today's Europe, the Council of Europe is at crossroads. There are serious reasons for concern in Europe. Yet, our belief in democracies to correct their shortcomings and to overcome challenges should remain unshakable.

European states must resist the temptation to turn inwards.

Europe cannot escape the accelerating process of economic and cultural globalization. On the contrary, it must embrace it. To the extent Europe succeeds in embracing it, Europe can demand the change and shape the developments in the world.

Europe's growing internal diversity, the global relevance of its shared values and the lessons learned from its past are our major assets.

We all remember the speech by Winston Churchill to the Council of Europe in 1950 where he called for the creation of a "unified European Army" in the face of the Communist threat.

Now, our former foes have become our new friends and allies. Europe has become much safer than what it was 60 years ago.

Yet, the challenges from within Europe still exist. To overcome those menaces, we don't need to create a unified European Army. What we need today, is to construct "a unified European Conscience" for a freer, safer and more equalitarian and united Europe.

The Council of Europe is the embodiment of our values and aspirations. Therefore, it is the right venue to nurture that European conscience. Let us work together and act together to build it. Thank you.