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TUSKON/EPC Conference: "Turkey-EU: Common Interests Revisited"

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Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (TUSKON) and European Policy Centre (EPC) conference

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Dear hosts, dear ministers, distinguished guests.

Let me first of all thank our hosts for organising today's event.

Looking around this well-filled room, I conclude that discussing our common interests still matters to many in Turkey and Europe. And there is a good reason for this; the fundamentals between Turkey and the European Union are very solid.

We are already closely linked by trade and investments, by contacts between peoples, and by fifty years of association and now accession negotiations. Let me just give some examples:

Some 46% of Turkey's trade is with the EU. We are so integrated in a number of sectors such as automotives, aviation, textiles or electronic goods, that it is irrelevant to distinguish between European and Turkish products.

Moreover, nearly 80% of foreign direct investments in Turkey come from the EU, including a significant part of technology transfer.

But also in education our ties are strong; close to 40.000 Turkish students, youngsters or academics participate each year in the education and research programmes of the European Union. Equally, every year 4.000 students from Europe follow their Erasmus year in Turkish universities.

So, there are many reasons for us to discuss our common interests, and how they can be shaped to provide for a common future. And I have some ideas to share with you on this.

However, before doing so, I wanted to briefly comment on a number of major developments that are of importance to all of us.

Let me start with the launch of the work on the constitutional reform and the way this process has been brought forward so far.

Turkey has a truly historic opportunity; the opportunity to upgrade the Constitution to the standards of a modern democracy. To shape a framework that will protect all citizens of Turkey and guarantee their freedoms, whatever their ethnicity, creed, beliefs and lifestyles. Or, as Prime Minister Erdogan has recently said, the new constitution should bring 'the individual, the citizen and freedoms to the forefront'.

Tragic events in Turkey of very different natures in the last few weeks have highlighted the need for a new foundation on which to build a Turkey for the 21st Century.

Recent vicious terrorist attacks and the deteriorating situation in the South-East underline the tensions that still exist there.

Yet at the same time, the horrible earthquakes have demonstrated a great solidarity among the Turkish population. Let me express – once again - my profound sympathy with the people and government of Turkey and convey to the families of the victims and those injured, my expression of deep solidarity.

In fact, throughout the EU there was an outpour of solidarity, as many efforts were made to quickly provide early emergency assistance to the Turkey and to the victims.

As my friend Egemen Bağış has said, if solidarity would be one of the negotiation chapters in Turkey's EU accession process, it would already be closed!

This great strength in adversity convinces me that Turkey can overcome divisions in politics and more importantly in society.

This requires the building of consensus through a democratic, participatory process with the broadest possible consultation.

Here, I welcome the progress made, with work having now started in earnest, based on a constructive collaboration among the four main political parties represented in the Grand National Assembly. I have the feeling all are aware of the historic opportunity that is presented, and of the responsibility to make good use of it.

But this is not a process for politicians alone. Far from it.

Contributions from NGOs and think-tanks have already come in. And I appreciate the business community's active involvement in further democratisation and consolidation of the rule of law. Every voice in favour of reform is welcome. A well functioning, democratic and open society based on confidence in its institutions benefits not just business, but Turkey as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Work on the new constitution is important. However, there are other important matters which Turkey should address to work towards a better future. The European Commission's recent enlargement package identified some of these:

the right to freedom of expression in practice

a solution, at last, of the Kurdish issue and the dangerous situation prevailing in the Southeast of the country

Allow me to dwell on the issue of freedom of expression. This is not only a basic fundamental freedom, a central feature in a modern democracy. It is also a vital requirement for any society facing significant reform challenges. This is precisely when ideas and dialogue are so badly needed, without taboos, through all possible channels and media support.

In this context, the rules that the society produces, while certainly setting certain limits, must be designed to protect and expand this right. We all know, dear friends, that there is always and everywhere room for progress in this respect, including here in Turkey. Recent developments have been a matter of concern for us and probably also for most of you.

I am therefore pleased with the announced agreement two days ago by Prime Minister Erdogan and the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, Mr Jagland, that as of January next year the ministry of Justice and the Council of Europe will work together to improve the situation in the field of freedom of expression and freedom of media. I note with satisfaction the foreseen amendments to the Anti-Terrorism and Penal Code, legislation which – as we have underlined at many occasions - at present does not sufficiently guarantee freedom of expression. Equally, I commend the intention to organise awareness raising activities for prosecutors and judges on the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, to avoid a restrictive interpretation of the right to freedom of expression and of media.

The Commission will gladly contribute, as foreseen, to the implementation of these activities, notably through the financing instrument for pre-accession. I look forward to discussing these matters further with Minister Ergin at our next meeting in two weeks time.

Now, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me return to the main course of the dinner; to the common interests I raised at the start of my speech. To further solidifying the fundamentals of EU-Turkey relations.

We are all aware that the EU and Turkey are in a delicate phase in their relations.

The pace of the accession process is disappointing with no chapter opened since June 2010. Frustrations are building as Turkey considers that the European Union blocks the negotiations unfairly, while the European Union demands the full implementation of the Additional Protocol to all 27 Member States, including the Republic of Cyprus, and expects more and faster reforms in Turkey to address urgent issues under fundamental rights and freedoms.

Should we allow these frustrations to set the agenda for our relations? The answer must be No. The reason is clear: we both have too many common interests, for now and for the future.

For this reason I proposed in the 2011 Enlargement package a renewed positive agenda for EU-Turkey relations.

This agenda will build on the achievements of the accession process and our joint interest, and give a new momentum to our relations.

This means renewed efforts in a number of key areas, including the support to political reforms in Turkey, the continued alignment of Turkey's legislation with the EU *acquis*, addressing important trade issues, a closer cooperation on visa and migration and a closer dialogue on foreign policy, energy and the fight against terrorism.

The "positive agenda" provides a realistic and feasible way to inject new life into EU-Turkey relations in general, and into the accession process in particular.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us avoid any misunderstandings: the positive agenda is a complement to, not a replacement for the accession process.

The first reactions of our Member States and Turkey are generally encouraging.

To be a success, the positive agenda must bring real benefits to both sides. It must also reinforce the strong fundamentals of EU-Turkey relations. I would like to give three examples of where the positive agenda could produce these benefits.

First, we want to convince Member States to put short-term measures into practice to improve visa issuance to Turkish applicants. I am aware of the impatience of the Turkish business community on further progress on visa issues. Measures include the harmonisation of supporting documents (which has been done recently); visa fee exemptions; multiple entry visas with a long period of validity and perhaps even consular coverage.

Second, we aim to take a good look at the Customs Union, and see how we can take concrete steps to have a more effective functioning Customs Union. We need to ensure the Customs Union can remain a key part of our strong fundamentals by addressing in parallel both the current trade irritants (including a more effective way we settle any disputes) as well as Turkey's concerns regarding the Free Trade Agreements which the EU concludes with third countries. Both Karel de Gucht and I are convinced that we need and can make progress here.

We are also keen to explore new avenues to make full use of the EU's and Turkey's joint economic potential. This is why the Commission is also interested in exploring how we can "modernize" the Customs Union to include public procurement and perhaps other areas. This joint visit by Commissioner De Gucht and myself is proof of the importance which the European Commission attaches to this matter.

Thirdly, we want to strengthen our cooperation in combating terrorism.

This is not an empty slogan: in the European Union too we have suffered immensely from terrorism. The menace of terrorism is the same all over the world. It is a threat to democracy wherever it occurs, and has the same face no matter whether it appears in Germany, Belgium or the Czech Republic. The PKK is on the EU list of terrorist organisations. The EU strongly condemns terrorist acts and understands Turkey's concerns about the need to fight terrorism.

We have made a number of concrete offers to increase our cooperation to fight terrorism, but also expect Turkey to make steps to intensify cooperation with the European Union. For instance, a proper law on the protection of personal data would open the door to an effective cooperation with Europol, the European Union's police cooperation, and Eurojust which promotes coordination between judiciaries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the essence of the positive agenda, an agenda to bring the European Union and Turkey ever closer. An agenda to support the Turkish reform process, to expand the freedoms of Turkish citizens and to enhance their living standards. An agenda to shape our common future.

Thank you for your attention.