

Press lunch with the Turkish State Minister H.E. Ali Babacan

7 December, 2005

On 7 December the Baltic Forum, in co-operation with the Turkish Embassy in Latvia, held a press lunch on the occasion of the Turkish State Minister and Chief EU negotiator H.E. Ali Babacan's visit to Latvia. Mr. Babacan was on a working visit in Latvia to discuss with the Latvian government representatives the current situation in the EU - Turkey accession talks. During the lunch Mr. Babacan answered questions from Latvian media and NGO representatives.

‘The Turkish EU accession is of critical importance for Turkey, but it is just as important for the Union itself. The EU is based on such fundamental shared values as open society, democracy and human right. The Union needs the highest standards in terms of these values, but it also needs to be open towards countries that live up to these standards. Bringing Turkey into the EU would prove that the Union is not a "Christian club" and that the Union takes its own principles seriously’, the Baltic Forum's Research director Victor Makarov suggested in his introductory remarks at the lunch.

Among the issues raised were such much-debated topics as the Cyprus issue and the human rights situation in Turkey. Referring to the current problems in the EU-Turkey negotiations, Mr. Babacan confirmed the Turkish government's commitment to the accession and its willingness to reach an agreement on the difficult Cyprus question in the nearest future. The EU demands that Turkey opens its airports and ports to Cyprus as a condition for proceeding with the accession talks. Turkey insists that the EU delivers on its pledge to end the economic isolation of the mostly Turkish-populated Northern Cyprus after it approved the re-unification of the island in the referendum. The Greek part rejected it, but joined the EU in 2004, while the Turkish part remains outside the EU. The deadlock over the Cyprus question currently is the main obstacle to the accession negotiations.

The Baltic Forum research fellow Eldar Mamedov asked about the steps taken by the Turkish government in order to fully guarantee the freedom of speech. Mr. Babacan said that "it is unacceptable that columnists and intellectuals are being prosecuted on the basis of the infamous Article 301 of the penal code", which provides for criminal prosecution for insulting Turkishness. The government is engaged in the dialogue with the NGOs and civil society on this matter and is committed to the reform of this article.

Viktor Makarov asked about the relations between Islam and secularism, putting the Turkish experience in broader European perspective. Mr. Babacan said that in his view the experience of Turkey could be relevant for European countries with significant Muslim population. "The state should not interfere in daily religious practice of its citizens, but the government should not be based on religious principles" - this is the position advocated by the current Turkish government, said Mr. Babacan. At the same time, he cautioned against rising "Islamophobia" in Europe. The Turkish way of blending secular government and moderate version of Islam could be a useful antidote to both extremism and Islamophobia, he said.

The director of the Latvian Institute Ojars Kalnins asked about the ability of Turkey as a democratic country and the EU candidate to project the "soft power" in the wider region of the Middle East. Mr. Babacan said that the Turkish democratizing experience and its path towards the EU are observed eagerly by reformers in the Arab world. The implications of a successful European evolution of Turkey for the wider Middle East will be huge: it will show that a Muslim country can be fully democratic and free.