

International conference
Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say

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Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I begin by thanking the Baltic Forum, European Commission's Representation in Latvia and European Parliament Information Office in Riga for arranging today's event. That they were able to gather such an impressive audience is a testament to how rightly they have selected a topic which is very intensively on European Agenda. It is a pleasure for me to address such a distinguished gathering today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kemal Atatürk set an example for his compatriots by donning a hat rather than the fez, thereby symbolically representing the Europeanisation of his country. The huge support by the population for the revolutionary changes in the twenties to the most recent and groundbreaking political reforms reflects this attitude and it is noteworthy that many of the reforms have been adopted unanimously, with bipartisan support from the majority and the opposition with the understanding that they are first and foremost for the benefit of Turkey's own citizens.

As may be easily seen today there is, though gradually depreciating, an impressive degree of consensus in Turkey in favour of joining the European Union. In fact there seems to be close to unanimous support for the modernisation strategy. But there are concerns as to how Turkey is perceived within the EU. And it is true that EU-Turkey relations are increasingly a subject of public debate.

Contrary to the situation in Turkey, the public opinion in the EU is not unanimous in favouring a Turkish membership. To give several examples as recently as last Monday I will quote the remarks of three European personalities.

For example, while he was visiting Finland Bavaria's Minister-President Edmund Stoiber stressed that "Turkey is a very big country and our relations are friendly, but Turkey is not a European country. My opinion is that the EU takes too big a burden if Turkey joins the European Union". And he added that the question is both about financing the EU and economy, and about the Union's identity.

Then the Finish Minister Matti Vanhanen more responsibly underlined that "in ten years' time we will see how Turkey is capable of meeting the membership criteria. He also pointed that "already perspective of membership has encouraged the country to develop democracy and human rights and come closer to values important for Europeans."

Lastly and all the more positively, Lithuanian member of the European Parliament, Mr. Justas Paleckis, speaking at a discussion on the EU enlargement at the Lithuanian Parliament said that the Lithuanian society has to be prepared for Turkey's possible membership in the EU. And he added that it was necessary to ensure the understanding in Lithuania of the benefits of Turkish accession to the EU. Mr. Paleckis also underlined that EU should not shut its doors to Turkey which might have negative effects on the EU.

It is in my view important for the political leadership in the EU and in Turkey to recognise and manage this political reality. There are those who are concerned about the religious and cultural dimension. Others have raised issues such as the capacity of the Union to integrate a

country of the size and with the demography of Turkey, the economic development of Turkey and Turkey's geographical situation. We need to reply to these concerns.

The fact that Turkey belongs to Europe was recognised already in the Association Agreement of 1963. And, of course, the land which is now Turkey has been a part of European history for centuries. The great armies of Darius and Xerxes were ferried across the Hellespont in one direction; Alexander the Great and his army in the other. Turkey still bears the marks of the Greek, Roman and Byzantine civilisations which have done so much to shape modern Europe.

Throughout the 18th, 19th and early 20th century policy towards the Ottoman Empire preoccupied the great European powers. In the 1850s it led to Britain and France fighting the Crimean war together against Russia and alongside Turkey. The Turkish Republic, which was founded in October 1923 saw its future firmly faced the West. Its founder, Kemal Atatürk, laid the foundations for the secular democracy which Turkey now is. He was responsible for the introduction of the Latin script. And in 1934 he gave women the vote – years before many Western European states did so.

Turkey's engagement with the West –and vice-versa- has carried on unbroken into post-war history. Turkey was a founding member of the Council of Europe. With the agreement of the US, UK, France and others, Turkey was invited to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1952. It's worth spelling the acronym out in full. What the West was doing was inviting Turkey into NATO to help defend the North Atlantic area.

Throughout the cold war Turkey was one of only two NATO countries that shared a border with Soviet Union and has continued to play a part in collective defence and peacekeeping operations right up to the present day – most notably in Afghanistan. Even as of today, Turkish Airforce planes are patrolling the Baltic airspace.

Turkey's relations with the European Union – then the EEC – began in 1963 with the signing of an association agreement establishing a customs union in three stages. It is significant that at the signing ceremony that day, Walter Hallstein, the German Christian Democrat and the first President of the European Commission, referred three times to Turkey being part of Europe. The Association Agreement held open the possibility one day of Turkish membership; and in 1987 Turkey applied to join the Union. Then in 1995 Customs Union Agreement signed between Turkey and EU. In 1999, she was granted candidate country status and in 2002 the European Council formally decided in Copenhagen that it would open accession negotiations without delay, once Turkey had fulfilled the political criteria for membership. Of course, all these decisions were, and had to be, unanimous.

The history of all this is important. It clearly demonstrates that the destinies of Turkey and the rest of Europe have long been intertwined. It also shows that when the European Council made its historic decision at the end of 2004 to set the date for the opening of accession negotiations, and the formal opening of the negotiations in October 2005, it was the latest step in a long journey.

Europe, in the wider historical sense, defies any simple definition. In 1876, Bismarck scribbled on the back of a telegram: "Anyone who speaks of Europe is wrong; it is nothing but geographical expression." Seventy years later, Jean Monet, the father of Europe, echoed those words: "Europe has never existed; one has genuinely to create Europe".

So the decisions on Turkey made by EU over many years have been decisions about the kind of Europe desired to be created. Is it a Europe turned inwards on itself or a Europe looking outwards to the rest of the world; how much will it expand its boundaries to build a wider community of stable, prosperous democracies or how much will it keep its neighbours at arms length?

We live in a world of global challenges and global competition. A static Europe will not face either with confidence. No-one is arguing that Europe has no limits. But stopping the enlargement already in train would not, in the long run, save one job, nor keep one firm in business. Rather it would only weaken Europe's ability to compete with the emerging economies of Asia, and in particular those of India and China. Neither would slowing enlargement help Europe to tackle the challenges of international terrorism, cross-border crime, drug trafficking and climate change.

On the other hand, it is a fact that every acceding country admitted to membership has had to meet strict criteria, especially on good governance, democracy, individual freedoms, and economic management. But it should be remembered that when some of the members, including recent accession states, began their negotiations they were a long way short of the standards for membership itself. [Just recall the anxieties and critics at the time:

"- with the accession of CEE countries, heterogeneity within the EU will rise sharply;
- the members will bring with them the peculiar historical, political, economic and social heritage and problems of their region;
- they have a particularly low level of socioeconomic development;
- struggle with specific problems of transformation from a communist society, possessing political traditions such as long periods of authoritarianism, foreign domination etc. which distinguish them clearly from the current EU members is rather impossible."]

They transformed during that process of negotiation, and because of that process, just as Turkey will go through a major, continuing process of transformation over a number of years before it joins the Union.

Turkey's geographical position makes it of vital strategic importance in every way. I could give many examples. Take the fight against drug trafficking, cross-border crime and international terrorism. Take the issue of energy which is becoming particularly important for Europe and even for the Baltic Area. The Bosphorus is already a key supply route for the world's energy needs. And once the pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey begins to pump one million barrels per day through Turkey, 10 per cent of the world's tradeable oil production will be passing through Turkey. Turkey's economy is growing faster than any of the current economies of the European Union. Half of Turkey's trade is already with the EU and it is already a major market for EU exporters.

The political rationale behind Turkish membership is even more powerful. It would show how diversity of culture and religion is compatible with a unity of purpose. A stable, secular and prosperous Turkey anchored in the EU would be a powerful symbol indeed that the true divide lies not between civilisations but between the vast majority of civilised people across the world and the uncivilised few who use violence and terror to try to destroy the common values and beliefs which bind the rest of us. It will prove that a secular, democratic state which shows respect for Islam can live comfortably within Europe.

The benefit that Turkey can offer to European security is already a plain fact. Therefore I will not dwell on it.

However there is an argument often used notably in France and Germany, which I find rather interesting. It is essentially argued that Turkish membership would mean the end of the "Power-Europe" project. Where did they get the idea that Turkey is only on the side of a "Market Europe?" Turkey is an important country, a former imperial power. Why would it wish that the Union that it would join be a weak and reduced to a single market lacking any foreign policy? We are not a candidate for entry into a customs union; we are already a party to such a mechanism. It is just the opposite: Turkey seeks to help build a political Europe in which it can fully participate; a political Europe where a lack of foreign policy is inconceivable. Turkey is ready to invest its political, administrative, military and cultural capabilities in such a Europe.

And it is exactly for the same reason that a situation where Turkey is boxed into the role of mechanically applying policies decided by the EU without our input is unacceptable to us. It is unjust to ask Turkey to implement European laws and follow European policies without being an equal partner in the decision-making process. That is why Turkey strongly rejects any discussion of a "privileged partnership" that would resemble such a situation. What Turkey wishes is simply to obtain full member status with obviously all the responsibilities that go with it.

The tasks of European Union enlargement are grand on both sides of the equation and they require decisive action according to cleverly constructed plans for the process performance.

Continuing this process in spite of all unavoidable resistance will be the decisive factor.