

**ADDRESS BY MR. LEVENT MURAT BURHAN
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AT THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION
AFFAIRS OF THE HOUSES OF THE OIREACHTAS
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(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

A Chathaoirligh agus a Chomhaltaí Oirirce den Choiste,

Let me first thank you all for giving me this opportunity to address this respectable Committee at this important point in time.

Turkey is a pluralist secular democracy which began "westernising" its economic, political and social structures in the 19th century. Following the First World War and the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, it chose Western Europe as the model for its new secular structure.

Turkey has ever since closely aligned itself with the West and has become a **founding member** of the **United Nations** and the **Council of Europe**, a member of **NATO** and **OECD**. During the Cold War years Turkey was part of the Western alliance, defending freedom, democracy and human rights. In this respect, Turkey has played and continues to play a vital role in the defence of the European continent and the principal elements of its foreign policy have converged with those of its European partners.

Having thus entered into very close cooperation with Western Europe in the political field, it was therefore only natural for Turkey to complement this in the economic field too. Thus, Turkey chose to begin close cooperation with the fledgling EEC in 1959.

The Ankara Agreement (1963)

In **July 1959**, shortly after the creation of the European Economic Community in 1958, Turkey made **its first application to join**. The EEC's response to Turkey's application in 1959 was to suggest the establishment of an association until Turkey's circumstances permitted its accession. The ensuing negotiations resulted in the signature of the Agreement Creating An Association Between the Republic of Turkey and the European Economic Community (the "**Ankara Agreement**") on **12 September 1963**. Ankara Agreement entered into force on 1 December 1964 and **aimed at securing Turkey's full membership in the EEC** through the establishment in three phases of a Customs Union which would serve as an instrument to bring about integration between the EEC and Turkey.

The Ankara Agreement still constitutes the legal basis of the Association between Turkey and the EU.

Turkey's Application for Full Membership in 1987

Two years after the military intervention of 12 September 1980, return to democratic rule took place through general elections in 1983. And following further positive developments, **Turkey applied for full membership in 1987** on the basis of the EEC Treaty's Article 237.

The Council forwarded Turkey's application to the Commission, which reconfirmed **Turkey's eligibility in 18 December 1989**. Commission's opinion was endorsed by the Council on 5 February 1990. It basically underlined Turkey's eligibility for membership, yet deferred the in-depth analysis of Turkey's application until the emergence of a more favourable environment.

The Customs Union (31 December 1995)

Talks for a Customs Union began in 1994, and were finalised on 6 March 1995 at the Turkey-EU Association Council. The Customs Union between Turkey and the EU formally entered into force **in 31 December 1995, and it includes industrial and processed agricultural goods**.

Four years later the **Helsinki European Council** held on **10-11 December 1999** produced a breakthrough in Turkey-EU relations. At Helsinki, **Turkey was officially recognised** without any precondition **as a candidate state** on an equal footing with the other candidate states. Helsinki marks a qualitatively new beginning and a process of strategic mutual transformation.

Accession Negotiations

As agreed at the European Council in December 2004, accession negotiations have been launched on **3 October 2005** with the adoption of the Negotiation Framework by the Council of the European Union.

Until today, In Turkey's EU accession negotiations, out of 35 Chapters, **16 Chapters are opened**, whereas only **one Chapter is temporarily closed**.

Enlargement

It is a fact that the EU has been facing considerable internal and external challenges, which are simultaneous and multi-layered: the rise of far right and increased populist policies, economic, financial and social concerns, migration pressure, Brexit and the weakening of transatlantic ties.

In this context, enlargement has been the most valuable asset in the possession of the EU. It is clear that if the EU wants to be an influential actor in global arena, it needs to keep its doors open.

If the EU of today, despite the conjunctural challenges it faces, has become a model of integration from the European Steel and Coal Community of 1952, it is solely thanks to the consecutive enlargement waves.

On the other hand, enlargement is also the EU's greatest soft power tool. Constantly questioning it jeopardizes EU's anchor role. Doubts on opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania raise the issue of reliability of the EU.

Common regional challenges of the Balkan countries require regional dialogue and cooperation. Turkey contributes to the development and prosperity of the Balkans. The Balkan dimension of the EU's enlargement policy cannot be finalized unless Turkey's accession process is completed.

Considering Turkey as one of the external actors who tries to gain influence in the region is just a populist approach which harms Turkey-EU relations and the interests of the Balkan countries.

During new Commission's term, we expect the EU to make enlargement policy a priority. Keeping a strong membership perspective, with no discrimination among the candidates is crucial.

Current state of affairs between Turkey and the EU

We can describe our relationship with the EU as a complex, multilayered and multidimensional partnership. In fact, Turkey's Prime Minister Turgut Özal, at the time of Turkey's application for membership to the EU in 1987, likened this process to "a long and narrow road" referring to a famous verse by the folk-poet Aşık Veysel. Time has proven that this road has not only been indeed long, winding and narrow but also bumpy.

Yet each time the relationship showed resilience and found a way out. We are again going through a delicate period, but we believe we will be able to find a way out this time too.

Last year in November (22 Nov 2018) we had the last High Level Turkey-EU Political dialogue. We regret the recent decision by the EU to suspend it. We believe we have a lot to gain from keeping the channels of communication open to understand each other's views better.

Joint Parliamentary Committee also met last year in December (2018) after more than three years break.

Last January we have had High Level Dialogue in Transport and in February in Economy.

Turkey-EU Association Council met in March (15 March 2019) after 4 years break.

In the last Country Report on Turkey published in last May 2019, it is confirmed that Turkey has reached a good level of alignment in general in 22 Chapters and there has been progress at various levels in 20 Chapters during the past year. However, alignment cannot be expected independently from the accession negotiations, and there is no explanation for not opening Chapters 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and 24, Justice, Freedom and Security to negotiations, all these being the topics most criticized by the EU.

Our quest in modernising the Customs Union, which would be a win-win development, to include services and agricultural goods, have been obstructed by the EU mainly for political reasons. In fact, Customs Union is an asymmetric relationship for Turkey but we have been in this for the last 20-25 years.

We need to avoid misperceptions in our relations with the help of proper communication channels. Parliamentary diplomacy is one of them. The EU should acknowledge the fact that Turkey's accession process is in EU's interest too.

Since 15 July 2019, the recent consecutive conclusions adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) have led to a growing resentment in Turkey. FAC conclusions regarding our drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Operation Peace Spring are unfair and by no means objective.

Turkey does have the resolve to enhance its bilateral relations with the EU. However, this negative trend, which is also further exploited by some member states, should come to an end.

The EU should see the reality that security and prosperity of Europe and NATO starts at Turkey's eastern borders.

As in the concrete example of 18 March Agreement, Turkey has always made significant contributions to the security, stability and the prosperity of the EU. We are looking for this spirit of cooperation reached in migration also in the other areas, especially in our fight against terrorism, security of Europe.

Our expectation is to implement 18 March Agreement in its entirety: progress on our accession negotiations, starting the modernization of the Customs Union and support to our efforts on visa liberalization.

We are committed to the reform process. The Parliament passed the first Judicial Reform Package and it entered into force on 24 October, which envisages to:

- improve the independence, impartiality and transparency of the judiciary,
- further strengthen the freedom of expression and press,
- enhance the right to a fair trial by setting maximum detention periods,
- reduce workloads of the judiciary.

Following the adoption of this new law, competent Courts have already ruled the release of some detainees. This means that there is a legal process going on in accordance with the laws in force, and domestic legal remedies are in place, including the right of appeal to higher Courts, and in the last instance domestically, individual application to the Constitutional Court is also possible. In case all domestic remedies are exhausted individual application to the European Court of Human Rights is also possible.

We are working on the six remaining benchmarks for visa liberalization.

On the other side, we expect the EU to display visionary leadership and anchorship vis-à-vis Turkey.

We are aware of the fact that maybe Turkey's accession to the EU is the most difficult and the most questioned one, but once realised, it will be the most beneficial membership both for Turkey and the EU, as well as its wider geography.

Overcoming the difficulties in Turkey-EU relations will result in significant gains not only for Turkey and the EU, but also for our region, international system and global peace.

No other country's membership is valuable and meaningful for the people of Europe and its wider geography than Turkey's membership to the EU, in areas ranging from foreign policy to culture, from security to energy and from trade to peace.

Turkey's accession is key to addressing the major challenges that the EU and Europe are facing.

In these testing times, EU and Turkey need each other more than before, and have a lot to gain from cooperation in areas such as the fight against terrorism, security threats, irregular migration, energy security, economy, trade, transport as well as people to people contacts in order to contribute to the security, stability and prosperity of our Continent and beyond. EU is Turkey's largest trade partner while Turkey is EU's fifth.

Turkey considers itself as part of the European family. We are a long standing member of all European structures. Against all odds, becoming a full member of the EU, and I emphasize **full member**, is still our **strategic objective**.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh go leir.