

## **THE EUROPEAN UNION AND TURKEY: BEGINNING THE COMMON JOURNEY**

*By starting accession negotiations with Turkey, the EU has become a stakeholder in the continuation of the political, economic and social transformation of this country. The negotiation process will inevitably contribute to blurring the lines between domestic and European matters in Turkey. This will be a sign that Turkey's political developments are gradually forming part of the European scene. It is further proof that the destinies of the EU and Turkey are converging. Be confident that, if Turkey works well, in harmony and with the participation and support of all its citizens, then the EU will be glad to have you as a member which strengthens our common house.*

**Olli Rehn\***



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**T**he 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2005 marks the start of a new phase in the relations between the European Union and Turkey. After some tense times we now have a fresh start and a good reason to celebrate. I was there in Luxembourg to greet Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül when he arrived to the conference room Monday night. I can assure you that there was electricity in the air, as the champagne glasses were lifted and all the gathered foreign ministers realized that they were witnessing the beginning of this new era. At that moment our common vision that the EU and Turkey share the same destiny won through.

Europe and Turkey remained firm in their conviction that religion, culture and history should not divide people, but on the contrary should help them build a common future based on the same principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Such an approach is more urgent than ever at a time when terrorism, fundamentalism and fanaticism try to spread their poison of hatred and war within our countries.

Turkey has in the past suffered from internal violence and instability. The country is also situated in a difficult neighborhood. I know therefore that people in Turkey appreciate the importance of security. The European Union also learned from a terrible past in order to build a new future and overcome centuries of conflict and mistrust. After two terrible world wars, which marked the decline of Europe in the world, our nations decided it was enough. In such a confined and populated area as this continent, with so many different nations and cultures, they recognized at last that the only option left was peace. But not just any peace: peace through unification and cooperation, where countries settle their problems around a table and not on the battlefield, where they design common rules and policies to increase welfare, where they pool their sovereignties to become stronger and more influential in the world. Looking backwards, and without ignoring its difficulties, sometimes quite serious, the European Union is a great and unique success.

Turkey has its rightful place in this project. This was already acknowledged by the EU when the Association Agreement was signed in 1963. It has now been firmly confirmed and I feel proud of this decision.

This success is above all the result of Turkey's achievements in the past few years. Without the determined and steady efforts to come closer to Europe, it would have been impossible to even think about starting negotiations. It gives a blunt response to all those, both in the EU and in Turkey, who have been making negative predictions over the years. We owe it to Turkey's resilience to anchor its policies to Europe and also to the exceptional period of stability and reforms enjoyed over the last few years.

It is also the sign that in spite of the ups and downs witnessed in the last 40 years, our relations have developed and deepened steadily. For instance the Customs

Union between the EU and Turkey, which has been in force since 1996, has greatly contributed to the rapid economic growth that Turkey has enjoyed in recent years.

Since 3 October, Turkey has moved a very important step forward: it is now a negotiating country and not merely a candidate country. This status entails new expectations, as well as new responsibilities. Therefore I would like to encourage Turkey to focus its energies and renew its determination on the accession process.

Obviously, the famous accession criteria are instrumental in such a process. We can call them the Copenhagen Criteria – since they were decided upon in that city in 1993 – we can also call them the Ankara criteria. The European perspective of Turkey is a strong incentive for the continuation of the reforms. But they offer merely a quality fuel for the engine: those who start the engine, are in the driving seat and push on the pedals are and always will be the Turks themselves.

Turkey is a great country with an amazing potential. Its population is young, its location at the crossroads of East and West is strategic, its entrepreneurs are renowned for their dynamism, its labor force is brave and tireless. To make full use of such a potential and transform it into reality, the key is good governance. The negotiation process for Turkey means nothing more or less than Turkey adopting the values, rules and standards which are applied in today's Europe. The European legislation, together with our social and economic programmes, forms the fundamental rules which allow the countries of the EU and its citizens to work together, to live in freedom and to prosper.

These rules are the key to success – to better citizens' rights and economic growth. Take a look at the previous enlargements. Look at Ireland, Spain or Poland. When it joined in 1973, Ireland was the poorest member of the European Community. It is now one of the richest. Its GDP per inhabitant is above the GDP per inhabitant of the UK. Spain, Portugal or Poland suffered for decades under dictatorships which suffocated their societies and prevented them from developing. They are now examples of countries which successfully made use of liberty, good governance and the solidarity of the Union to carry out the necessary reforms and significantly raise their living standards.

For Turkey, the adoption of these rules will mean a lot of hard work and many changes. Turkish history has proved to the world that you are afraid of neither. No doubt, Turkey will have to take difficult decisions. Many issues will come to the forefront which will have an impact on people's daily life. Inevitably, sensitive questions will have to be tackled, not only in terms of economic or trade interest, but also in the area of relations with neighbours, peaceful settlement of border disputes and reconciliation.

The EU will follow closely what happens in Turkey. By establishing a rigorous negotiating framework, as adopted on 3 October, the European Union has set into motion a process which is geared towards Turkey's membership of the European Union.

We will get down to work without delay. The first task will be to open on 20 October a technical exercise consisting of analyzing in detail the laws and policies of the EU and comparing them with the legislation of Turkey. This will allow us to find out in which areas Turkey will need to focus her efforts in order to align with the EU legislation. In this sense, the word negotiation here is perhaps misleading; the discussions will in fact focus on "how" and "when" Turkey will adopt European standards, not on "whether" Turkey will adopt them. Fundamental principles of the EU are not negotiable. Every candidate country must adopt all of the EU's laws and policies to become a member state.

Thus the negotiation process is likely to be a long one. It will be a marathon rather than a sprint. A lot of stamina and patience will be necessary. This process will inevitably contribute to blurring the lines between domestic and European matters in Turkey.

Negative developments on issues of human rights and freedom of expression, such as the prosecution of world famous novelist Orhan Pamuk, will not be a matter of serious concern only for Turkey, but for European public opinion as a whole. Whether one agrees with his views or not, we must stand united in defending his fundamental democratic right to freely express himself.

This should not be a surprise but rather the sign that Turkey's political developments are gradually forming part of the European scene. It is further proof that the destinies of the EU and Turkey are converging.

Therefore there will be a strong link between the pace of negotiations and the pace of political reforms. Turkey will need to continue its process of internal transformation. It will need to speed up its transition towards a fully fledged liberal democracy respectful of human rights and minorities. Looking at recent developments, we can see that in spite of some road accidents, Turkey's reform process is ongoing.

I am aware of the anxieties in Turkey about the political uncertainties concerning the country's membership bid. I know that public opinion in Turkey is asking more questions about the EU. We know by experience that any accession negotiation process, and even more so in the case of Turkey, cannot be taken for granted.

However, my advice is not to dwell on what other people might be saying, but instead focus on what you can do to help Turkey become a member of the EU.

Be confident that, if Turkey works well, in harmony and with the participation and support of all its citizens, then the EU will be glad to have you as a member which strengthens our common house.

There needs to be a broad discussion in Turkey on the issues at stake in the negotiations. There needs to be a large consensus over the reforms still to be adopted. This process cannot succeed without the society at large being fully aware and in control.

My message is that we need to build solid relations based on mutual trust. In this way we will avoid difficulties and misunderstandings in the future. I expect the Turkish authorities to embark on this journey with an open attitude.

One issue of crucial importance is to address the concerns about Turkey's EU membership perspective expressed in the democratic debate in Europe. I strongly encourage initiatives of the Turkish authorities and NGOs to gain the hearts and minds of your fellow Europeans.

But in the end, Turkey's best asset to gain support in public opinion in the EU is to show unambiguous and relentless commitment to democratic transformation and European values. As Turkey produces good news, in particular about how the reforms are being implemented, this will have a great impact on European opinion.

By starting accession negotiations with Turkey, the EU has become a stakeholder in the continuation of the political, economic and social transformation of this country. Obviously, if the EU is committed to this process, it is because we believe that this is also in our best interest and it can be beneficial to our own citizens.

The journey is as rewarding as the final destination, the reform process is as important as accession itself. Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, the European Union and Turkey are embarked together in the same journey. Stormy weather for the one will mean stormy weather for the other. A failure of Turkey would be a failure for the European Union, while a successful Turkey will give the European Union the chance to become a true world player, a force for stability, democracy and prosperity. It is our common goal, and worth striving for.